

Explorer of the Mind

By Renée Tursi

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JULES VERNE

The Definitive Biography By William Butcher

Thunder's Mouth Press. 369 pp. \$28

Avoyager of the imagination, French novelist Jules Verne (1828-1905) found himself vexingly tethered to one genre. Driven by his publisher's commercial interests, he produced two or three books a year of scientific fantasy and adventure aimed at young readers.

Classics such as "Journey to the Center of the Earth" (1864), "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea" (1869) and "Around the World in Eighty Days" (1872) continue to make him one of the most translated and recognized writers. Yet a decade before his death he wrote to an admirer that he was "the most unknown of men."

What was unknown, according to Verne's latest biographer, William Butcher, is how secondary futuristic science was to Verne's writing; his larger interest was in mankind's longing to understand itself. Verne was a psychological explorer, not a technophile, Butcher insists, and all the fantastical vessels -- the balloon, the submarine, the spaceship -- were simply means to an end. As Verne suggested, "human nature [is] the greatest science of all."

Presented as "definitive," Butcher's biography thoroughly explores the novelist's own nature. It begins with the bustling maritime culture of Verne's native Nantes, which launched his romance with unseen destinations. Butcher describes a young psyche both entranced and worried by the strange shifts of tide, land and ice; for Verne, "the normal categories became blurred by all these upheavals and inversions. . . . All his life he would suffer from left-right and east-west disorder, category confusion, and unquenchable pansexuality."

Verne's father, Pierre, was a lawyer, and he decreed that his son would likewise have a law career, despite his obvious zeal for writing. While halfheartedly pursuing his studies in Paris, the young Jules wrote Pierre in 1851 that "I may become a good writer, but only a poor lawyer as I invariably see the comic or artistic side of things, missing their precise reality." Meeting Alexandre Dumas the younger, and later his famous father, changed Verne's compass, leading him deep into the world of theater and the practice of literary collaboration. He wrote plays and librettos with several authors. In later years, he would face some charges of plagiarism; Butcher sees no link to these early collaborations, yet for Verne that process of exchange might naturally have made words seem ownerless.

Love proved to be its own elusive journey. After a desperate (and very funny) appeal to his mother to find him a wife, Verne met and married the widow Honorine de Viane, with whom he had one child, Michel. The wearisome pull of debts amassed by an apparently dull wife, two stepdaughters, an unmanageable son and a sailboat tied him to lawyering and then stockbrokering.

But Verne kept writing. In 1863, his first novel, "Five Weeks in a Balloon" -- the adventures of an airborne explorer who discovers the source of the Nile -- became tremendously popular, but it moored him to his lifelong reputation. He claimed he wrote the work "not as a story about ballooning, but as a story about Africa." The novel's technical dazzle, however, galvanized a public that would demand more "Extraordinary Journeys in the Known and Unknown Worlds," as publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel collectively dubbed Verne's novels.

The writer's long association with the profit-minded Hetzel is the real focus of Butcher's book, one of many divergences from Herbert R. Lottman's 1996 biography. Lottman represented that relationship as a warm partnership, casually noting the unfair contractual agreements that assured Hetzel (who also published Victor Hugo and George Sand) most of the earnings. Butcher depicts a more slavish affiliation, with Verne churning out novels like sausages and, exhausted, relinquishing editorial control to the publisher, who then bilked him.

While Butcher is given at times to an odd metaphor and sloppy footnoting, his biography's animated style and bite-every-nickel research make it a vivid read. The book opens with a literal bang, describing the 1886 incident in which Verne's nephew

wounded him with a bullet that hit a leg but seemed aimed for his loins. Butcher's real strength, though, is his expertise with Verne's manuscripts. Scholars have long known that Hetzel rewrote large swaths of Verne's prose and leaned on the author to change story lines. But here we see exactly how, for instance, Capt. Nemo of "20,000 Leagues" was originally conceived as harboring nationalistically justified gripes and possessing "a generous nature," but appeared in the published work as a mysterious, somewhat irrational character. Verne complained bitterly that Hetzel had mangled Nemo "to the point where I can't recognize him."

With little rattling of his chains, Verne accepted the "rather restricted milieu where I'm forced to have my being." And so he spent his final years famous but misunderstood, unable to convince his readers that his "main subjects" were "geography and humanity." Late in life, he did a public reading of a short story -- a fable concerning a hermit with a cane. He pretended not to notice when some in the audience left early.

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