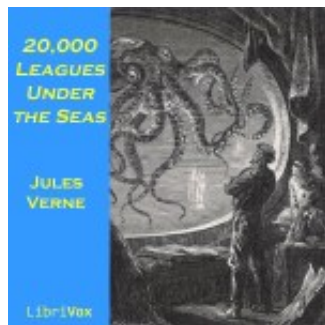


## 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea by Jules Verne

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Monday, November 03, 2014

<https://curmudgeon-alley.com/20000-leagues-under-the-sea-by-jverne/>



This book was not quite what I expected. What little I knew about this story was from seeing bits and pieces of the various movies based on this book. The movies emphasize the adventure aspect of book. Perhaps the best way to describe the book would a travelogue for 20,000 leagues most of which was under the sea.

Towards the end of the book Professor Aronnax is reviewing his time aboard the *Nautilus*. He does so in a short paragraph:

*“My nerves were somewhat calmer, but in my excited brain I saw over again all my existence on board the Nautilus; every incident, either happy or unfortunate, which had happened since my disappearance from the Abraham Lincoln—the submarine hunt, the Torres Straits, the savages of Papua, the running ashore, the coral cemetery, the passage of Suez, the Island of Santorin, the Cretan diver, Vigo Bay, Atlantis, the iceberg, the South Pole, the imprisonment in the ice, the fight among the poulps, the storm in the Gulf Stream, the Avenger, and the horrible scene of the vessel sunk with all her crew. All these events passed before my eyes like scenes in a drama.*

It is these events that Hollywood has sucked out of the book to make movies. Verne spent much of the book spouting taxonomy, ichthyology, botany, and other branches of science. Professor Aronnax’s faithful man-servant Conseil is the ultimate classifier. He cannot look at a biological organism without placing it in taxonomic pigeon-hole. The following passage is an example of the many similar that occur all throughout the book.

*“In the eighty-ninth genus of fishes, classed by Lacepede, belonging to the second lower class of bony, characterised by opercules and bronchial membranes, I remarked the scorpaena, the head of which is furnished with spikes, and which has but one dorsal fin; these creatures are covered, or not, with little shells, according to the sub-class to which they belong. The second sub-class gives us specimens of didactyles fourteen or fifteen inches in length, with yellow rays, and heads of a most fantastic appearance. As to the first sub-class, it gives several specimens of that singular looking fish appropriately called a ‘seafrog,’ with large head, sometimes pierced with holes, sometimes swollen with protuberances, bristling with spikes, and covered with tubercles; it has irregular and hideous horns; its body and tail are covered with callosities; its sting makes a dangerous wound; it is both repugnant and*

*horrible to look at."*

As a former Biology major I found many of those passages interesting, but I am sure some readers would find them tedious. If I had been reading rather than listening to the audio-book, I would have probably been skimming through those sections.

When it was not science it was history.

*"Sir, if you have no objection, we will go back to 1702. You cannot be ignorant that your king, Louis XIV, thinking that the gesture of a potentate was sufficient to bring the Pyrenees under his yoke, had imposed the Duke of Anjou, his grandson, on the Spaniards. This prince reigned more or less badly under the name of Philip V, and had a strong party against him abroad. Indeed, the preceding year, the royal houses of Holland, Austria, and England had concluded a treaty of alliance at the Hague, with the intention of plucking the crown of Spain from the head of Philip V, and placing it on that of an archduke to whom they prematurely gave the title of Charles III. "*

Of course all this had pertinence to story as this is where Captain Nemo replenished his gold supplies.

The actual numbers of characters in this book are few. There is a crew aboard the *Nautilus*, but for the most part they are faceless. The reader is never really sure how many souls inhabit the submarine.

The narrator is the French Professor, Dr. Pierre Aronnax. He is the most richly developed. A physician turned naturalist he is enchanted with all he discovers aboard the *Nautilus* and in the seas they transverse. While his companion, Ned Land, is agitating to escape, Aronnax is trying to calm him down. He wants to remain aboard and learn and see all that he can. His love of learning and science cloud his vision of the reality of Captain Nemo. In the end he awakens, but it takes the destruction of a battleship and the death of hundreds of seamen to do so.

Conseil, the man-servant of Dr. Aronnax is more or less one dimensional. He is to be admired for his faithfulness to the employer, and he does provide a bit of comic relief. His primary purpose in the novel seems to be as a spouter of taxonomy.

There is Ned Land, the Canadian harpooner. His function in the novel is to provide tension as his main focus is escaping the *Nautilus*. After they are rescued by the crew of the *Nautilus*, they are told that they will never be set free. Land never accepts this state as reasonable and presses the other rescuees with escape plans.

Of course, the other main character is Captain Nemo. He remains a man of mystery as does the reasons for his actions. I read somewhere that in the original version Captain Nemo was Polish and the ships he was sinking were Russian. Russia had recently invaded Poland. France was trying to remain on good diplomatic terms with Russia; hence no one would publish the book as written. In Verne's rewrite the nationalities of the participants fade away.

Captain Nemo is presented as a man of nearly superhuman intellect and physical abilities. He is also portrayed as man who generally has his emotions under control, but has bursts of anger. He also seems to be suffering from clinical depression. He is a man who has cut off all ties with humanity except for

revenge. In Dr. Aronnax, Captain Nemo sees another man of intellect and for murky reasons wants to share with him the wonders he has seen in the ocean. Hence they start an around the world voyage, hitting all the oceans and major seas. They even visit sunken Atlantis!

It appears that Verne was a great admirer of Edgar Allan Poe. He wrote a sequel to Poe's novel, *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Verne has the narrator mention Poe within the context of this book. The *Nautilus* visits the South Pole, as did Gordon Pym and the Verne in the follow up book *An Antarctic Mystery*. Verne even uses the same dramatic device again. In *An Antarctic Mystery*, an iceberg flips over trapping the schooner, *Halbrane*, on top of it so it is high and dry several hundred feet in the air. In this book, an iceberg overturns and traps the *Nautilus* between it and the roof of ice under which they are navigating.

Jules Verne had a huge impact on one my favorite genres of literature, science fiction. He sprinkles science through this book, but it is the science of the 1800s. Looking back at with today's eyes some of it seems very erroneous. But like most science fiction writers, Verne took some bit of cutting edge science from his day and extrapolated the possibilities. A submarine that could go around the world was one of those extrapolations, and we know that came to past. He also gives a nod to plate tectonics and dismisses the Genesis creation story as a story in favor of long geological time and evolution.

The ending would be what my brother termed, *dues ex machina*. It was a rather contrived ending, and in some ways seemed to be another nod to Edgar Allan Poe as the ending was similar to the ending of Poe's, *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. The *Nautilus* is lost (or is it?) in a powerful oceanic vortex called a maelstrom. Gordon Pym and Dirk Peters are seemingly lost in a cataract at the South Pole in Poe's book.

All in all it was a reasonable adventure story. I enjoyed reading it, as it tied up a lot of movie references I was familiar with.

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Just for grins and giggles here is the link to the Wikipedia article on [Jules Verne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jules_Verne)

I am always interested in the movies inspired by books. Here are links to movies this book inspired:

1. [1954 version](#) starring Kirk Douglas, James Mason, Paul Lukas and Peter Lorre
2. [1997 TV movie](#) starring Michael Caine, Patrick Dempsey, Mia Sara. Just glancing at the list of characters, it must deviate from the book quite a bit
3. The TV movie can be found on YouTube at [Click Here](#)

I've included a picture of Jules Verne simply because he looks like a person that would be fun to be around

