



## Helen Fields

Freelance Journalist

Home Media: Freelancer, Washington, DC  
Guest Media: Die Welt/Welt am Sonntag, Berlin

Helen Fields is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C. She writes mainly about science. This spring she spent six weeks on an icebreaker in the Bering Sea, reporting on climate research for the Polar Discovery website.

Helen grew up in the D.C. area, studied biology at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, then lived in Norway and Japan for a few years. She started a Ph.D. in biology at Stanford University, but quit after a year and a

half to become a journalist. During a one-year graduate program in science writing at the University of California - Santa Cruz, she interned at the *Monterey County Herald*, the Stanford University Medical Center press office, and *Science* magazine. An internship at *U.S. News & World Report* turned into four years of covering health there. After *U.S. News*, she worked at *National Geographic*, covering science, history, and other geography-friendly topics.

## Report by Helen Fields

This was a great opportunity and I was glad to be able to go. I really enjoyed working at *Die Welt* and learning about operations at *Bild*. Unfortunately, a nasty illness at the beginning of my stay knocked me out for a couple of weeks and started my stay in Germany on the wrong foot.

### Language courses

I was placed in the C1 class at the Goethe Institut. I think this was probably the right level, or it would have been if I'd started at the beginning of a class. But being dropped into the middle of a class that had been going on for several weeks was really tough. The other members of the class already had a wide base of shared vocabulary, and it was difficult for me to follow along. I would have much preferred individual lessons.

The class might have gotten more comfortable for me in the second week, but instead I took a significant detour: I contracted norovirus and was quite ill for about 12 days. This knocked me out of my second week of class and meant that I started my fellowship a week late, too. My disease odyssey included a midnight visit to the emergency room for IV hydration and several visits to the doctor down the street for checkups, blood tests, and other joys.

The other Berlin Burns fellows were champs. Even after the first really bad days, I didn't think I could get back up to my top-floor apartment if I left to go shopping, so they kept me supplied with ginger ale, bananas, white bread, and other things I could eat. The biggest help turned out to be some downstairs neighbors who are friends with my roommate (she works in Cologne, so she was out of town most of time). Being that sick and alone was really awful, though, and it made me homesick – which has never happened to me. Unfortunately, I think the misery of those first few weeks colored my whole Burns experience.

### *Bild*

I was originally supposed to be on the national desk at *Bild*, but they looked at my resume and switched me to *Leben und Wissen*. I think this was a good move, because it's definitely a better fit for my interests.

*Bild* didn't really have anything for me to do. I pitched a few stories. One even made it through a few rounds of meetings, and was still on the schedule at 2 p.m. It died sometime after that. I wrote a brief story one of my last days, but due to some failure of communication, the newspaper ran a story written by someone in another section instead. (My story was better. The story they ran had clearly been assembled from press releases or wire reports and contained a significant error.)

The main reason there was nothing for me to do, I think, is that the *Leben und Wissen* section mainly does service journalism, and it just doesn't make sense to have a foreign reporter call local experts to ask them about the changes to the divorce laws, or what's going to happen when incandescent bulbs are no longer available to the shelves, or how to stay cool on a hot day. I helped out a bit, but I wasn't a big contributor. Someone who is more fluent than I am in German might have been able to do more.

I don't know that I would have been able to contribute more in other sections. *Bild* is a very competitive newspaper, with many reporters trying to get their work into a small space. I think it would be tough for any fellow to write there. That said, I was only there for two of the intended three weeks because of my extended illness. With a longer stay, it might have been possible to do more.

But even if I wasn't contributing much, it was fascinating to see how this tabloid operates. I've never worked anywhere like that before. I went to meetings and heard issue critiques. One day I went to all the conferences and listened to the top editors making decisions about what would be in the paper the next day. This would be less interesting for someone who doesn't speak any German.

The people at *Bild* were friendly and welcoming, and I was impressed by how hard they work. One day there was a story going around that was a pretty clear choice for a tabloid – it was about how a common household item can kill you. It had appeared in a small local paper first, but was also picked up by one of the biggies, either *Süddeutsche* or *FAZ*. The top editors wanted this story for *Bild*. The only problem: there was no scientific evidence that the story was true. One of the people who'd been quoted in the other stories was clearly unqualified, and the other expert was really angry about how he'd been misquoted. One of my colleagues argued against doing the story and won. I was impressed that the other, supposedly more reputable papers, had clearly done a lazy job with this story, while *Bild* was the one with standards. Of course, while I was there, my section also produced two stories about a baby alien that had been found in Mexico.

## *Die Welt*

My experience at *Die Welt* was much more productive. I'm happy with the work I did there, and if I'd been there for more than four weeks, I'm sure I could have accomplished even more. I wrote four stories and cowrote two others. I was in the *Wissenschaft* section, which writes stories for *Die Welt*, *Welt am Sonntag*, and *Berliner Morgenpost*. I wrote mainly for *Die Welt*, although a couple of my stories also appeared in *Morgenpost*. Here are links:

My stories:

<http://www.welt.de/die-welt/wissen/article4445223/Der-kaeltteste-und-oedeste-Platz-befindet-sich-in-der-Antarktis.html>

<http://www.welt.de/wissenschaft/article4550027/Forscher-lassen-farbenblinde-Affen-farbig-sehen.html>

<http://www.welt.de/die-welt/wissen/article4452030/Affen-haben-Sinn-fuer-Musik-aber-nur-fuer-ihre-eigene.html>

<http://www.welt.de/wissenschaft/article4497363/Der-schlimmste-Feind-der-Kartoffel.html>

Cowritten stories:

<http://www.welt.de/die-welt/wissen/article4617207/Der-erste-Impfstoff-gegen-Aids.html>

<http://www.welt.de/wissenschaft/medizin/article4686934/Die-meisten-Nierenschaden-bleiben-unerkannt.html>

I pitched all four of the stories I wrote by myself. On most days, if I didn't pitch, I didn't do anything. I found it a little frustrating that the editors at *Die Welt* didn't give me assignments. Toward the end of my four weeks there, they seemed to notice that I was a useful resource – for example, I could easily interview foreign researchers over the phone – and assigned me a couple of stories. Generally, though, I felt that I was being underused.

I was surprised to learn that my German was good enough for writing. I wrote all my stories at *Die Welt* in German. It was reasonably correct German, but it wasn't necessarily great writing. The colleagues who edited me did a very nice job of turning my clumsy stories into better language, while retaining my structure, quotes, style, and jokes.