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Autor: Herzog, Stéphane
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Is Roger Federer the Swiss Jesus?

'Rodger, l'enfance de l'art,' a satirical comic album dedicated to the Swiss tennis player, presents him as a divine being. The book's author, Herrmann, lauds Federer's unmatched ability to make his countrymen dream.



STÉPHANE HERZOG

The best tennis player of all time, a stylish player of incomparable grace, a fair-play athlete, a serene champion who can still cry for joy, a father and exemplary husband ... The virtues with which Roger Federer has been credited are innumerable. And after each victory, the press wonders how the superlatives associated with his achievements can be embellished yet further. "We don't dare dream any more in Switzerland. We're too restrained," says Gérald Herrmann, the cartoonist for *La Tribune de Genève*. "But Federer enables us to let rip. He's a god!" In collaboration with Vincent die Silvestro, who drew the pictures, Herrmann wrote the story for a satir-

Federer as a ball boy in Basel in 1990. McEnroe predicted: "You'll be the next McEnroe." Rodger was furious: "I want to be Edberg!!!"

ical and crazy story, 'Rodger, l'enfance de l'art.'

This 80-page comic album, which was published in the spring, follows Federer's life from his birth to his phenomenal junior world title and Wimbledon win "in July of the year 16", in other words 1998. "Roger was quick-tempered, just like Borg. He cried with fury after losing matches, but we know little about his childhood," Herrmann says. The Genevan has his hero lose his virginity to Martina Hingis, the global tennis star, at 16. "He achieved everything that he could achieve," says the self-confessed Roger fan, who admits that he has to hide in the toilets whenever his hero plays against Nadal. "We are 8

million Swiss out of 8 billion people on the planet. And yet our country has brought forth a champion of this calibre, who beats all the others and has remained at the very top for a very long time," Herrmann explains. Are there any Swiss heroes to compare with "RF"? What about Bernhard Russi, for example? "We're proud of him, but he is far less important internationally," Herrmann says.

Federer and his false twin brother

This comic album is a bit like an extended quiz for all those unacquainted with the minutiae of Roger Federer's life. Did "Rodger" perhaps lose a twin brother at birth who later



became his own double when he plays? Was his father Robert really the Swiss wrestling champion? The answer is no, but the story remains plausible. The novel is filled with mythological fabrications, such as the story that claims the champion's future mother – who is actually South African by birth – visited Nelson Mandela as a Red Cross representative. And that the hero advised her to leave that racist country. "Everything is all false, of course, except the passages with Jesus," as the back cover claims.

So where did "Rodger" get his superpowers from? That is the question at the heart of this comic story. Sure, part of the champion's strength stems from his father, who worked in the pharmaceutical industry and one day fell into a cauldron of a cocktail of chemicals destined for the Swiss Army. But the central explanation is different: that God Himself had tasked Jesus with finding Him a successor (see box opposite). It was this message that revealed itself to Robert in the toilets of the Swiss tennis club in Johannesburg, of which he was a member, as was his future wife, Lynette Durand.

Cut scenes and a parcel to Ohio

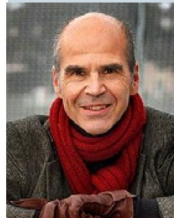
So has the book's main character read it? Herrmann admits that his contacts in the industry weren't much help in reaching Roger. The album was sent to the star's manager in Ohio. "I'll be so happy" a person in the secretary's office had said on the phone, claiming that the book had indeed been passed on to the champion. "I'm sure he would have read the book and wouldn't have liked it," says Herrmann, who had already cut certain scenes from his work on the advice of another star, this one a Genevan lawyer.

'Rodger, l'enfance de l'art,' published by Herrmine, 2018, 80 pp.

"Roger Federer is more like a sort of saint"

Is Switzerland's favourite sportsman divine? *Swiss Review* put the question to two theologians who are also sports fans.

Denis Müller, an honorary professor at Geneva University, wrote the book 'Le football, ses dieux et ses démons' [Football, its Gods and its Demons]. Olivier Bauer from Canton Vaud is the author of a book on the religious fervour of supporters of Montreal's ice hockey team. What did they think of this comic album, which claims Roger



Olivier Bauer is the author of a book about ice hockey as a religion

Federer was predestined to have a supernatural career?

"It's all very amusing, but barely credible," says Denis Müller. "Federer is an exceptional champion, but he is partly self-made, with the accompanying highs and lows. He is the outcome of training, talent and circumstances."

Müller puts the public's obsession with the tennis player on a par with "quasi-religions that are imitations of religions, but remain a far cry from real religions".

"There isn't a Church of St. Federer, but certainly one dedicated to Maradona," quips Olivier Bauer, reminding us that "the aim of tennis is to destroy your opponent, and Roger Federer is a product designed to make money, neither of which are goals of religions". The theologian also stresses the excessive amounts of money tennis stars earn. "It's fundamentally unjust that one person can amass so much money," he says.

A Swiss model

Will Swiss religious aspirations be sublimated in their love of this sportsman, presented humorously as Jesus'

successor? "Jesus died on the cross at the age of 33," Dennis Müller replies. "His achievements were linguistic and therapeutic in nature. At age 36, Federer is preparing for a second career rather than a resurrection." Bauer reminds us that the tennis player has failed on several occasions: "He had glandular fever and sometimes lost to lower-ranking players. If anything, Federer encourages us to be better people, to defend our country better, but everyone knows that he's not godlike. In theology, we don't confuse Jesus of Nazareth with God Himself. Even in the Holy Trinity, Christ is the son of God; the crucified one."

Olivier Bauer says you can use theological tools to interpret the image of the Swiss star even without recourse to the divine. He sees Federer as being more like the saints. "He's an ideal man, a model to follow at a time in our history in which people are united by sport, whereas in the past they did so more during patriotic gatherings, wrestling competitions or at Church." The athlete from Basel would also make the perfect example of Swissness. "He appeals to everyone, a little bit like Bernhard Russi. Some people would also like the Swiss to be like Federer: a country that doesn't make too much fuss."



Denis Müller, honorary professor at the University of Geneva