

The Mysterious Island

Translator: Jordan Stump. Introduction: Caleb Carr. Illustrator: Jules Ferat. New York, NY, Modern Library, 2001. 629 pages, 74 ill.

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RECOMMENDED (*read why below*) Get it at Amazon.com or Barnes & Noble.

The first full re-translations of this novel in over a century, both of these appeared back to back late in 2001, and both are now available in soft-cover editions. In actuality, for the last several years New Jersey engineer Sidney Kravitz had generously made his original draft available on an informal basis—spiral-bound, on diskette, and in Zvi Har'El's Jules Verne Collection. For this official version, however, series overseer Arthur B. Evans has supplied the professional editorial touch, inserting contractions into the dialogue, tweaking the vocabulary, and lubricating the phrasing. As for Modern Library's text, it's a more recent effort by University of Nebraska professor Jordan Stump.

In any case, both renditions are admirably responsible and readable. Stump's sometimes has a more consciously literary tone, Kravitz's is a little more faithful to Verne's inner sequences and structures. For example, eyeball the opening paragraphs of II 9 while checking the French at Zvi's site: Kravitz, like Verne, gives the March 2nd date at the outset of paragraph two; Stump, contrariwise, just barely tacks it on. Yet Stump may sometimes phrase more elegantly: "otherwise the interior of their dwelling would surely have been flooded." Versus Kravitz: "otherwise all would have been flooded inside the rooms."

Both reissues are reasonably priced. True, the Wesleyan costs four bucks more, but it packs plenty of extra value. Modern Library reprints 74 of the Férat illustrations, whereas Wesleyan offers all 152 in cleaner, clearer reproductions. What's more, the latter features a huge scholarly apparatus: William Butcher supplies extensive annotations, analyses of the pertinent manuscripts, comprehensive bibliographies on the author and on this novel in particular, and coverage of Verne's other desert-island efforts including his false start for this novel, *Uncle Robinson*. As for Butcher's introduction, it's endlessly stimulating, relating the novel's tortuous evolution, detailing the struggles between the author and his micromanaging editor P.-J. Hetzel, and raising major questions for future researchers—for instance, I was startled to learn that Verne had originally planned a god-out-of-the-machine different from the one in the text we know. Fascinating stuff!

For its part, Modern Library redraws Verne's map with English place names, but otherwise the incidentals are pedestrian: their Verne bio is hackwork, featuring careless research (Verne didn't "witness" the 1848 revolution, nor did he leave a MS of *The Barsac Mission*), and also recycling the old discredited fiction of young Jules running off to sea. And this last taradiddle is trotted out yet again in historical novelist Caleb Carr's intro, a would-be think piece on the novelty of Verne using a mystery-yarn format. It's a valid angle, but unfortunately for mystery buffs and first-time readers, Carr undercuts it by giving the plot away.

So Wesleyan's entry ought to be the easy winner—except for one lamebrained editorial decision. Wespress undermines the overall preeminence of their version by omitting Verne's detailed chapter headings (Kravitz *did* translate them, as shown by his draft text at <http://jv.gilead.org.il/kravitz/>), which means that for all its added attractions and special features, this Wesleyan edition is literally incomplete. Consequently, for first-timers who simply want a good reading copy of this novel, my recommendation would have to be Modern Library. Serious Vernians, needless to say, will want both.

-- Review by Frederick Paul Walter, extracted from "Verne in the Shops," originally published in *Extraordinary Voyages*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Mar 2003).