

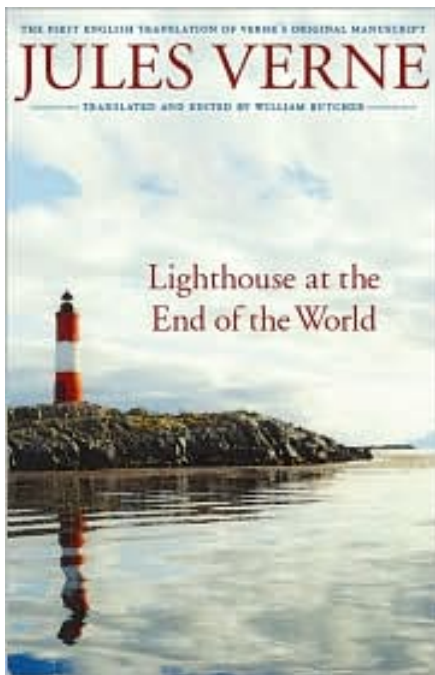
# The Lesser of Two Equals

So many books, so little time: we figure out which ones are worth it.

## Book Review: The Lighthouse at the End of the World

August 15, 2008

[The Lighthouse at the End of the World \(http://www.amazon.com/Lighthouse-End-World-Translation-Imagination/dp/0803260075/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_sr\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1218778823&sr=8-1\)](http://www.amazon.com/Lighthouse-End-World-Translation-Imagination/dp/0803260075/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1218778823&sr=8-1)



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By Jules Verne, translated by William Butcher

Published September 2007

[University of Nebraska Press \(http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/\)](http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/)

210 pp.

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A new novel from Jules Verne? The mere idea should be enough to send readers into a frenzy – “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea” and “Journey to the Center of the Earth” are seminal works of literature, uncannily prophetic pioneers of the science fiction genre. Of course, it’s also an idea made more problematic by the fact that Verne died more than a century ago and not even he foresaw a way to bring someone back from the dead.

There is a new novel from Verne in a sense, however, thanks to the University of Nebraska Press and William Butcher’s recent translation of “The Lighthouse at the End of the World.” Printed in France after Verne’s death in 1905, the manuscript is now enjoying its first English translation, a crisp if occasionally dry tale of greed and heroism in an inaccessible climate.

“Lighthouse” takes place on Staten Island, an island off the tip of Argentina, home to a lighthouse recently established to protect vital trade routes. Unknown to the builders however, the pirate chieftain Kongre has made his den on the island as well and plans to use the lighthouse for wrecking and looting ships. Only Vasquez, the courageous lighthouse keeper, is in a position to bring help and foil Kongre’s plans.

Anyone expecting a scientific romance on par with “20,000 Leagues” will be disappointed, or at least have to settle for the clear fascination Verne has with how the lighthouse works. This book is a psychological thriller, focused on the isolation of being at the tip of the world and how that isolation drives men to greater fears and motivation. As such, the action moves quicker, Captain Nemo’s elaborate *Nautilus* tour replaced by hurried repairs and moonless scouting sessions

But this change is an easy adjustment, chiefly because even without vision Verne is an amazingly readable author. His books are entertainment with a fine grasp of language, descriptions that are rarely too dense and a storyteller’s habit of offering asides to his reader. Butcher’s translation is thankfully the inverse of his last name, preserving Verne’s voice: concise and clear scenes that follow a compelling narrative, a prose that may be old-fashioned but with many hints of elegance.

For long-time fans of Verne’s work, Butcher has also strengthened the text with supplemental research, literary analysis on word choice and an introduction showing how the book fits into the Verne canon. The research is interesting but not presented ideally: all notes are sorted into an appendix, and rather than numbering

each note asterisks inform readers which page has a comment. It would have been more accessible to organize the research by footnotes, or create an appendix for each individual chapter.

What the organization does do, though, is keep the research from breaking the narrative – a tremendously important thing to do, as Verne would be nothing without a well-told story. His novels were the paperbacks of a century ago in terms of popularity, and “Lighthouse” is yet another reminder that here is an author who has stood the test of time.

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