

7-1999

Interviews with Jules Verne. [Review of *Entretiens avec Jules Verne, 1873-1905*, ed. Daniel Compère and Jean-Michel Margot, Slatkine, 1998]

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Recommended Citation

Arthur B. Evans. "Interviews with Jules Verne." [Review of *Entretiens avec Jules Verne, 1873-1905*, ed. Daniel Compère and Jean-Michel Margot, Slatkine, 1998] *Science Fiction Studies* 26.2 (1999): 334-336.

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Science Fiction Studies

#78 = Volume 26, Part 2 = July 1999

Interviews with Jules Verne.

Daniel Compère and Jean-Michel Margot, eds. *Entretiens avec Jules Verne 1873-1905..* Genève: Editions Slatkine, 1998. 275 pp. 35 Swiss francs/22 euors (approx. \$25) paper.

This book constitutes an important new contribution to the scholarship on Jules Verne. For the first time, *all* personal interviews with Verne (many of which have never before been published and/or were previously unknown) are collected into one meticulously annotated volume. The editors are expert Verne scholars, familiar to and respected by all Verne aficionados. Daniel Compère has published several top-notch books and dozens of insightful articles on Jules Verne over the past two decades, his *Jules Verne, Écrivain* (Droz, 1991) being perhaps the most notable. And Jean-Michel Margot is one of the world's leading bibliographers and Vernian book collectors: his continually-updated *Bibliographie documentaire sur Jules Verne* (Centre de documentation Jules Verne, 1989) now contains over 7000 items. Incidentally, this extensive book collection has recently been moved from Switzerland to the United States and is now available to everyone wishing to do advanced research on Verne; those interested should contact Margot at the following e-mail address for more information: <margot@ibm.net>.

Entretiens avec Jules Verne is divided into eight chronologically-based chapters and includes editorial introductions that offer useful historical and literary insights into the 32 interviews showcased in the book. These chapters are arranged as follows: *A Bord du Saint-Michel* ("Aboard the Saint-Michel"—referring to Verne's first yacht, purchased in 1868, and featuring two early interviews from 1873 and 1875); *Le Tour du Monde de Nellie Bly* ("Around the World with Nellie Bly"—five interviews from 1890, the year after Nellie Bly's famous 72-day circumnavigation of the globe); *Chez Jules Verne* (seven interviews from 1893-99 at Verne's home in Amiens); *Le Tour du Monde de Gaston Stiegler* (six interviews from 1901, the year Gaston Stiegler completed his trip around the world in a record-breaking 63 days); *Dernières et Prolifiques Années* ("Final and Prolific Years"—ten interviews from 1902 until Verne's death in 1905); *Un Souvenir, Un Adieu* ("A Remembrance, A Farewell"—two published eulogies,

one in France and one in the United States, appearing after his death); and *Entretiens avec Michel Verne* (two interviews with Verne's son who, as research now shows, collaborated very closely with his father during Jules Verne's final years).

The book also contains a general introduction and a postface wherein the editors speak not only of their own *modus operandi* in collecting this material but also of the "kaleidoscopic" (259) portrait of Verne that emerges from these interviews and the growing "Jules Verne myth" that began to cling to his name partly as a result of them. An appendix concludes the volume, listing all works of Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires* in chronological order by date of first publication, along with a somewhat skimpy but functional index. Finally, the book includes numerous handsome black and white illustrations from the period; its translations of the original English-language interviews appear to be complete and accurate; and its overall typography is thankfully free of those irksome little misprints that often plague publications of this sort.

I consider this book to be one of the most significant additions to Jules Verne criticism since the Taves and Michaluk *Jules Verne Encyclopedia* (see *SFS* 23.2 [July 1996]: 305-306). It provides scholars with many original documents never before available and, unlike the many derivative conjectures in Herbert R. Lottman's "modern biography" of Verne (see *SFS* 24.3 [Nov. 1997]: 489-98), this collection of interviews allows the well-known but often misunderstood Verne to speak for himself. In fact, I dare say that, had this book been published earlier in this century, many of the most common myths about Jules Verne the man—e.g., that he was a visionary prophet of things to come, that he read and spoke English fluently, that he was a scientist, a misogynist, a secluded eccentric, etc.—would probably have never developed.

The Verne who emerges from these interviews is a vigorously prolific, vastly imaginative, yet sometimes stubbornly self-effacing writer who chose to shun the sycophantic literary salons of nineteenth-century Paris for the quiet town of Amiens in order to chronicle the wonders of the Machine Age. He proves to be a man who was fully engaged in the scientific and social issues of his era, yet who preferred to be called a simple "story-teller." And he is also shown to be a novelist who was painfully aware of his own oxymoronic status as one of the most popular and translated authors of all time, yet ignored by the literary establishment of his native land. Most important, it is Jules Verne himself who, in his wide-ranging discussions with the many journalists whose work is reprinted here, provides the raw materials for this firsthand reportage.

My only quibble with this excellent volume is that all the interviews contained within it—even the ones originally published in English—are in French only. This may seem, of course, wholly understandable given the publisher and the book's intended audience. But for all those monolingual Verne fans of the world's sf community whose native tongue is English—and who perhaps have an even greater need for such primary texts to penetrate the many fallacies surrounding Verne's legacy—it is regrettable that only a fraction of these interviews will continue to be accessible. Despite this basic reservation, however, I strongly recommend *Entretiens avec Jules Verne 1873-1905* to all French-reading scholars of sf and especially to those historians of the genre who are looking for a glimpse of the real man behind the myth.

—ABE