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Some Light Reading for the Winter Nights

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Gómez Paz, Guillermo. *Las Claves de Julio Verne: La novela [de aventuras] de nueva forma.* Bogotá (Colombia), eLibros, 2020. ISBN 978-9585277687.

Dusseau, Joëlle. *Jules Verne.* La Crèche (Deux Sèvres), La Geste, 2021. ISBN 979-1035309855.

Allard, Nicolas. *Les Mondes extraordinaires de Jules Verne: Aux origines de la pop culture et de la science-fiction.* Armand Colin, 2021. 978-2200631369.

Verne continues to be a hot topic for the general public, to judge from these three books, which may afford some relief from the more ponderous articles of recent years.

If Dusseau is “pure biography”, Gómez Paz and Allard incorporate both biographical information and discussion of the novels. None of the three are really “Vernians”, in the sense of having published extensively or highly innovatively on the subject. All three books are aimed at a wide public, highly readable in the relatively learned register typical of the Latin languages, but do not involve original research or startling new syntheses. Only Gómez Paz includes full endnotes, bibliography and index; Dusseau and Allard have short bibliographies and a limited number of notes.

All three contain many illustrations: Gómez Paz mostly with original gravures from the original French editions; Allard, a wide variety of books and especially films in both black and white and colour (eg steampunk, Harry Potter, Titanic). Dusseau’s 70 photographs are largely taken from historic stage productions, with a few fine ones of Verne and his family, including an absolute gem: a full-length, high-quality photograph of the writer himself, not reproduced before as far as I know. Taken in Nantes at about 30, it shows Verne in a dark suit, with a napkin, watch-fob, detachable collar, unlined face and a resplendent mustachio!

Neither a biography nor a close-reading, Gómez Paz's book is opposed to much popular thinking about Verne, and constitutes a welcome return to the delight of actually reading the books, the pleasure and excitement of the adventures, via an *eversion*, in the mathematical sense, of his structures. Unburdened by excessive plot summary, it gallops refreshingly through the writer's deep roots in real-life explorers and exotic travel writing, and more generally the cultured milieux of Nantes and Paris. True, there are a few slips, and the book sometimes depends too much on Allotte de la Fuÿe, for instance for the story that Verne met Nadar in 1860 at the Circle of the Scientific Press.

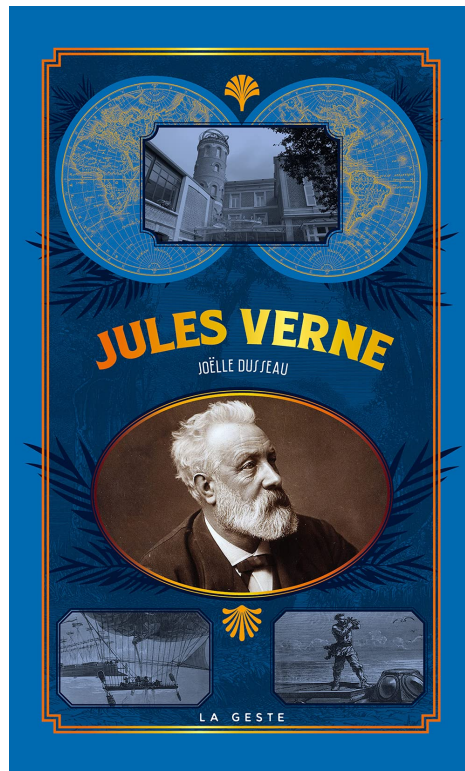


Almost unique amongst the many commentators, Gómez Paz gives a definition of science fiction – and then shows that Verne totally fails to fit into it. The preface and the whole of *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, he shows, are systematically anti-science and anti-technology. There was no inkling of the first three or four novels being in any way “scientific” when first published, an idea visible only after publisher Hetzel’s infamous announcement in the preface to the large-format *Hatteras*. Even the idea of a series of *Voyages extraordinaires* was dreamed up only after the first masterpieces.

The title of Allard’s book looks promising, because Verne has clearly exerted considerable influence on many subsequent writers, including – yes! – fantasy and science-fiction ones. As regards JRR Tolkien, as just one example, who read Verne as a youth in late-nineteenth-century South Africa, one can quote: the all-encompassing quest that culminates fatally in the heart of an erupting volcano; the multiple grasping hydra-like arms of aquatic monsters that, although repeatedly cut off, carry a man off to his death; or the age-old Nordic runes that,

once deciphered and interpreted, not by scientific analysis but by a fluke, allow entrance to the underworld, with fearful unknown species again lurking in the depths.

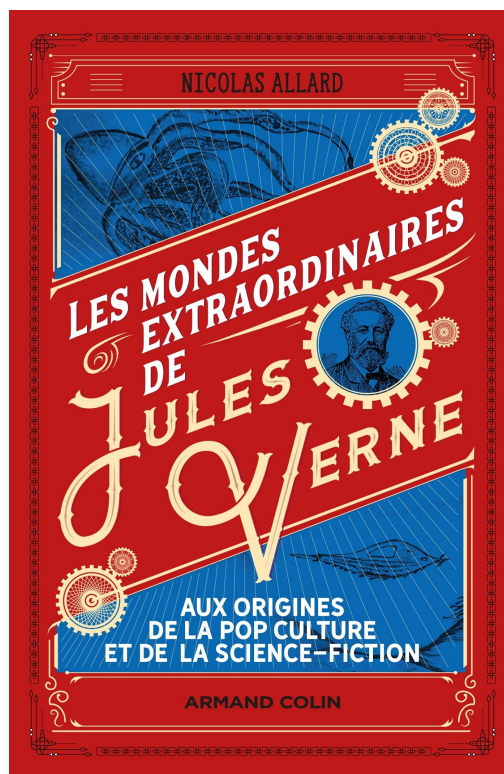
Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*, similarly, bears obvious similarities with *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, if only through the depiction of the massive extinct species brought back to life. Crichton, like Ray Bradbury and Arthur C. Clarke, has indeed gone on record about his debt to Verne (in introductions and private correspondence to myself), with Crichton going so far as to analyse the qualities of different translations of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.



Allard's text is stimulating, raising multiple questions, themes and ideas in non-linear fashion. However, the question of the title is begged, since the book's affirmations about the deep and wide influence of Verne on subsequent popular culture are unsupported. If the book does briefly mention some examples, there is little attempt to link successors' ideas with the Frenchman's, simply the citation of many literary and pop figures that have appreciated him in general terms, reinforced at best by weaselly formulas like "how not to think...", "reminiscent of...", "at the origin of...". (One can be "father of" a great deal without necessarily having any direct connection!) The book has too many lengthy quotations of often marginal relevance, and too many descriptions of contemporary pop culture. As to the vexed question of whether Verne wrote science fiction, Allard, although a specialist on the topic, assumes it as a given, even claiming that Verne "abundantly practises" the genre.

The puzzling paradox of Dusseau's book is that she signed another work with an identical title, for Perrin in 2005. The earlier, much more substantive volume, again mostly biography but interspersing chapters of analysis of the novels, grew out of her PhD. It was probably the

best of the numerous biographies of that year, certainly the most comprehensive, even if relying almost completely on published sources. Strangely, the new volume contains a number of errors, slips and hasty generalisations that were correct in 2005, namely that: Verne encountered the Dumas in 1850, the “Onze sans femme [sic]” met in the 1850s, in 1859 Verne took a “boat going to Edinburgh”, in 1862 he was a “failed playwright”, Fergusson is “English”, at the turn of 1864 Verne was “free from want”, he published two articles in the *Revue des deux mondes*, *Hatteras* was his “third novel” (it was, but not the third for Hetzel), *A Floating City* is a “novel”, multiple “liaisons” in both Paris and Amiens are confirmed facts, the first *St Michel* moored in “the docks of London” or *Yesterday and Tomorrow* was part of *Storitz*. To compensate, the narrative does sometimes take off, and does provide readable insights into some areas, for instance on Verne’s life after the 1886 shooting or his relations with son Michel.



All three books, especially Gómez Paz’s, then, can be read with pleasure; all three illuminate the authentic Verne to varying degrees.

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