

Fiction Reviews

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea

(1869 / 2019) Jules Verne, Oxford University Press,
£8.99 / US\$12.95, pbk, xlii + 419pp, ISBN 978-0-198-81864-9

Jules Verne's 1869 classic still reads well today, especially given the early 21st century vogue for steam punk.

The story is one you likely know, but if not here's the summary.

It is the mid-nineteenth century and Dr Aronnax is a French biologist who sets out on a cryptozoological mission to track down a terrifying sea monster that has been sinking ships. Long story short, his own vessel is targeted but, adrift with another survivor, they join a third who has found a small floating island.

But the island is in fact a submarine and the submarine, in turn, is the very monster they have been chasing!

Rescued, they discover that the *Nautilus* submarine's commander – Captain Nemo – is a disaffected soul who seeks to undermine the naval might of war mongering nations.

The survivors join the submarine as unwilling passengers as it tours the world's oceans beneath its waves...

The story itself prescences that of modern submarines and its power source could even – given the description of a hot, heavily shielded mysterious energy source – conceivably be nuclear. But perhaps this is a stretch too far.

The story is well known and has been made a number of times including in [1916](#) and 1954. It is therefore pointless for me to summarise the initial plot here, or even its status within science fiction for genre enthusiasts: it is that famous and if you have stumbled upon this review by chance and are genuinely unaware of this work then a search engine will quickly get you to the key information you need. So the question that remains is what is the value of this 2019 edition from Oxford University Press? Well, several things. In fact, I contend that this is the edition you should seek out.

First up, this is a new translation. The translator, William Butcher, has also had published a biography of Jules Verne and so is well placed to not only give us a sound translation

but also provide copious 'footnotes' marked by an asterisk and gathered in a lengthy appendix at the book's end. These footnotes really do add another dimension to the book especially for the modern reader over a century and two-thirds later: current readers will not be aware, say, of historical details such as that vessels of the armour-plated Soldferino (or Magenta) class consisted of only two such ships worldwide at the time! Or that a variant of the octopus battle occurs in a book by Victor Hugo that came out a couple of years before Verne's. There are 349 such footnotes so the reader genuinely comes away with the feeling that without them appreciation of this classic SF novel would be but a shadow.

And then there is the 16-page introduction that explores many aspects from the novel including that of the nature of the *Nautilus* and the clues buried in the text and between the two different editions of the novel that hint at Nemo's nationality. There is also a short piece on how the translation was undertaken and the text used, in addition to a Jules Verne biographical summary timeline.

This truly is the edition that serious SF readers will want. Indeed, given its rigour is at the academic level (such is the quantity and detail of ancillary information provided), it is surprising that this book is priced at the level of an average fiction paperback: it is extremely good value. If SF book aficionados do not want it for themselves – say, because they already have a couple of editions of this classic in their collection (I see I already have three in mine) – then they might get it for a younger, embryonic SF enthusiast for their birthday or Christmas. I suggest this in the full likelihood that the copy ultimately given away will be an old one from their collection as this is too good an edition not to have.

Indeed, if you are into SF and want to do your good deed for the day, then spread the word on your blog, social media, *etc.* You would be doing your SF-loving friends a genuine favour.

Jonathan Cowie

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