

# Jules Verne's '20,000 Leagues Under the Sea' Goes Deeper Than You May Realize

Like its vast ocean setting, Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* goes deeper into pop culture – its tentacles reaching farther than its creature's – than you may realize.

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20,000 Leagues Under the Sea

Jules Verne

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Jules Verne is a literary singularity. He is one of the most translated authors in the world, yet often overlooked by ivory tower academics due to his classification as a “genre writer”. Verne’s masterwork, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, first published as a magazine serialization between 1869 and 1870, is one of the most enduring works of science fiction ever written. The novel is widely hailed as the first work of modern science fiction. (Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, published in 1818, is often deemed the earliest example.)

*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* profoundly influenced the exalted “ABCs of Science Fiction” (Issac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, and Sir Arthur C. Clarke). The book also played an ironclad hand in the rise of Steampunk, the retro-futuristic sci-fi sub-genre. It even influenced explorer Robert Ballard’s 1985 discovery of the Titanic, and renowned oceanographer, inventor, and conservationist Jacques Costeau referred to the book as his “shipboard bible”. Even still, serious scholarly acceptance has long eluded Verne’s oeuvre outside of his French homeland. It’s been a slow burn for genre fiction, in general, to be widely embraced by the snooty academy, even though many in the canon (Shakespeare, Shelley, Dickens, Kafka, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tennessee Williams, and many others) dabbled or dove head first into the chimerical waters of the fantastic.

Ironically, despite the shortage of academic acceptance in the US, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* foreshadowed the genre hybridity presently en vogue in today’s American literary tableau. From Charles Yu’s 2020 National Book Award-winning *Interior Chinatown* (screenplay as the literary novel) to Colson Whitehead’s Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award-winning *Underground Railroad* (historical fiction cum magical realism), inventive genre mashups and stories told via untraditional narrative forms are enjoying a bonafide artistic groundswell. Indeed, Jules Verne can be credited with making the first splash with his creation: the “scientific novel”.

Often described as “Victorian scientific romance”, the scientific novel includes science and technical achievements, details, discoveries, and adventures central to the story while celebrating humankind’s romantic quest to conquer air, land, and sea. Verne’s invention was a precursor to what would later be labelled “science fiction”.

*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* was Jules Verne’s seventh novel and set out to be his survey of the earth’s oceans and seas—above the surface and far below. After the book was serialized in the popular French family periodical, the *Magasin d’éducation et de récréation* (Magazine of Education and Recreation), it was quickly published in two lavishly illustrated volumes that brought an already wildly imaginative tale to next-level heights of visual storytelling. Enlisting well-known French illustrators Alphonse de Neuville and Édouard Riou, the 111 pen and ink renderings brought Verne’s novel to

life, depicting everything from moments of high-narrative action and drama to scientific details, maps, and charts.

The French author was already a national success based on his previous works, including earlier “scientific novels” *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) and *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865). But his undersea adventure story would secure his standing in the pantheon of storytellers. *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* is a masterwork of imaginative literature and features Verne’s most memorable character, the brilliant, brooding, curious, anarchistic, and ever-mysterious Captain Nemo.

“The old test for what makes a work canonical,” stated legendary literary critic Harold Bloom in a 1991 *Paris Review* interview, “is if it has engendered strong readings that come after it, whether as overt interpretations or implicitly interpretive forms.”

Now 154 years after its publication, Verne’s aquatic adventure is the most translated novel in the world (148 languages as of 2023), according to multinational translation corporation Tomades. Unknown to many, the novel was part of Verne’s hyper-ambitious 54-volume series, fully illustrated *Voyages Extraordinaires*. As Verne described this Herculean effort, he hoped to “conclude in story form my whole survey of the world’s surface and the heavens.” Verne worked on this 54-book behemoth until his passing in March 1905.

Jules Verne was born in the port city of Nantes, France, in February 1828. The eldest of five children, his father was an attorney and yearned for his son to pursue the same career path. Verne’s mother hailed from a ship-building family, and he grew up in a vibrant seaport. This is where he developed his lifelong affection for the sea. As a boy, Verne was captivated by books, notably the adventure novels *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe and *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) by Johann David Wyss. He also developed a fondness for writing as a child. Simultaneously, he was enthralled by science and language. The primordial ingredients of what would lead to his sea-faring masterwork were already at play.

Verne went on to fulfill his father’s wishes and attended law school in 1847, but his love of reading and writing called his heart. While in law school in Paris, he read Shakespeare on Parisian park benches and grew increasingly enamored with the vibrant French theater scene. He frequented literary salons while studying law and was introduced to Alexander Dumas Fils, son of one of France’s best-known playwrights and author of the historical adventure novels *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers* (both published in 1844).

It wasn’t long before the son introduced Verne to his father, and 19-year-old Jules Verne, a law student with literary aspirations, was sitting in private opera boxes for plays written by the elder Dumas. Just four months after arriving in Paris, Jules Verne had befriended one of the most famous writers in the world. His heart was not vested in law, and he began writing plays and fiction in earnest. He was reading the romantics in droves, rubbing elbows with literary greatness, and fell deeply under the spell of the work of Victor Hugo, most notably author of the 1831 gothic novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

By 1849, Verne earned his law degree but was also on a roll with his writing, composing nearly two dozen comedies and tragedies. His one-act comedy, *Les Pailles rompues*, ran for 14 nights at Dumas' exclusive Théâtre Historique. A short time later, he began writing magazine articles focusing on his passion for history, travel, and science. One of his first articles, "A Voyage in a Balloon", was a harbinger of his later novels, notably *Around the World in 80 Days*, published in 1872.

In the ensuing years, he fell in love, married in 1857, and had his only child, a son, Michel, in 1861. Verne worked at a brokerage firm to pay the bills but continued writing and publishing, and in 1862, his big break came. He was introduced to publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel, who had worked with some of the finest writers of the time, including Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, and Madame George Sand. Hetzel had recently launched the *Magasin d'éducation et de récréation* and extended an offer to Verne to write serialized scientific adventure tales for the publication. This agreement allowed Verne to, at long last, fulfill his dream of writing full-time. It also marked the beginning of Verne's 54-volume *Voyages Extraordinaires*, a creative pursuit he would continue working on until his death.

Jules Verne's best-known works include *Around the World in 80 Days*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *From the Earth to the Moon*, and *The Mysterious Island*. But *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* is universally deemed his magnum opus. The story follows French professor and naturalist Dr. Pierre Aronnax, who sets out to hunt down a widely reported sea monster that is terrorizing oceans around the globe. The mysterious leviathan has even attacked ships. Aronnax surmises the creature is some unknown cetacean, possibly a giant narwhal, as it has been reported to have used a "tusk" to attack vessels.

Aronnax, his faithful servant Conseil, and the rugged and stubborn Canadian harpooner Ned Land set out on the ironclad frigate USS Abraham Lincoln amidst much national fanfare to hunt the mysterious beast. Following months of searching and traveling thousands of miles, they arrive in the Pacific and finally encounter the giant creature. But what they discover is no living sea beast, but instead, a mechanical wonder—an impossible giant—a futuristic horned submarine christened the "Nautilus".

After a violent skirmish, the Lincoln is damaged, and Aronnax, Conseil, and Ned Land are thrown overboard. To their utter disbelief, they are rescued by the mysterious submarine, taken aboard, and held hostage. There, they meet the vessel's commander, Captain Nemo.

Like many genre writers, Jules Verne wrote plot-driven stories. But what elevates *20,000 Leagues* to literary stature is its characterization of the despotic Nemo (along with some decidedly rapturous passages of prose). What makes Nemo so compelling is how little Verne reveals about the character and how much of his backstory is only hinted at and left to the reader's imagination. Throughout the story, Verne supplies breadcrumbs about Nemo's tragic past and his motives.

Some of this marginalia is, in fact, due to Verne's publisher controversially excising large passages from the original manuscript. According to Verne biographer William

Butcher, these changes did not sit well with the author. Verne certainly understood Nemo's motives, but his publisher, who had a standing rule against publishing anything of a political nature, removed much of Verne's intended backstory for Captain Nemo.

Surviving correspondence between Verne and Pierre-Jules Hetzel illuminates what is only hinted at in the novel: Nemo is a political dissident, a Polish noble who had participated in the 1863 uprising against Tsarist Russia. During this violent tumult, Nemo's beloved wife is murdered, and his daughters are ravaged. Driven by a desire for revenge and a trauma-induced disdain for humanity, Nemo uses his wealth to go off-grid. He uses his genius to build a submersible marvel, assembling a crew of like-minded anarchists, and goes full-Unabomber by disappearing into the oceans, hunting Russian ships in retribution for the death of his beloved family. Surviving correspondence between Verne and his publisher clearly articulates the author's vision for his character:

You'll say: but he is committing an abomination! And I'll answer: no! Don't forget what the original intent of the book was: A Polish aristocrat, whose daughters were ravished, his wife hacked to death with an axe, his father died under the blows of a whip, a Pole, whose friends have disappeared in Siberia, sees that the existence of the Polish nation is under threat of Russian tyranny! If such a person has no right to sink Russian frigates wherever they meet, then retribution is nothing more than an empty phrase. I would sink ships in this position without any remorse...

Dismissing Verne's entreaty to keep Nemo's tragic backstory, his publisher adhered to his apolitical guidelines and excised the origins of Verne's most extraordinary character.

Politics aside, this is what we do know about Captain Nemo: He is a collector of art; he is remarkably well-read; he has a profound understanding of oceanography; he is astoundingly wealthy; he plays sad music on an organ in his private quarters where hangs a portrait of a woman and children, we can infer, are his family. Nemo is a contradiction of sorrow and rage, an amalgam of great sympathetic antagonists throughout storytelling history, part Ahab, Lord Vader, and the Wicked Witch of the West.

We also know he is a visionary genius, having conceptualized and built the Nautilus, a submarine way ahead of submersible technology circa 1870. Verne's prescience throughout is what establishes *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* as a milestone in the field of science fiction. The fictional Nautilus gained its name from what is largely considered to be the first practical submarine, "The Nautilus", designed and built by engineer and inventor Robert Fulton in 1800 (Fulton is also credited with designing the first commercially viable steamboat). Fulton's submersible, commissioned by French leader Napoleon Bonaparte, descended to a then remarkable depth of 25 feet and carried a crew of two.

As the author described it, Verne's imaginary Nautilus, an homage to Fulton's invention, was "a masterpiece containing masterpieces." The undersea vessel in Verne's book, indeed, foreshadows a plethora of future submersible technologies. Verne's Nautilus was powered by electricity, which was made possible by sodium/mercury batteries. The sodium was renewable, of course, harvested from the sea. The fictional Nautilus is described as cylindrical, not dissimilar from today's modern submarines. Verne's Nautilus could submerge for extended lengths of time, was double-hulled, and lavishly appointed with plush Victorian furniture, large viewing ports, an extensive library, and an impressive original art collection. It even had a large organ for Captain Nemo captain to play in his late-night hours of loneliness and despair. The Nautilus was righteous and visionary, predating the nuclear submarines of today.

Throughout *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Verne describes oceanic species in detail and surveys the undersea geographies of the world with immense factual precision, utilizing scientific knowledge of the time he wrote the book. He knew he was on to something. In a letter dated 28 March 1868, as he was fast at work on his novel, he wrote to Hetzel: "If I don't pull this book off, I'll be inconsolable. I've never held a better thing in my hands."

The fusion of scientific fact with imaginative storytelling—the "scientific novel"—was singular for the era. This combination of deeply researched Victorian science facts and high-flighted fantasy established the bedrock for what science fiction would become. Verne's romantic science novel would also set the precedent for future hybrid works, such as John Steinbeck's remarkable, if lesser-known, mash-up of detailed science fact and memoir, 1951's *Sea of Cortez*.

*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* was widely hailed upon its release and quickly became Verne's most acclaimed work. His celebrity catapulted, as did his wealth. Verne went on to own a mansion in the provinces and a 38-ton yacht boasting a crew of ten. More than 150 years after its publication, the book is largely credited as one of the earliest works of science fiction (alongside Mary Shelley before it and H.G. Wells shortly afterward). It also led to the Steampunk movement, the sci-fi sub-genre awash in neo-Victorian futurism. First defined in 1987 by science fiction author K.W. Jeter, Steampunk draws heavily on the Victorian-era aesthetics of Verne and H.G. Wells: sepia-hued, steam-powered, rife with rust and rivets, top hats, corsets, goggles, dirigibles and submersibles a la the Nautilus.

Steampunk, writes scholar Stefania Forlini, "imagines alternative Victorian pasts in which technological advances (such as those imagined by H.G. Wells and Jules Verne) radically alter the course of history and open up possible future techno-cultural worlds." Steampunk is as much a fashion and lifestyle movement as it is literary today. Beyond the stories, the sub-genre encompasses clothing, jewelry, cosplay, art, and convention fandom. It is also socio-political, with an anarchist bent reminiscent of Captain Nemo's ethos, hence the "punk" moniker, a Victorian-rooted, anti-establishment sibling to the '60s and '70s new-wave dystopian "cyberpunk" movement that fused low-lives with high-tech.

“Both Verne and Wells constantly called out the corrupt nature of imperialism, and the negative effects of colonial expansion in their works,” states Joshua Pfeiffer, founder of the Steampunk-centric record label/collective Gilded Age Records. “Not to mention being some of the first authors to address environmentalism, and the dangers of science run amuck. These were prophetic men with something to say and causes to fight for.”

Alongside literature and lifestyle, the sub-genre produced popular films such as Martin Scorsese’s *Hugo* (2011), Stephen Norrington’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), and the Studio Ghibli classic *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004), directed by Hayao Miyazaki.

Verne’s novel also has its own cinematic history. In 1954, the book was brought to the screen, personally produced by Walt Disney. The cinematic adaptation starred Kirk Douglas as harpooner Ned Land, Peter Lorre as Conseil, Academy award-winner Paul Lukas as Professor Arronax, and James Mason as Captain Nemo. Directed by Richard Fleischer, the film was one of the first feature-length movies photographed in the widescreen technology of CinemaScope and garnered two Oscars, one for art direction and one for special effects.

*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* is considered Disney’s finest live-action production and is often best remembered for the Nautilus’ action-packed encounter with a giant squid. The iconic design of the Nautilus was brought to the screen by legendary Disney artist Harper Goff, and with its Victorian romantic-science appeal, it was certainly a precursor to the Steampunk movement that arrived on the scene 30 years later. The ornate whirly-gig world of Steampunk would not exist if not for the imaginings and influence of Jules Verne.

<https://youtu.be/BdHWQ0hs1x4>

“Verne was hyper-interested in the technical side of invention,” said Margaret Atwood, “not Martians invading, but human beings stretching the limits of the physically possible—which, when it goes pear-shaped, gives us *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*. He was a huge innovator in his time, following in the footsteps of Mary Shelley.”

Over a century-and-a-half since its publication, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* continues to captivate and inspire. The Verne masterpiece has unprecedented longevity and cultural sway from the Jules Verne Museum in the author’s birthplace of Nantes, France, to Steampunk conventions worldwide. Having lived through a period of immense invention, innovation, and achievement, Verne chose to predict where this new age of technology could take humanity through the lens of the fantastic. By merging science fact with a white-knuckle adventure yarn, he was steadfast in his belief that literature can instruct and entertain. In doing so, he helped invent an entire genre of storytelling: science fiction.

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**TAGS** 20000 Leagues Under the Sea book feature jules verne sci-fi science fiction Steampunk

### **OTHER RESOURCES**

- Jules Verne Museum
- Jules Verne: Library of Congress

The Ted K Archive

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