Histories of German literature were published in the hundreds throughout the nineteenth century, and all adhered more or less closely to the paradigm established early in the century by Heinsius, Koberstein, and others. As the century progressed, however, the "standard" format was modified as new methods and styles of presentation were adopted in order to reach an ever wider public or to satisfy the requirements of special interest groups. While the basic outline remained virtually the same, the format varied from pure text to mainly illustration, and from a single sheet to multiple volumes.

Most of those who produced histories of German literature were schoolteachers rather than professors, and their aim in writing these works – frequently directed at the general public as much, if not more than, at schoolchildren – was nothing if not didactic. In the present work the author surveys the extent of this somewhat amorphous genre, traces its development in form and function, and points out the general biases (primarily religious and political) that lie behind such factors as the choice of writers discussed and their evaluation or the designation of literary periods.

The work also covers foreign histories of German literature (European and North American), and in these chapters conclusions are drawn about the characteristic (i.e., national) features of these works and how they differ both from German and from other foreign works.

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