

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB

Interview with William Butcher (June 2022)

William Butcher lives in Hong Kong, where he was a professor at Hong Kong Baptist University. He has studied Jules Verne for twenty years. He wrote "Jules Verne: The Definitive Biography" and has done new translations of five of Verne's novels.

John Grayshaw: Jules Verne's novels and stories. Are they Science Fiction? Voyages Extraordinaires? Scientific Romances? Or all of the above?

This is a controversial subject, with many authorities outside the US objecting to Verne being pigeon-holed as SF. The term was only invented in the 20th century, so personally I'd be reluctant to apply it to Verne, especially as most of his novels contain vanishingly little science. Verne himself strenuously objected to being classified as a writer of "anticipations".

Adam J. Meek: Was Verne aware he was writing in a new genre, even though terms like SF weren't in use?

Yes, but the new genre he thought he was writing in was the geographical or adventure novel.

Adam J. Meek: How serious was his rivalry with HG Wells?

I'm not sure what Wells thought of Verne, but the French author criticised Wells's implausibility: just show me, he said, an anti-gravity shield.

Connie Marshall Thompson: The work of Jules Verne was one of my first introductions to science fiction. What was his background in science and what inspired him to write of the things that though we take (some of them) for granted were nothing short of miracles in his day?

He had no training or education at all in science; and later wrote that he really wasn't interested in the subject (and that it shouldn't be taught to girls). In about half a dozen novels, out of more than sixty, he used applied technology to get his heroes to exotic places, but his explanations about underlying science were often in terms of "levers" and "it being not of the common sort".

Robert Knuckles/Ronald Pelle: Is there a good list of Best Translations or at least passable translations of his works? I know his fellow French author Alexandre Dumas has also had at least a century's worth of poor translations of his own works.

Most US and UK translations in the 19th century were indeed defective, with wonderful howlers and considerably cutting. The North American Jules Verne Society used to have a presentation of good modern translations, but I'm not sure if it's still on their website. Arthur Evans produced an article for Science Fiction Studies attempting to rate all translations of Verne. With him I co-wrote an article on translations of *Around the World*: <https://www.ibiblio.org/julesverne/articles/curates.pdf>. Translations by FP Walter or in Oxford World's Classics have often been recommended.

Ronald Pelle: I recently tried to read "Michael Strogoff" and had to stop in the middle. I think the translation was horrible and pulpy, but some depictions of either Eastern Europeans or Sinti & Roma were really really bad, if not outright racist. I was a bit shocked by this, as Verne had a different reputation in my mind.

Was Verne rather "a man of his time" or was he indeed ahead of his time in regards to topics like racism, antisemitism and antiziganism?

Strogoff does have its longueurs... The book was repeatedly censored by the publisher, who made Verne cut out many of the most interesting passages. Like nearly all his contemporaries, especially the scientific authorities, Verne did display racism in some of his books. But he was unusual in having some admirable non-white heroes, in for instance *The Mysterious Island*, *Captain Grant's Children* or, especially, *The Tribulations of a Chinese in China*.

Damo Mac Choiligh: How is Verne regarded in France today, in particular how is he regarded by current French SF writers? From what I have read, many their subjects and concerns are very much about the impact of technology on society and culture, whereas Verne seemed to be an enthusiast for technology for its own sake. Am I right in thinking there is a gap there?

Verne is usually regarded in France as simply a writer, one of a literary stature. His novels have been included in doctoral- and master's-level competitive examinations, and he may be the most studied writer there. I'm no expert, but French SF writers probably draw general novelistic inspiration from him, but without much direct reference.

Verne was often pessimistic about the effect of technology; even in the earlier, better-known novels, it was his publisher that made him introduce praise of science.

Molly Smith: For *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, there seem to be a lot myth from the past. In particular classic Greek mythology, Nemo means nobody in Latin and is a figure in classic Greek myth the Odysseus. I believe and Jules Verne also used Greek myth of Atlantis. How much was Jules Verne influenced by the classics and did he have a background in the classics?

Yes, in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*, *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, there is a lot of classical reference and allusion. Verne studied Latin and Greek at the Lycée de Nantes, and enjoyed showing off his learning.

Molly Smith: Also, for the sea monster in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, another French writer Victor Hugo wrote a book about a sea monster the Kraken in 1866. Did this influence Jules Verne's sea monster?

Verne read Hugo's novel before writing *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, but the two creatures are not similar. Verne based his "poulpes" (more or less: "squid") largely on contemporary observations.

John Grayshaw: If SF tends to reflect the fears and hopes of a times, such as post-nuclear apocalypse stories in the 50s and 60s, what would be the equivalent for Jules Verne's time?

One fear at the time was the death of the Earth by cold. Another was the loss of community due to excessive urbanisation. Verne's own fear at the beginning was that there would soon be no unexplored areas on the globe, that his series of novels going to unknown places would soon have an end.

John Grayshaw: Was it difficult for Jules Verne to get published? How popular were his stories at the time?

He spent fifteen years in relative poverty in Paris, writing scores of plays, most of which were never staged. His first novel was published only at the unprecocious age of 35. In the late 19th century he was the best-selling French writer.

John Grayshaw: I think Verne's most well-known novels are "*Journey to the Center of the Earth*," "*From the Earth to the Moon*," "*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*," and "*Around the World in 80 Days*." Which of his other works SHOULD be more widely read?

Agreed. But *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* and "The Eternal Adam" are at least as good.

John Grayshaw: Do you have personal favorites of Verne's work?

The above two, with *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. His earlier books are usually more interesting than the later ones.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the writers Verne grew up reading?

Fenimore Cooper, Poe, Hugo, Dickens, Scott, Wyss, Stendhal and various desert-island stories.

John Grayshaw: Who are some writers that were Verne's contemporaries that he enjoyed/admired?

Not many... He admired Zola, but didn't like him; and liked Maupassant, but said don't let your wife read him...

John Grayshaw: What kind of research did Verne do for his books?

Very extensive. He read huge numbers of popularising works, especially about geography, travel or navigation. He even referenced his reading in the manuscripts, meaning that the precise passages used can now be identified.

John Grayshaw: What are some of the most interesting things you've found in your research of Verne?

That the sex, violence and politics Verne wrote were cut by the publisher; that his early life had never been studied; that his visits to Scotland and Norway determined the course of his writing; that the margins of his manuscripts reveal his financial difficulties and his extra-marital activities; that Phileas Fogg originally married Aouda in Hong Kong to avoid arrest; that Captain Nemo was originally greatly admired by Verne; that his first published book was a review of the 1857 Art Exhibition.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the writer's the Verne had correspondence with?

Dumas, but few others.

John Grayshaw: Are there any examples of Verne corresponding with his readers?

There are a score of interviews, usually by UK or US journalists, some of which are very revealing. And Verne corresponded lengthily with an Italian fan. He usually gave brief replies to fanmail from America.

John Grayshaw: Did Verne have any particular writing habits or routines he stuck with?

He wrote every morning, from about 5 am, producing a first draft, then a fair copy, then extensively revising on successive proofs.

John Grayshaw: What were some of Verne's hobbies other than writing?

He loved travel, usually sailing on his succession of yachts, visiting the British Isles at least 15 times, North Africa twice and America once. But most of his life was dominated by his writing.

John Grayshaw: Why has Jules Verne stayed so popular?

In short, because of the quality of his writing.

John Grayshaw: What is Verne's legacy? Why was his work significant at the time? And why is it still important today?

Verne may have changed the world as much as anyone in history. His accumulated sales exceed those of any other classic writer. He presents an alternative "world-view" to the increasingly dominant English-language one. Nearly all subsequent writers, but especially Tolkien, Arthur C Clarke, Michael Crichton or Ray Bradbury, have been profoundly influenced by him.