

‘Around the World in Eighty Days’ — about to get a reboot — is the perfect Christmas tale

By Michael Dirda

Critic

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One Christmas, when I was 9 years old, Santa Claus brought me two books. Printed on cheap newsprint, each was an oversized paperback labeled “A Golden Picture Classic,” featuring washed-out color illustrations and a text adapted for young readers. During the lazy week between Christmas and New Year’s I read “The Count of Monte Cristo,” and that 200-page condensation of Alexandre Dumas’s masterpiece became the first “grown-up” novel I truly loved.

The other “Golden Picture Classic” I received, Jules Verne’s “Around the World in Eighty Days,” has always struck me as surprisingly appropriate to the yuletide season, capturing something of its gaiety and high spirits, as well as the desperation of the last-minute shopper’s race against time as Dec. 25 approaches. Of course, many of Verne’s works, especially in illustrated editions, have long been among the reliable perennials of holiday gift-giving. What 10-year-old wouldn’t be thrilled to unwrap a copy of “Journey to the Center of the Earth” or “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea”?

With particular relevance, though, “Around the World in Eighty Days” depicts a Christmas miracle worthy of the Hallmark Channel — the conversion of a friendless, stiffly precise Victorian gentleman into a human being capable of love and joy. Charles Dickens’s Scrooge undergoes a similar transformation in the course of a single, vision-packed night. By contrast, Verne’s hero needs almost three months to reveal fully the tender and generous heart beneath his unflappable exterior.

When the book opens the punctilious Phileas Fogg lives by the clock, his schedule never varying, each day passed almost entirely at London's Reform Club, where he reads the newspapers, dines and plays whist. But one afternoon the club's card players begin discussing a daring robbery — 55,000 pounds stolen from the Bank of England. This soon leads to an argument about modern travel, which, in its turn, results in Fogg wagering that he can journey around the world in just 80 days. He bets half his fortune, some 20,000 pounds, reserving the rest for expenses en route.

As the obstacles, emergencies and missed connections mount up, Fogg and his newly hired valet Passepartout find their resolve and cleverness tested to the full. Much of the book's frequent humor derives from culture clash, as the volatile Passepartout gets into trouble by misunderstanding foreign ways while the majestically indifferent Fogg simply concentrates on his timetable: "He was not travelling, he was describing a circumference." Nonetheless, the severely self-disciplined Englishman — as logical and dispassionate as Sherlock Holmes or Star Trek's Spock — is repeatedly forced to break out of his shell, whether by rescuing Aouda, a rajah's beautiful Parsee widow, or by risking the loss of his wager, as well as his life, by saving Passepartout from Sioux warriors, or, through that most common way of enlarging one's horizons, by falling in love. That the woman is of another race even shows Verne's hero flouting widespread British prejudice.

While the novel's action sometimes recalls a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta or a Baron Munchausen tall tale, a disturbing current runs beneath the surface, much as it does during our own secularized holiday — the power of money. Whenever things grow desperate, Fogg pulls wads of cash from his carpetbag to pay captains to sail faster, to buy an elephant as jungle transport or, finally, to acquire and destroy an entire steamship. Even Inspector Fix, who doggedly pursues Fogg from Asia to North America and back to Great Britain, does so with the expectation of a lucrative reward for capturing the man he believes robbed the Bank of England.

As a boy, I found “Around the World in Eighty Days” a thrilling story. Then 20 years ago, I got to know Brian Taves, who before his heartbreaking death in 2019 oversaw the Library of Congress’s Jules Verne collection, the largest outside France. Along with Arthur B. Evans, Jean-Michel Margot, Marie-Hélène Huet and other contemporary Verne scholars, Taves taught me that the “Voyages Extraordinaires” (“Amazing Journeys”) weren’t simplistic books. Close reading reveals an artistry that can be subtle, complex and politically daring. Verne’s editor, Pierre-Jules Hetzel, however, regularly toned down elements he deemed disturbing to comfortable bourgeois families, and early English translations subsequently further sanitized the texts.

Intended to be educational as well as exciting, Verne’s narratives were constructed around cutting-edge scientific advances, the latest engineering triumphs and geographical discoveries in what were still distant regions of Earth. While “Around the World in Eighty Days” may not feature a fantastic submarine like Captain Nemo’s Nautilus or a flying fortress like Robur the Conqueror’s Terror (from “The Master of the World”), Fogg’s race against time and space occurs just after the opening of the Suez Canal and runs almost simultaneously with the first globe-spanning tours of the Thomas Cook travel agency.

Of the novel’s modern English versions, the best has long been the Oxford World’s Classics edition by Verne biographer and scholar William Butcher. His endnotes point to its undercurrent of ribaldry and double-entendre, and he argues for Verne as artistically innovative in his use of temporal shifts, elisions and flashbacks. Butcher persuasively demonstrates that there’s more in the book than a mixture of farce, manhunt, suspense and romance, though it is doubtless these that have made “Around the World in Eighty Days” the most popular novel by one of the most popular novelists of all time.

But what of the upcoming PBS miniseries, due to begin on Jan. 2? The advance publicity suggests a creative reimagining of the original, far less faithful to it than the Academy Award-winning 1956 film, headlined by David Niven. Yet that movie — a three-hour travelogue chockablock with cameos by stars of stage and screen — consists largely of a succession of relatively static episodes and old-timey sight gags. It’s best enjoyed as a kind of cinematic Muzak, ideal for an occasional glance while baking cookies or wrapping presents.

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at the end, Verne's story, however it's encountered, will always mirror the Christmas season: Weeks of madcap action and inner turmoil finally usher in a morning of gladness, serenity and goodwill to all.

Michael Dirda reviews books for Style every Thursday.

Jules Verne for the Holidays

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