

SCIENCE AND SHOWBIZ: GOING PLACES WITH JULES VERNE

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True or not, a favorite Jules Verne anecdote has the famous Frenchman visiting a Paris government official in the 1880s. By then Verne was an international celebrity, and his novels had taken countless readers where nobody had gone before: the ocean depths, the earth's core, the moon, the whole solar system. When Verne entered the official's chambers, the man pushed him into a chair and plumped pillows around him. "Make yourself comfortable, Monsieur Verne," the official urged. "You must be exhausted after all that traveling!"

From his childhood Verne had been fascinated by faraway places. He grew up in the medium-sized French metropolis of Nantes on the Loire River, some thirty miles upstream from a major Atlantic seaport. Shipping and transportation were the leading industrial concerns, long-distance travel was in full swing, steam-powered locomotives and ocean liners were available to the general public. Air travel wasn't so available, but the many well-advertised flights by gas balloon were definitely in the public eye. All of these developments tantalized Jules Verne's young imagination.

BOY AUTHOR

He wrote from his boyhood on, a sample of his poetry surviving from his fourteenth year, half of a novel from his eighteenth (Lottman, 13, 17). By his early twenties Verne was already being paid for his writing, though not munificently. During the 1840s and 1850s, he penned over twenty plays (Margot, 14–16), mostly knockabout farces and the books and lyrics for musical comedies. His first staged work, *The Broken Straws*, enjoyed a professional Paris run of a dozen or so performances in 1850. Over the following decade he kept up the scriptwriting and in addition managed to publish several pieces of short fiction, some of them hinting at his interest in science and its future possibilities.

Another couple decades would go by before Verne turned into a best-selling author, but those early tales already gave off glimmers of the famous novels to come. The science of aeronautics drives his short story "A Journey by Balloon" (1851), likewise one of those death-craving monomaniacs who keep reappearing in his mature fiction. The novelette "Wintering in the Ice" (1855) features a search for a lost sea captain in the subarctic seas, foreshadowing the polar quests in several later works. Another novelette, "Master Zacharius" (1854), unveils the demented, power-hungry side of science, a perspective he would return to in books throughout his career. A third novelette, "The First Ships in the Mexican Navy" (1851), shows young Verne exploiting his source materials as shrewdly as his later self: with just a map and somebody's travel memoirs, he convincingly sketches an inland journey through regions he'd never personally visited (or ever would).

Along with these early yarns, Verne completed about fourteen new scripts (Butcher, 110). A musical comedy, *The Comrades of the Mint Leaf* (1852), had a performance run just shy of a month: a rustic sex farce with a nitwit plotline, its effect is difficult to judge without the music. But an unproduced script that he wrote the following year makes for enjoyable reading and has plenty of

recognizable Verne shenanigans: *A Foster Son* (1853) is a racy sitcom full of running gags, nonstop wordplay, bawdy double meanings, and shameless plot twists . . . the piece is hopelessly lightweight, but many of its jokes still work; Verne may not have been a major dramatist, but he *was* a first-rate gag writer and vaudevillian.

Yet another theater piece foreshadows his great novels as clearly as the first short stories: *Mr. Chimpanzee* (1857). Staged in Paris the year after its writing (Jules-Verne, 37), it's a slapstick comedy set to music. However its offbeat setting is a natural history museum, it boasts a speculative science angle that's typical Verne, prehistoric monsters such as the ichthyosaurus and megatherium are among the museum exhibits, and there are allusions to the Count de Buffon, the great French naturalist who would be a frequent source for the masterpieces ahead.*

Meanwhile Verne also did some book-length work during those early days: a chatty UK travelogue that he finished in 1860 but never published in his lifetime (today it's available as *Backwards to Britain*). Even so, whether he was generating theater pieces, short fiction, or book-size nonfiction, he had little genuine success till he finally hit on this winning combination: stories of science and exploration . . . that were highly theatrical.

BREAKTHROUGH

When he published his first novel, Verne was already a seasoned pro. He'd been writing for twenty years, and his output had been onstage and in print for over half that time. Then, in 1862, he took a manuscript to an interview with Pierre-Jules Hetzel (1814–1886), described by the author's grandson (Jules-Verne, 54) as “one the greatest publishers France has ever known.” Hetzel's stable of writers was a who's who of 19th century French literature: Balzac, Hugo, Zola, Baudelaire, George Sand—and Jules Verne would become his biggest moneymaker.

Verne's manuscript was about balloon travel over Africa and it tackled the crux of the matter. As his grandson wrote a century later (Jules-Verne, 57), “aeronautics was in its infancy. No satisfactory solution had yet been found for steering a balloon.” So Verne's book imagined “a balloon that could climb or descend at will to take advantage of the different wind directions at different altitudes.” Revised and refined, the tale came out in 1863 as *Five Weeks in a Balloon*. An instant hit, it enjoyed a big print run and was soon turned into actuality by real-life balloonists.

The next year Hetzel had major plans for Verne: he launched one of history's first family magazines, a fortnightly periodical named the *Magasin d'éducation et de récréation* . . . a moniker that today's media whizzes might be tempted to translate as *Facts and Fun*. It grew into one of the century's publishing phenomena (Lottman, 95–96), and Verne could take much of the credit. Hetzel wanted intriguing stories to serialize in his publication, and Verne supplied him with a sequence of adventure novels that were both educational and entertaining, combining up-to-the-minute scientific fact and dramatic exploits spiced with humor. After their serialization Verne's visionary yarns were published in deluxe hardcover editions, and over the years he produced some sixty books in this fashion. Hetzel marketed the whole line under the enticing rubric of *Voyages extraordinaires*, and the English wording *Amazing Journeys* captures both the sense and verve of the French.

* American Vernian Frank Morlock has created English acting versions of these and other scripts by Jules Verne. They're online at <http://jv.gilead.org.il/works.html#plays> (accessed November 3, 2009).

At last the ideas in Verne's early short fiction came to full bloom. "Wintering in the Ice," a search for a lost mariner in the North Sea, led to full-scale polar quests in *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1866), *20,000 Leagues Under the Seas* (1870), and *The Fur Country* (1873), not to mention the mighty three-volume search for another missing seaman in *Captain Grant's Children* (1868). As for the aeronautics in his short story "A Journey by Balloon," they supplied ingredients not only for his breakthrough book *Five Weeks in a Balloon* but also for important later novels, including his desert-island masterwork *The Mysterious Island* (1875), his interplanetary comedy *Hector Servadac* (1877), and his tale of aerial warfare *Robur the Conqueror* (1886). Finally his spooky novelette "Master Zacharius," dealing with science's dark, sinister potential, raised concerns he would revisit in novels throughout his career: *20,000 Leagues*, *The Begum's Millions* (1879), *Facing the Flag* (1896), and *Master of the World* (1904). In short, the seeds were there from the start.

FABULOUS FIRST DECADE

For the rest of his life, Verne stayed under contract to the Hetzel publishing house, but his best-remembered books appeared during their first decade together: the five "visionary classics" in this volume. His instincts and skills fully developed, Verne shot like a comet into public view, and he took that public on some staggering first-time journeys: into the earth, to the ocean floor, to the moon, around the globe in record time. His later novels, splendid as many of them are, come off as variations on a theme: in the *The Black Indies* (1877) Verne goes back underground, in *Hector Servadac* back into outer space, in *The Steam House* (1880) and *The Robinson Crusoe School* (1882) back to locales on Phileas Fogg's 80-day itinerary. In that fabulous first decade of 1863–1872, Verne's powers were on full display.

What *were* those powers? Consider this: by some estimates Jules Verne is the "most translated writer in the world," the "most read" of all authors (Butcher, xix). What magic had he mastered to account for this phenomenal standing?

Verne's virtuosity as a storyteller isn't well understood in America and England. A good deal of nonsense has been recycled about him by critics who apparently haven't read his works or studied his life; no need to name names—the bunkum that follows can be found in many reference works and blanket surveys. Several, for instance, describe Verne as a cockeyed optimist whose yarns look on science's bright side, darkening only late in his career. Wildly inaccurate: even the fiction from Verne's youth is jittery about science's potential, as are two of the early novels in this volume. Others, meanwhile, call Verne a stay-at-home, an armchair recluse who journeyed only in his head. Equally untrue: he was an energetic tourist and yachtsman, visiting America and traveling repeatedly around the UK, mainland Europe, and the Mediterranean. Still another contingent claims his fiction is incurably conventional and wedded to bourgeois values. Hopelessly wrong: Verne's heroes are innovators, oddballs, outcasts, rebels, and anti-imperialists.

Finally, and least justified of all, they rate him a stodgy writer, lacking in color, finesse, or talent for characterization. This is more than wrong, it's loony: in their original French these novels bubble with jokes, pranks, theatrics, scientific thrills, and bigger-than-life characters. It's their raddled old Victorian translations that are stodgy—and it's the scholarship relying on them that's lacking. Consequently, before moving on to this volume's accurate *new* translations, this essay intends to celebrate that storytelling virtuosity mentioned above.

Though Verne had no in-depth scientific training, he clearly had a knack for

giving the sciences popular appeal. It helped that he also had a knack for legwork and research, and his grandson (Jules-Verne, 58) describes how the famed novels came into being: “A mass of facts are skillfully incorporated into the narrative—facts that by themselves would have remained unattractive or even inaccessible to the general readers that Verne had in mind. In this respect alone, Verne shows himself to be a consummate storyteller.” And just how dependable were those vaunted facts? His grandson again: they were “scrupulously accurate and up to date. . . . [He] kept a “respect for accuracy throughout his life. Indeed, on many occasions Hetzel used his influence to get Verne introduced to specialists whose brains he wished to pick.”

As a consequence his novels have often been praised for their farseeing science. Walter James Miller, spearheading Verne scholarship in America (Miller, viii), once commented that the Frenchman’s two moon novels “anticipated every stage of the actual space effort of the 1960s.” And while their nomenclature may be in continual flux, the extinct life forms in *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) or the marine fauna in *20,000 Leagues* can still be found in today’s databases and textbooks. Apparently he was a man who never forgot a fact, and his personal library housed thousands of books, clippings, and memoranda. One day the English crime novelist Marie A. Belloc paid both Verne and his library a visit. “The room is lined with bookcases, and in the middle a large table groans under a carefully sorted mass of newspapers, reviews, and scientific reports,” she writes (Belloc, 209). “A number of cardboard pigeonholes . . . contain the twenty-odd thousand notes garnered by the author during his long life.”

THEATRICAL FLAIR

A zest for science is only part of Verne’s magic, the rest is his theatricality. This kicks in immediately, at the research stage. He has a flair for sifting through his subject matter and cherry-picking its most dramatic aspects, its angles that have storytelling and attention-getting potential. He has particular fun with the mores and folkways of far-off cultures: Icelandic cuisine with its 20-year-old butter sauces in *Journey to the Center of the Earth* . . . the Yankee willingness to smoke cigars around high explosives in *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) . . . the goofy product lines (false teeth and hairpieces) of his traveling salespeople in *Claudius Bombarnac* (1892).

Similarly, when his objectives are educational or he’s laying factual groundwork, he can dramatize and sugarcoat with the best of them, adding color with an anecdote, a joke, a parable. In *From the Earth to the Moon*, for instance, you can duplicate the moon’s movements (p. 150) simply by strolling around your dinner table . . . or, in Chapter 6 of *Circling the Moon* (1869), a train engineer can illustrate the effect of heat on motion just by applying the brakes. Nor does Verne balk at exaggerating for effect, at overdoing things in a good cause: *20,000 Leagues* is loaded with outsized marine life—25-foot reef sharks, 60-foot narwhals, 185-foot rorquals, even “giant lobsters” and “titanic crabs.” As for the prehistoric reptiles in *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, they’re familiar to paleontologists, but their sizes (“forty feet wide,” “at least a hundred feet long”) are heftier than any known fossils.

The astounding punch line to Chapter 36 in the latter book is an example of an additional Verne specialty: the eye-popping plot twist. Others include the switcheroo at the halfway point of *The Mighty Orinoco* (1898) . . . the reverse-English endings of *Around the World in 80 Days* (1872) and *Michael Strogoff*

(1876) . . . the windup of his low comedy *Keraban the Pigheaded* (1883), where Verne paints his title character into the tightest possible corner, then extricates him with a cheeky surprise gimmick. On the other hand he also knows how to get serious with his theatrics: three of the yarns in this volume feature vicious storms at sea, events actually expressive of his characters' inner turmoil. The tempests in *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (pp. 102–4), *20,000 Leagues* (524–25), and *Around the World in 80 Days* (602–4) are among the most horrific in literature—their gale speeds “are four times that of a locomotive shooting along at full throttle,” they unleash “lightning bolts like broods of snakes running loose in the sky,” they fill the air with “complex noises made up of crashing breakers, howling winds, claps of thunder.”

And Verne's terrifying set pieces are sometimes more than just good theater (Walter 2008, 2): they can “strike us at a visceral level, assail our animal essence, prey on our most primitive fears.” Among these harrowing episodes: the crisis in *20,000 Leagues* where the submarine runs short of oxygen . . . and the narrator's near-death experience in Chapters 26–28 of *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. If Verne seems flamboyant and prankish elsewhere, in these instances he's all ruthless economy and specificity (Walter 2008, 3): “He doesn't pussyfoot, sentimentalize, or parade strings of adjectives. No, he narrows his narrative to the tightest, leanest, most disquieting details.”

ARCHETYPAL CHARACTERS

Two other facets of Verne's theatricality are central to his storytelling power: his large-scale characters and his versatile comedy.

As for the first, he's rarely given credit for his feats of characterization, though Captain Nemo and Phileas Fogg are household words and many of his other creations are now stock figures. In fact his engineers, astronomers, and geologists are true originals for one simple reason: unlike such earlier savants as Faustus, Frankenstein, and Coppelius, Verne's researchers are engaged in recognizable scientific pursuits. Some, such as the naturalist Aronnax in *20,000 Leagues Under the Seas* or Dr. Clawbonny in *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras*, are rational, capable professionals. Others are the original versions of two familiar archetypes, science's yin and yang: the absent-minded professor and the mad inventor.

Earliest of Verne's “nutty professors” is the high-strung Lidenbrock in *Journey to the Center of the Earth*: heart of gold, stressful to live with. His immediate successors include the disoriented Paganel in *Captain Grant's Children* and the oblivious Thomas Black in *The Fur Country*, resident funny men, Verne's designated sources of comic relief. As for the mad inventors and explorers, the maniacs bent on destruction, domination, or some other grim objective, Verne's initial attempt—and a genuinely scary one—is the nameless skyjacker in his short story “A Journey by Balloon.” Next comes the pole-seeking Captain Hatteras, who *does* go certifiably mad, then Verne's most complex creation, the multilayered, ambivalent, darkly elusive Captain Nemo. A later figure, the aeronaut Robur, is a Nemo variant: beneficial in *Robur the Conquerer*, bad news in *Master of the World*.

There's more to be said about Captain Nemo, but first a quick look at the obsessives and compulsives who pack Verne's pages. Generally they're played for laughs: the chatterbox Frenchman Ardan . . . the diehard manhunter Inspector Fix . . . and even more extreme, the warmongering J. T. Maston, who tends to go off the deep end in the most literal sense—he nearly topples into a 900-foot well, barely avoids “a nasty fall” off a stage, almost tumbles down the 280-foot tube of a

giant telescope, then at last personally brains himself and collapses in a heap. As for female characters, women and wooing scenes are common in Verne's plays but scarce in his fiction: Hetzel's contracts restricted him to adventure writing for a family audience. Yet when women do show up in the novels, they're assertive and independent: the efficient Grauben in *Journey to the Center of the Earth* . . . the tough explorers Paulina Barnett in *The Fur Country* and the titular heroine of *Mrs. Branican* (1891) . . . even the voluptuous Aouda in *Around the World in 80 Days*.

And in one case, finally, a character assumes mythic stature: Captain Nemo is the result of special circumstances, of a character not turning out as planned. At first he was simply one man against the world—though, unlike Dumas's Count of Monte Cristo, a man bent on political rather than private revenge. But the original Captain Nemo had a detailed history, nationality, cause, and antagonist. The published novel specifies *none* of these things and the book's aura and effect are different from nearly anything else in Verne.

Some of this may have been a lucky accident, but in any event Verne's publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel was to blame. Like many an editor since, Hetzel could be invasive and tyrannical; today's scholars roast him regularly, not only for his trigger-happy interfering with Verne's texts but also for his profiteering and hard financial bargains. Yet good things sometimes came from his meddling: the political particulars in Verne's first drafts of *20,000 Leagues* worried Hetzel, and Verne ended up steering the book down a new path, a path he hadn't taken since his eerie novelette "Master Zacharius." Clearly it was meant to be. Though far from its author's first intentions, the novel's revamped version became colossally successful and today is often regarded as Verne's magnum opus. Nemo is shadowy, mystifying, numinous, his drives and objectives taking vague shape only near the end. Yet we experience enough of him to see him as human—his sardonic humor, his impressive IQ, his flickers of temper—so when he hates, lashes out, and inflicts fearful suffering, he's the Verne hero who approaches tragic stature. Unlike Fogg, who also has mysterious antecedents, Nemo is never comic material.

But he rises even above tragedy to the otherworldly: his nebulous background gives him a mythic, almost preternatural presence. At the end Captain Nemo grows "astoundingly" in the narrator's mind, evolves into "the Man of the Waters, the Spirit of the Seas," and takes on "superhuman proportions." Ultimately he himself becomes that "shrouded human figure" the narrator recalls from Poe.

NOSE-THUMBING HUMOR

The first English-speaking scholar to look closely at Verne's comedy, Arthur B. Evans (2005, 96–99) calls his novels "humorous, witty, theatrical," repeatedly lauds them for their "humor and wordplay," and finds that "they're teeming with double entendres, authorial 'winks' and self-referential parody." He concludes that "anglophone readers have never been able to savor Verne's wit."

Sad but true. This major aspect of Verne is often missed entirely in his English translations, likewise in their English commentaries. Unfortunately some types of jokes don't carry over from language to language: puns, for instance, with their dependence on soundalikes and multiple meanings. And Verne was a chronic punster, whether he's mauling a maxim of the zoologist Linnaeus (approximated on p. 324), or mingling the sports of knitting and hitting (p. 648 substitutes a different sort of joke). In any case nose-thumbing humor is Verne's bodyguard, and he uses it not only for itself but to lubricate a wide range of snags and bottlenecks: plot slowdowns, dreary technical details, far-fetched developments, even utterly in-

soluble problems such as the takeoff acceleration in *From the Earth to the Moon*. And as Evans notes (1988, 144), Verne's gag writing covers the waterfront: "slapstick, situation comedy, witticisms, exaggerations, social satire, understatement, ethnic humor, absurdities, black humor, and so on." If the translator has the spunk to look for decent English equivalents, much of this humor *can* cross the Atlantic.

Understatement? A Verne trademark is the deadpan wisecrack. Here's the stoic guide in *Journey to the Center of the Earth*: "He carried economy of motion to the point of stinginess." Or Barbicane after bypassing Texas as the site for his moon shot: "his unpopularity in Texas was on a par with General Santa Anna's." Or the Frenchman Ardan's role aboard the space capsule: "In this miniature cosmos he stood for Gallic impulsiveness and talkativeness, and believe me, these attributes were adequately represented." Self-referential parody? Verne will sometimes kid his own scholarly apparatus, as with his two impish footnotes in *The Mysterious Island* (Walter 1999, 9): "Footnote 1 refers us to Footnote 2, which refers us right back to Footnote 1." Nor, conversely, is there any shortage of humor at the service of graver purposes. Miller (162) calls *From the Earth to the Moon* an "all-out satire on militarism. . . . no writer—not even Aristophanes, Voltaire, or Joseph Heller—has conceived of better ways to satirize war and the military mind."

JULES VERNE'S LEGACY

As stated, the five "visionary classics" in this volume appeared during the incandescent first decade of Verne's collaboration with Hetzel. They're a staggering legacy: *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, the first time-travel novel . . . *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Circling the Moon*, the first hard-science tales of space exploration . . . *20,000 Leagues Under the Seas*, the first novel of a vendetta that's global rather than personal . . . and as for *Around the World in 80 Days*, it remains one of the planet's favorite thrillers to this moment.

The first four are regularly regarded as milestones of science fiction, but Verne also wrote a large number of straight adventure stories, yarns where the sciences are simply geography and sociology. His other achievements in that first decade included *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras*, a fictional conquest of the North Pole forty years before Peary, and one of Verne's most massive works, a triple-decker rescue mission entitled *Captain Grant's Children*. From then on, as previously noted, his novels tended to be variations on a theme. Most were geographic adventures, but aside from the spy thriller *Michael Strogoff* and the desert-island epic *The Mysterious Island*, it's his occasional sorties into scientific speculation that provoke the most interest today: his interplanetary journey *Hector Servadac*, his high-tech gothic novel *Castle in the Carpathians* (1892), his mad-inventor sagas *Facing the Flag* and *Master of the World*, the grisly dystopia he unveils in *The Begum's Millions*.

During much of the 20th century, it was traditional to call Verne "The Father of Science Fiction." This has come under noisy reassessment in recent decades: SF has grown increasingly respectable in many graduate schools, and new approaches are needed for master's theses, doctoral dissertations, and career-building papers. Many who write about Verne have had to duck the conventional wisdom and find new tacks. Unfortunately some of this rethinking has verged on the silly. Certain UK scholars, for instance, insist that Verne had no actual interest in science—somehow forgetting his hundreds of pages on the topics of chemistry, biology, astronomy, geology, paleontology, and meteorology, not to mention nautical and aeronautical engineering. And speaking of the latter, one American critic even

claims that Verne's futuristic vehicles were already technically feasible when he wrote about them—ignoring, of course, the famous ones such as the space capsule in the moon novels, the supersub in *20,000 Leagues*, the giant helicopter in *Robur the Conqueror*, the all-terrain walker in *The Steam House*, the mobile landmass in *Propeller Island* (1895), etc.

Even so, the old labeling of Verne as “Father of Science Fiction” has come in for backtalk. Of course the legitimacy of this title has always relied on what one means by “father” and “science fiction”: for example, a good case can be made for the genre's springing up in antiquity, in assorted creation myths or Plato's utopias. Once again it depends on how you define SF, both the science part and the fiction part.* To illustrate: if the science has to be a recognizable discipline, if the fiction has to be genuine narrative prose, and if both have to deal with some visionary or speculative development, then a plausible candidate for first SF novel might be Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* with its prehistoric monsters and time-travel motif. Or, if we raise the bar and the science has to be rigorously pragmatic and provable, then the palm might go to Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*, the pioneering specimen of “hard” SF. But either way there's still a hitch. What about unknown competitors? Earlier works by obscure authors? Stories that fell through the cracks? Citing only French authors, Evans asserts (1988, 2) that there “were many writers of this brand of narrative who preceded [Verne] . . . and remain all but forgotten today.”

Finally, and pertinent to the above, it has become trendy in recent years (Mann, 8) to classify Mary Shelley's horror classic *Frankenstein* (1818) as “the first true SF novel.” This has been tempting for some Anglophile critics (Wolfe, xix): they can leave Verne out altogether and bookend the form's genesis with two Brits, Shelley and H. G. Wells, “the first real science fiction writers.” The snag is that *Frankenstein* itself flatly disagrees with this classification. Shelley's unique novel has been cherished for its seminal insights on human duality and the creator-creation relationship: there's virtually *no recognizable science* onstage in the body of the story, certainly not in the brief “workshop” sequence where Victor Frankenstein fabricates his humanoid creature. Chapter 4 candidly refuses to tell the reader how he manages this: “that cannot be,” the text insists, and a leading British literary critic (Sutherland, 29) calls Shelley's writing here “a piece of magnificent Gothic fuzz.” Does Victor employ the arts of sorcery, alchemy, or surgery? There isn't a single specific. And that's because Shelley had minimal thematic interest in Victor's labwork; her novel would have proceeded along the same lines had he simply waved a magic wand.

This notion of *Frankenstein* as SF was first proposed by British novelist Brian Aldiss, who claims Shelley imbued her book (Aldiss, 23) with “new scientific ideas” but doesn't say where those ideas actually are in the story. This hasn't kept others from likewise calling the novel true SF. How so? Because (Clute and Nicholls, 1099) Victor builds a “mechanically sound body and shocks it into life.” Or because (Mann, 8) Shelley contributes “the added dimension of science” and the monster is “literally shocked into existence by electricity.”

The only problem is that nobody seems to have *read* Shelley's novel, at least not recently or carefully. They're confusing the story on the page with the story at the cinema. In the novel the monster is emphatically *not* shocked into life by elec-

* The web page http://scifi.about.com/od/scififantasy101/a/SCIFI_defs.htm offers over fifty definitions by critics and practitioners. Most insist on a dash of bona fide science (accessed November 3, 2009).

tricity—that tidbit is from the 1931 Boris Karloff movie! So these folks are fixated on the films, Aldiss, for instance, repeatedly calling Victor “Baron Frankenstein,” even though the word “baron” doesn’t occur even once in Shelley’s text. As for Wolfe’s skipping everybody between *Frankenstein* and H. G. Wells, he seems ignorant not just of Shelley but of several SF pioneers—not only Jules Verne but the Americans Poe and Perce, the Russian Mikhailov, the Rosny brothers in France, the time-traveling Twain, even the Britishers Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle, all of whom penned varieties of science fiction before Wells.

Sadly, all scholarship suffers when some participants play fast and loose, and you wonder if this instance is simply nationalistic vanity. Not content with claiming Shakespeare, Austen, and Chaucer, do some Brits also need to claim a first in science fiction? There are precedents for such obfuscating: in 1911–12 when the Norwegian Amundsen raced the Britisher Scott to the South Pole, Amundsen was the first to reach it by over a month. Yet, as a later historian noted (Huntford, 513), the “most astonishing manipulations of facts were performed in order to prove that the British had not been worsted. . . . English schoolchildren were taught that Scott discovered the South Pole.” If you can’t win playing by the rules, rewrite the rules.

VERNE FOR AMERICANS

Whether or not Verne “fathered” the genre of science fiction, clearly he was the writer who first brought the form to world notice, the writer who first lionized science’s achievements and possibilities, and—most crucially—the writer who first produced a *body* of science fiction. Alone among those early authors, he was more than a one-shot wonder, he was an actual career professional: in his lifetime he wrote eighteen SF novels, including half a dozen of the genre’s best-known titles. As for their literary standing, one of his major modern successors (Asimov, xii) called Verne’s science fiction “the first truly successful tales of this type.” And like Asimov himself, the Frenchman also produced a huge amount of engrossing and entertaining work in other genres: adventure, mystery, intrigue, even nonfiction.

Since Verne’s era science fiction has come a good way. Yet in some respects science *fact* still hasn’t caught up with him. Of the journeys in this volume, only Phileas Fogg’s is realistic for today’s readers—assuming they can budget the travel dollars. Two others, the moon shot and the *Nautilus*’s underwater voyage, are theoretically possible but well out of reach for civilians. As for a trip to the earth’s core, not in this lifetime. What’s more, Verne raised other burning questions that have yet to be resolved: one biggie (p. 193) is the issue of “whether life exists on other worlds.” Astronomers haven’t a definitive answer today any more than they had in 1865. Fiction, of course, has given thousands of answers . . . science none.

To read Jules Verne, then, is to go back to the basics, back to first causes, back to the sparkling source. It isn’t surprising that he remains enormously popular around the globe, and even in our English-speaking world new translations and annotated editions of his books keep appearing, some of them titles never previously available in our language. New film versions keep premiering as well. His best-known books continue to thrive on high school reading lists.

Even so, his books can be a consumer challenge. Here in America Verne is for sale in so many adaptations and condensations: decent English renderings of the full-length originals are often tricky to come by. Why? In the 19th century (Taves and Micheluk, xi), “Verne’s stories were rushed into publication—poorly translated, extensively abridged, and even censored for American and British read-

ers.” Though improved translations have since entered the U.S. and UK markets, truncated and error-ridden versions of his most famous titles are still rampant.

The book in your hands is an effort to solve the problem. It’s a handy omnibus volume of Verne’s best-loved novels in new, accurate, communicative translations. These five classics are more than household words, they’re joyous parts of our American heritage, from their films and Saturday morning cartoons to their connections with the U.S.S. *Nautilus*, the NASA space missions, and our other technological triumphs. And the USA itself is crucial to these novels: two have major American sequences, one divides its time between America and outer space, and still another takes place entirely in the U.S. So this volume is targeted to the American public: these are reader-friendly translations, translations complete down to the smallest substantive detail, translations that aim to convey the humor, theatricality, and scientific excitement this essay has been honoring.

For American purchasers, then, the texts convert metric figures to feet, miles, pounds, and other U.S. equivalents. The Americana, too, will be convincing for U.S. readers, sparing you the eye-rolling moments that can occur with overseas translators. In addition these new translations benefit not only from current Verne scholarship but from today’s worldwide access to academic, institutional, and educational databases: it’s possible to compare and cross-check multiple versions of the original French, and it’s possible, too, to render the marine biology in *20,000 Leagues*, the surface features in *Circling the Moon*, and the obscure locales on Phileas Fogg’s itinerary with unprecedented clarity and accuracy.

Finally these translations work to suggest Verne’s style and tone—the stealthy wit, irreverent prankishness, tale-spinning virtuosity, and showbiz flamboyance of one of literature’s leading humorists and satirists. This is a Verne almost completely unknown to Americans . . . yet a Verne who has an uncannily American mindset.

Specialists, educators, and students are encouraged to consult the Textual Notes starting on p. 657: these pinpoint the policies, priorities, and textual decisions underlying the translations. In preparing this volume I’ve run up unpayable debts to a host of kindly individuals: my wife Barbara Ann Bryant for her boundless patience and support; leading SF novelist Jane Lindskold for her invaluable mentoring; Dr. Gary Dunham, SUNY Press’s Executive Director, for his dedication to Jules Verne and good books in general; Laurie Searl, Senior Production Editor, for her gifts of ingenuity and diplomacy; Dr. Alan Hale, President of the Earthrise Institute, for help with the cosmology in *From the Earth to the Moon*; and Verne specialists Dr. William Butcher, Dr. Arthur B. Evans, Dennis Kytasaari, Dr. Julia Mastro, Andrew Rogulich, and Dr. Peter Schulman for help with matters too numerous to record. This volume wouldn’t have been possible without their benevolent assistance, however all errors and shortcomings are my own.

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