

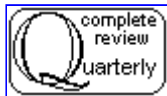


Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas

by
Jules Verne

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Title: *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*

Author: Jules Verne

Genre: Novel

Written: 1870 (Eng. 1998)

Length: 409 pages

Original in: French

Availability: [Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas](#) - US
[Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas](#) - UK
[Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas](#) - Canada
[Vingt mille lieues sous les mers](#) - Canada
[Vingt mille lieues sous les mers](#) - France
[20 000 Meilen unter den Meeren](#) - Deutschland
[Ventimila leghe sotto i mari](#) - Italia
[Veinte mil leguas de viaje submarino](#) - España

from: [Bookshop.org](#) (US)

directly from: [Oxford University Press](#)

- French title: *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*
- Translated and with an Introduction by William Butcher
- There are numerous other translations, including by Lewis Page Mercier (1872), Henry Frith (1876), Anthony Bonner (1962), Mendor T. Brunetti (1969), Emanuel J. Mickel (1992), Frederick Paul Walter (2010), and David Coward (2016)
- There have been several film versions of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*, including the 1954 film directed by Richard Fleischer and starring Kirk Douglas, James Mason, and Peter Lorre

Our Assessment:

B+ : good adventure-fun

See [our review](#) for fuller assessment.

Review Summaries

Source	Rating	Date	Reviewer
Extrapolation	.	Spring/2001	Jie Lu
19th-Cent. French St.	.	Fall/Winter 2000/1	Arthur B. Evans

From the Reviews:

- "Butcher's translation of this novel, thus, exemplifies the ideal of adequate style as well as strong details. One of the strong impressions that the reader gets from browsing over this edition is the ultra-sincerity and high-standard scholarship of the translator, as well as his minute consideration for the reader's convenience, knowledge necessity, and referential need." - Jie Lu, Extrapolation
- "So how do Butcher's new "Oxford World's Classics" versions of these three Jules Verne novels stack up against the many other English translations that are currently available ? The answer is simple. In terms of their textual integrity and scholarly substance, they are the best of the lot. Although I may occasionally quibble over his choice of a specific word or phrase (...), Butcher's translations are generally excellent and very faithful to Verne's original prose and stylistic idiosyncracies." - Arthur B. Evans, Nineteenth-Century French Studies

Please note that these ratings solely represent **the complete review's** biased interpretation and subjective opinion of the actual reviews and do not claim to accurately reflect or represent the views of the reviewers. Similarly the illustrative quotes chosen here are merely those **the complete review** subjectively believes represent the tenor and judgment of the review as a whole. We acknowledge (and remind and warn you) that they may, in fact, be entirely unrepresentative of the actual reviews by any other measure.

The *complete review's* Review:

For many of Jules Verne's books -- certainly the better-known ones, such as this one -- readers have (and should know they have) a choice among translations. Unfortunately, Verne's work has often been manhandled in translation -- certainly in the case of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas* where, as William Butcher notes in the Introduction to his own (1998) translation (the one under review here):

Lewis Mercier's 1872 translation was typical of the time: adequate on 'style' but extremely weak on details. Also, about 22 per cent of the novel is missing ! Since then, over half of the editions have reproduced Mercier, many of them making further minor changes without, unfortunately, referring back to the French; and it is often the editions that protest the most about poor translation which are themselves the least faithful and the most Mercier-like !

Butcher notes, correctly, that: "A great majority of the current English editions of Verne continue to be of an unacceptable standard" -- suggesting also that: "this, I would claim, is the main reason for his poor reputation".

Even in English, Verne is a popular and well-known author, but Butcher is correct that he is not taken as seriously or valued as highly as his work warrants, with the versions on offer -- often also edited and marketed for a younger-readers' market -- too often confirming the opinion that the work is just not that good. So, if the originals are out of reach, it is important to be aware of what translation one is reading. As far as *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas* goes, Butcher's already gets one of the basics right, in his being a complete translation; there are others one can more or less safely turn to as well -- with the general rule of the more recent the better holding truer for Verne than for most classical authors. (I have not seen the David Coward translation (2016), now published in the Penguin Classics series, but that too seems likely to be a good alternative.)

Butcher's Introduction to this Oxford World's Classics edition is also a notch above the usual classics-introduction -- not least because Butcher takes both author and work seriously (as, as noted, Verne simply often isn't). Aside also from a variety of interesting observations regarding the translation ("There are perhaps 2,000 rare words and proper names in the French edition, but more than 100 are incorrect") he also suggests a number of interpretations and approaches to the novel in a jaunty manner; his Introduction is 'scholarly' but not too dry or dense or long. He also is critical where appropriate, including in his Notes on the Text and Translation, where he points out some of the novel's numerous implausibilities. The fairly extensive endnotes -- Explanatory Notes -- also both usefully explain and comment on the text, and are of particular interest in also pointing out the textual variants, as there are two extant manuscript versions of the novel, with the occasional interesting variation.

The novel is narrated by Pierre Aronnax, a forty-year-old lecturer at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. (As Butcher points out: "Aronnax is stated to be a modest 'lecturer' ('professeur suppléant'), and not a professor, as has been the usual translation to date".) He has a notable publication under his belt -- the two-volume *The Mysteries of the Ocean Deep*s -- but more recently has been on assignment studying the Badlands of Nebraska. When the novel opens, in 1867, he is making his way back home -- at a time when there's been lots of buzz about a mysterious sea-object, sighted by numerous ships.

When Aronnax is in New York he is invited -- by no less than the American Secretary to the Navy -- to join the *Abraham Lincoln*, a vessel being sent out to track and hunt down the mysterious sea-object, and of course he can not pass up that opportunity. Aronnax has considered the evidence carefully and formed a view, "based on the logic of facts", as to what the object might be, and he is absolutely certain that it is an enormous swimming mammal like a whale, fitted with a tusk. Aronnax is, of course,

completely wrong.

The expedition also includes fabled Canadian harpooner Ned Land, as well as Aronnax's completely devoted man Friday, Conseil. The hunt long comes up empty, but eventually they encounter the floating object -- but catching up with it only gets them so far. A collision with it flings Aronnax (and, it soon turns out, Ned) overboard -- with dutiful Conseil jumping in after his master ("I followed monsieur since I am in monsieur's service").

The trio are then saved by the mysterious object -- the huge submarine that is the *Nautilus*. Its captain is a man: "who has broken with humanity" - - and one who is not pleased about having to deal with these unwelcome outsiders. This Nemo is a man who:

Not only had he placed himself outside humanity's laws, but he had made himself independent, free in the strictest sense of the world, out of all reach !

It is, of course, a great set-up for a story -- now completed with the three new passengers who are accepted into the fold but are, in fact, prisoners, welcome on the ride, but not allowed to get off. As Nemo tells Aronnax:

You came and discovered a secret no man on earth must penetrate -- the secret of my entire existence. And you imagine that I am going to send you back to shore, where nothing is known about me any longer ? Never ! By holding you, it is not you that I am protecting, but myself.

Nemo does know how to sweeten the deal, at least for Aronnax: the *Nautilus* is on a journey of discovery, after all, and can reveal to Aronnax secrets of the sea that he would never otherwise have an opportunity to see And, while the living-space is somewhat limited, it really is quite comfortable -- even luxurious -- and offers, besides many fine art works on display, an impressive library of twelve-thousand volumes. Not that they have much choice, but Aronnax: can definitely see that this is also quite an opportunity for him. Ned, of course, is much less pleased -- and his increasing eagerness and then desperation to return to land and freedom help supply some of the tension in the story. (Conseil, of course, will do whatever his master wishes.)

The mystery of Nemo also makes for some of the suspense of the story, as the captain long does little to explain himself or his past, or his reasons for removing himself from the rest of humanity -- despite wealth so great that he could do more or less as he wishes, anywhere. As Aronnax offhandedly mentions to Aronnax:

'You must be very well off then ?'

'Infinitely sir, and without undue difficulty I could pay off the ten billion francs of France's debt.'

Conseil thinks it's simple enough

The worthy fellow persisted in seeing in the captain of the *Nautilus*, merely one of those unrecognized scientists, who return humanity's indifference with mistrust. For him he was still a misunderstood genius, tired of the disappointments of the earth, who had taken sanctuary in that inaccessible environment where he could freely exercise his abilities. But in my view this theory explained only one of Captain Nemo's sides.

Indeed. Nemo clearly is a driven man, and a great deal weighs on him. But it is only at the very end that Aronnax recognizes the extent of it:

It was not common misanthropy that had enclosed Captain Nemo and his companions in the flanks of the *Nautilus*, but a monstrous or sublime hatred that time could not diminish.

For ten months, Aronnax and his companions roam the seas with Nemo, a voyage richly imagined by Verne as he opens up a whole new world underwater. Several of the high-points are surprisingly brief -- a visit to Atlantis; the crossing from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean (the "uncrossable isthmus" of Suez, pre-canal, crossed in a few minutes) -- but the variety of adventure is great and often genuinely thrilling. There are encounters with hostile natives -- in a rare on-land episode --, sperm whales, and giant squid; walks on the ocean-bottom; and a foray underneath Antarctica that almost leaves the submerged submarine ice-bound. Ultimately, there is a showdown, and a Maelstrom -- "The Maelstrom ! Could a more frightening word sound in our ears in a more desperate situation ?" -- while in perhaps too convenient but certainly an appropriate touch Aronnax doesn't quite miss the boat but does the climactic action, as: "My head struck an iron spar; and because of this violent impact I lost consciousness".

Aronnax is a fine narrator for such a tale - a typical Vernian one, as Butcher also notes in his Introduction ("They exist to narrate, and narrate to exist") --, and, while hard-working and studious, also somewhat limited and simple; one can see why he's never made it beyond 'lecturer'. Part of the fun of the novel comes also with just how wrong he is about so much, beginning with his certainty that what turns out to be a man-made submarine is a mammal.

The situation of the captured trio as prisoners is also an interesting element in the novel -- with Ned increasingly desperate to get free while Aronnax is often ambivalent. This, like much here -- so also Nemo's deep, dark issues --, arguably isn't really mined for all its worth, but this detracts less than in most fiction: leaving much about the characters to the reader's imagination, Verne does a good job of inflaming that. (It's perhaps one reason Verne is so often thought as a young-adult or even children's author, with more mature readers expecting (or demanding) fuller character-portraits where younger readers are satisfied with strong outlines which they easily fill in in their minds' eyes.)

Throughout, Verne also offers up the usual lists and details -- as Butcher also remarks upon in his Introduction (including noting: "There are indeed a bewildering number of common and proper names in the novel") -- but this cataloguing rarely bogs the narrative down -- helped, in no small part, by the incredible variety that Verne's premise offers him, both in the underwater realm and the island of civilization that is the *Nautilus* (with its great library, among much else).

Even for those familiar with the story, from childhood reading or the movie versions, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas* remains good fun and a good read. This Oxford World's Classics edition is a very good one to rely on, not least in also providing supporting material that suggests some of the additional, less obvious layers and references.

- M.A.Orthofer, 11 November 2022

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About the Author:

French author Jules Verne (1828-1905) is one of the bestselling writers of all time.

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