

Reviews

Jules Verne: Journeys in Writing. By TIMOTHY UNWIN. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 2005. xii + 242 pp. £20. ISBN 978-0-85323-458-6. Ro2132

In 2005 Jules Verne aficionados from around the world commemorated the centenary of the death of this ever-popular author. Scores of new Verne-related publications—of varying quality—appeared in the marketplace. Some were by serious literary scholars, some by well-meaning but idolizing fans, and some by media journalists who seemed to know Verne only as the putative ‘father of sci-fi’. *Jules Verne: Journeys in Writing* stands squarely in the first group. In fact, it constitutes one of the very best scholarly monographs on Verne to appear in English or French in several years.

As its title suggests, this study offers a refreshingly new focus on the legendary French author. Rather than treating Verne as a cultural icon of futurism or technological prophet (as most critics tend to do), Timothy Unwin chooses instead to concentrate on Verne as a writer. He argues that Verne should be viewed first and foremost as a nineteenth-century ‘novelist who renews and revitalises the genre’ (p. 6) and whose literary talents have too often been ignored, misunderstood, or underestimated. Unwin explains:

It is true that Verne has been plundered, pilloried, and appropriated in such rich and inventive ways that his massive cultural legacy can quite simply overshadow his real literary output. A significant part of the purpose of the present study, then, is to step back from the myths, indeed to challenge the clichés about Verne, and to re-examine his writing from a more strictly literary perspective. [. . .] In what ways is his writing subversive, innovative or experimental? What are its ideological or philosophical undercurrents? How does he adapt the conventions of the realist novel to his own particular enterprise? To what extent does he, literally and literarily, push back the frontiers of fiction?’ (pp. 2–3)

To answer these questions, Unwin examines the many building-blocks of Verne’s narrative recipe—his ubiquitous intertextuality (scientific and literary), his ‘narrativization’ of non-fictional discourses, his theatrical modes of characterization, his self-reflexive narrative voice, his tongue-in-cheek use of irony, etc.—in order to highlight the stylistic originality of Verne’s *Voyages extraordinaires*. Interesting comparisons with other French authors of the ‘realist’ tradition such as Balzac and Flaubert are included. Pertinent studies by other Vernian scholars such as Pierre Macherey, Piero Gondolo della Riva, Volker Dehs, Andrew Martin, Alain Buisine, and especially Daniel Compère are referenced (in-text and/or via profuse footnotes). And, throughout the book, Unwin showcases a wonderfully broad selection of Verne’s fiction, underscoring the ‘polyphonic, composite nature’ (p. 52) of this writer’s œuvre.

The book is logically structured, reads smoothly, and contains almost no typos or other editorial glitches. It begins with a six-page introduction and ends with a six-page conclusion. In between are six chapters entitled ‘Science, Literature, and the Nineteenth Century’, ‘Textual Environments’, ‘All the World’s a Text’, ‘Theatre and Theatricality’, ‘Self-Consciousness: The Journey of Language and Narrative’, and ‘Writing and Rewriting’. A brief chronology of Verne’s life is included in an appendix, and a selected critical bibliography and topical index complete the volume.

As a veteran Vernian, I learnt much from this book; its scholarship is up to date, and its analyses are both original and insightful. A few of the discussions that I especially enjoyed were those describing how Verne’s early experiences in the theatre influenced his style as a novelist, how he explored in highly creative ways the problematic link between narrative and knowledge, and how his playful manipulation of metatextual narrative voice ‘More, perhaps, than any other novelist in nineteenth-century France’ (p. 134) continually offers the reader a unique behind-the-scenes look at Verne’s own ‘journey in writing’. Highly recommended for both university and public libraries

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as well as for all Jules Verne enthusiasts who wish to gain a greater appreciation for Verne as a *littéraire*.

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