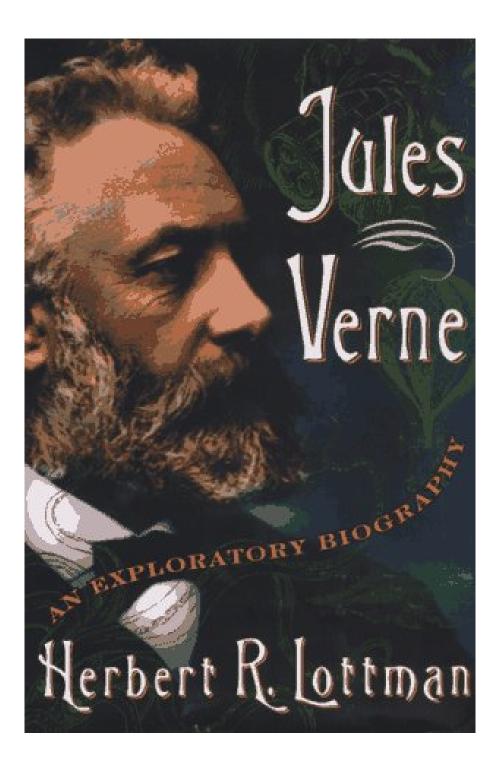


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Drawing on mountains of unpublished correspondence between the renowned science fiction author and various friends and family members, a comprehensive biography recreates Verne's life from his youth in Nantes to his self-imposed exile outside of Paris as an adult.

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In-depth biography of Verne

By My Two Cents

This book is meticulously researched, with 20 pages of footnotes, based on the correspondence of Verne, his family, and his business associates, along with contemporary accounts. I knew of Verne only from his famous novels: "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," Journey to the Center of the Earth," etc. I did not know the range of fiction that he wrote, much of it NOT related to these science fiction stories. From the biography, we learn of the substantial contributions his publisher, Pierre-Jules Hetzel made in making Verne's books marketable and palatable. Many chapters are dedicated to a discussion of what went into Verne's books, including what sparked the idea and a summary of the plot, plus the biographer's opinion regarding the quality of the story. Some of the books were adapted for the stage, which was an important source of income for Verne. The author goes into great deal regarding Verne's health problems, the reluctant financial supported proved by his father, the challenges posed by his son, and Verne's prejudices. Due to the way the book is based on source materials, and provides endless details, it was tedious to read at times. There is a growing sense of repetition from chapter to chapter because of Verne's concerns about his son, his health issues, and his back-and-forth correspondence with his publisher. I was disappointed that the book did not have a list of the novels and plays that Verne wrote, as this would have been a helpful reference. Overall, the biography was a solid one, just not especially inspiring to read.

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Survey of author's life, work and times

By Avid Reader

This book starts out well, with a chatty informal style that promises to give you both a standard biography of a major author, but also the biographer's interesting asides. Unfortunately, that promising beginning is not carried through in this book, as it quickly declines into a standard-issue chronology without much insight. It's quite repetitious, too, though this can be perhaps be the fault of the subject himself, who constantly complained about stomach ailments and who was ridiculously prolific (thus tempting a biographer to give short summaries of book after book). It's no exaggeration to say there are at least 100 references to Verne's stomach complaints in his letters to family and friends. And since he wrote 100-plus books, it's no exaggeration to say that there are about 100 times when we get a book title, a plot summary and then are told that the book was serialized in one magazine or another and then bound into an illustrated edition for the

Xmas holiday sales season.

But back to the actual subject: Jules Verne. He created a new type of literature, or at least perfected it. A blend of science, historic travelogue and fiction, Verne's best books educated children and adults while also entertaining them. He researched his topics meticulously, but then layered on top of them wild scenarios that brought his heroes and villains into those worlds, where the skills of the hero (and usually a trusted servant or colleague) would eventually save the day. It was formulaic, and it rarely earned much praise from the intelligensia of the day, but it sold well for decades.

The locations of these tales was literally everywhere in the world and occasionally beyond earth. But his favorites were the North Pole, South Pole and the ocean. He could evoke the scary depths of these uncharted and dangerous places, while also sharing with readers whatever new knowledge was emerging about their topography, weather, geology, flora, fauna and human habitation. And whether his heroes arrived by boat, train, balloon, on foot or some other means, they always carried with them just enough modern technology and engineering savvy so that they could scrape together a new contraption. As the biographer notes, this fired up the imagination of countless explorers and scientists for generations.

I must admit, however, that I find his books to be dreary. They're basically lists, punctuated by stock characters doing obvious things. In fact, I picked up this biography hoping that it would inspire me to re-read a few of his books. Not gonna happen.

This biographer does a good job of delving into Verne's life and politely asking some provocative questions. Were his stomach ailments real? Did he cheat on his wife -- and with women or with teenage boys? Why did he allow his publisher to continually lengthen a very unfair contract that deprived Verne of a share of the profits of illustrated editions? Why did he leave Paris at the height of his fame and move to the provincial town of Amiens for the rest of his life?

And the biographer places him in context of his times, which were very interesting, including rapid and violent changes in the French govt. several times during his lifetime. Verne was a religious man (Catholic) and deeply conservative politically. He politely, but firmly, was one of those guys trying to hold back the dam of political progress, even as he celebrated technological progress in his books.

Yet, the book is still lacking something. It doesn't give a truly deep dive into how Verne actually put together his research and his fantastical ideas into a book. We are told that he always had two or three books in progress, and that he rewrote and edited his drafts many times, always with deep consultation with his editor and publisher. But we don't really understand how he did it, other than some weird system of writing in pencil and then writing over it in pen when he had finished the first draft. In a book-length biography, we would have been better served with a full chapter on his technique.

Similarly, we would have been better served to have a deeper look at a few of his most lasting works: 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea; Around the World in 80 Days; etc. These do get lengthier treatment in the book, but the treatment is more about their acclaim and the theatrical productions that "80 Days" spawned than about what made the books special.

In the end, this book is a helpful grounding in Verne's life and times. But I'm not sure it really told me what make Jules Verne special.

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