

## Science Fiction Book Club

### Interview with Jess Nevins January 2019

*Jess Nevins is the author of “the Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victoriana” and other works on Victoriana and pulp fiction. He has also written original fiction. He is employed as a reference librarian at Lone Star College-Tomball. Nevins has annotated several comics, including Alan Moore’s The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Elseworlds, Kingdom Come and JLA: The Nail.*

**Jess Nevins:** Thanks for the opportunity! I really appreciate it.

#### **John Grayshaw: What is your definition of Science Fiction?**

**Jess Nevins:** I’m in the minority on this, but I tend to define science fiction not as a yes/no, is/isn’t, binary, but on more of a continuum, so that I don’t think of a book as “science fiction” or “not science fiction,” but as “more science fictional” or “less science fictional.”

The way I think the continuum works is that there are a number of science fictional elements that a story or book or show or movie (or whatever) can have, and that the more of the elements and components that the story (or book etc etc) has, the more science fictional that story is. So, for example, some of the elements I think of as science fictional are:

- technology which is different in some way from historical or modern technology. This would include both technology advanced beyond the present day (i.e. most of what is seen in traditional and modern sf) as well as alternative technologies (as seen in steampunk, for example).
- science which is different in some way from historical or modern science. Biology, Chemistry, Physics—alterations to any of them are science fictional and fit here.
- history which is different from the path of events we know happened. Alternate histories, obviously, but secret histories as well.
- a setting which is feasible, whether on-Earth or off-, but which is not present-day Earth.
- a society which is plausible but which is not one in which humans have historically existed.
- a being or beings (intelligent or otherwise) who have never existed on Earth.
- a being or beings who existed on Earth at some point but is altered in some way so that it or they possess capabilities and/or intelligence which they did not historically have.
- a time frame which is not the present day.
- one or more physical laws which do not currently exist in our universe.

Obviously not every science fiction story is going to have all of these elements, and equally obviously there are a lot more elements we could add to make up the science fictional

continuum, but this is a starting list. The more of the elements a story has, and the more that the story embraces those elements, the more science fictional that story is.

As I said, I'm in the minority on this. People tend to like cut-and-dried answers, especially when it comes to defining genres.

**John Grayshaw: The novels and stories from the Victorian Era. Are they science fiction? Voyages Extraordinaires? Scientific Romances? Or all of the above?**

**Jess Nevins:** I tend to use those phrases somewhat restrictively, so that I think voyages extraordinaires and scientific romances are science fiction, but not all Victorian science fiction is a voyage extraordinaire or a scientific romance.

I think the voyages extraordinaire are works heavily influenced by Jules Verne, and are stories in which people travel to some extraordinary location, whether a hidden city or the Hollow Earth on the Earth or to the moon, another planet, or another solar system. Voyages extraordinaire are, like Verne's work, set in the present or the near past, and generally feature scientists, explorers, and professionals.

Scientific romances, on the other hand, is British science fiction (rather than American or European), published through the nineteenth century and into the 1930s, and has a limited number of topics, ranging from a concern (nearing on obsession) with a dystopic ending for human civilization to evolution to religion and politics being discredited to a generally serious tone (unlike much American science fiction of the era) to what one critic calls "a focus on long vistas brooded upon by meditative protagonists, often in conversation with mentor figures (who are often Alien sages from other planets and/or Secret Masters, or, alternately, dictators)."

Obviously, by using the phrases like this, I'm leaving out a lot of Victorian science fiction. But I think that's okay. A lot of Victorian science fiction is just science fiction rather than belonging to a subgenre like the voyages extraordinaire or the scientific romance.

**SFBC Member: Would Victorian Sci-fi be considered steam punk?**

**Jess Nevins:** Oh boy. This is kind of a sore spot. Different people define steampunk different ways, and there really isn't a set definition for steampunk. Which is actually interesting, because the genre keeps evolving, which we haven't seen in a while from any other literary genre. What steampunk was in, say, 1999 is a lot different from what steampunk has become in 2019.

Now, since you're asking me: I define steampunk as stories that were/are published in the 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, so, no, I don't think Victorian science fiction is steampunk. I think some

Victorian science fiction has steampunkish elements, of course. But there are some basic differences between Victorian science fiction and steampunk which keep the former from becoming the latter. The first difference is when it appeared, as I mentioned. The second is a consciousness of genre. The Victorian writers of science fiction had some hazy idea that they were writing something different from what most people wrote, and after Jules Verne started publishing people began comparing science fiction stories and novels to Verne's work, and later Wells'. But during the late nineteenth century the whole idea of separate literary genres wasn't well-articulated, so Victorian writers of science fiction didn't have the idea—didn't even have the vocabulary to articulate the idea—that there's this separate genre called science fiction, and that they were writing in it. Steampunk writers, on the other hand, know they are writing science fiction, in the steampunk subgenre, and that consciousness of genre, I think, influences steampunk stories to a greater or lesser degree.

I mentioned that steampunk is evolving. Traditionally—by which I mean, since the word “steampunk” was coined, back in 1987—steampunk has a few core elements: an urban British setting—usually London—in the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century; the use of extrapolated, advanced, or science fictional technology, whether steam- or electricity-powered, which did not exist in the time period the story is set in; and a stock set of characters (the scientist, the reporter, the female love interest, the soldier, the explorer/adventurer). But ever since 2008 authors have been writing what they call “steampunk” that has different elements: settings that aren't in the British Empire; time periods before the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century; advanced/extrapolated/science fictional technology that doesn't rely on steam- or electricity; a wider range of characters; and a lack of the racism, sexism, and glorification of imperialism and colonialism that a lot of traditional/standard/stereotypical steampunk had and still has.

Now, it can be argued—it has been argued, pretty vociferously—that the authors of the post-2008 stories aren't writing steampunk, they're just writing science fiction. And this argument was, maybe, true when only one or two writers were creating these sorts of stories. But when you get a bunch of authors who claim that their work—which doesn't meet the traditional definition of steampunk—is steampunk, when there are story collections and anthologies and novels that use the label “steampunk” for the post-2008 stories rather than the traditional ones...well, that's when it's no longer easy to claim that there's only one definition of steampunk. This gets into the whole prescriptive-versus-descriptive argument: should a dictionary say what a word *should* mean, or should a dictionary define a word according to how many or most people actually use the word? Language evolves, after all, and so do words' definitions.

I tend to be a descriptivist—that is, I think dictionaries should define words according to common usage rather than traditional usage. So I tend to believe that the post-2008 stories and

novels are steampunk. Which means that the definition of steampunk needs to be revised from its traditional definition. Despite giving it a lot of thought, though, I haven't come up with a good definition of steampunk that includes both the traditional steampunk and the post-2008 steampunk.

**John Grayshaw: Regarding Steampunk, do you think the look of it stems from Victorian Sci-Fi itself or is it merely a modern interpretation?**

**Jess Nevins:** If you look at the history of steampunk, there are a couple of significant dates. One of them was in August 2003 when a steampunk fan named Kit Stollen began posting images of his hairstyle and clothing on to an Internet steampunk fan group. Before Stollen, most of the images of steampunk, whether of fashion, hairstyles, or of weapons and vehicles, were *largely* (though not entirely) based on actual Victorian sources. But Stollen's hairstyle and fashion were modern extrapolations of historical Victorian clothing and hairstyles. After Stollen made his post, the steampunk community took what he'd done and ran with it, so that now, in 2019, the look of steampunk isn't so much based on Victorian science fiction as on individuals taking elements from Victorian science fiction and fashion and architecture and weapons and vehicles—gears and goggles and so on—and using them to make their own pseudo-Victorian or mock-Victorian style.

An example of what I mean is every steampunk outfit in which a woman's arm is bared. The Victorians considered that shocking and unfathomably daring of a woman, and any woman who had bared arms was seen as low, fast, and coarse, but bared arms are a part of modern dress for women, so modern female steampunk fans bare their arms.

**Ed Newsom: Our view of scientific advancement took a beating in the 20th century after two world wars, the threat of nuclear extinction and the ills of industrial pollution. Do you think that steam-punk culture is a desire to recapture that positive (and hands-on) relationship to technology we felt in the Victorian era?**

**Jess Nevins:** Yes, basically. Most steampunk "makers," of mock-ray guns and wooden keyboards and steampunk watches and so on, definitely have a hands-on relationship to technology. They want to take it apart, see how it works, and put it to use for themselves.

At the same time, though, I think the relationship of the Victorians to technology was a lot more complicated than the steampunks portray it as being. The railway, for example, was a controversial vehicle for the Victorians, and while it had its obvious advantages it had some obvious disadvantages as well—which the Victorians were well aware of—it intruded into towns and regions which had been comfortably rural and unconnected with the modern world (and which liked it that way), it churned out coal smoke and contributed to the pollution of the skies (London was notably polluted during the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century because of all the coal

burning), and it mixed classes and genders (via its passengers) in ways that the Victorians were deeply uneasy with.

So I think steampunk culture wants to recapture the hands-on relationship to technology, and to portray technology in a positive way, as something that men and women have mastered and which is our servant. But the historian in me always wants to object that that attitude was, historically, a lot more complicated than the modern steampunkers portray it as being.

**Jesse Bryan: This was a time before any ideas about a space program could be given any serious credibility. What was the driving force behind a literary leap from the unexplored places here on earth to the unexplored places beyond our earth? Was there a specific motivation for this or were there many?**

**Jess Nevins:** I think it was a gradual change. Certainly the impulse toward exploring the unknown and writing about the exploration of the unknown predates the Victorians by centuries, and so when the far places of the Earth are mostly explored, and when people know about the other planets in the solar system, as they did in the nineteenth century, it's a easy leap to go from "explore Africa/Asia/South America" to "explore outer space."

But I think it was more than that for the Victorians. Stories of angels visiting Earth are as old as organized religion. In the Victorian era you began to see stories about aliens who were angels visiting the Earth—there are examples as early as 1848 and as late as 1898. This subgenre of religious science fiction lasted a good long while, and it doesn't take much of a leap of the imagination to go from "aliens who are angels visiting Earth" to "aliens visiting Earth" to "humans visiting aliens."

Also, the frontiers of the known were becoming firmed up during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and people who wanted to explore, or who wanted to write about explorers, were running out of places on Earth to write about. There were certainly a lot of stories about hidden races and lost cities and so on published during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but there is, it seems to me, to be a relationship between the number of stories and novels about space programs published and the decreasing number of places that were unexplored by Westerners. As the century drew to a close, the western frontier in America was declared closed, most of Africa, Asia, and South America had been visited by white men if not mapped. Science fiction writers could tell that the number of unknown places in which to send their characters was declining rapidly. So they sent their explorers into outer space.

So, basically, to answer your question: I think it was many motivations: a desire to explore, a desire to write about exploration, a desire to write about aliens.

**Eva Sable/Jesse Bryan: What I know about Victorian science fiction can probably be written on the inside of a matchbook with a grease pencil. Other than Verne and Wells, are there any authors who are particularly intriguing? Or any who have been completely forgotten but who, perhaps, shouldn't have been?**

**Jess Nevins:** I originally wrote a response to this about underrated and forgotten Victorian writers who people should read if they love good literature—there are loads of them—but I reread your question and had to delete my response and try again.

There are a few Victorian sf writers who continue to intrigue me and who shouldn't be forgotten about. Fitz-James O'Brien, for example, an Irish-American writer who wrote some surprisingly good science fiction stories in the 1850s. (Try "The Diamond Lens" as a starter—you can find it online). Ambrose Bierce, near the end of the century, wrote several good sf stories. (I'd try a collection of his science fiction stories—too many to choose from). Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*, from 1871, does a lot of interesting science fictional things—especially interesting because it was written in 1871. George Griffith's *The Angel of the Revolution* (1893, available online) is fun because of the sheer over-the-top daring of the novel; not the best-written, but Griffith included several interesting ideas to accompany the movie-like mass destruction. Oh! And Jack London also wrote some good science fiction stories as well.

Most of the good forgotten Victorian writers of science fiction actually wrote science fictional horror stories—I have to say that science fiction during the Victorian era didn't attract nearly the talented writers that horror did during the Victorian era.

**François Peneaud: If SF tends to reflect the fears and hopes of a times, such as post-nuclear apocalypse stories in the 50s and 60s, what would be the equivalent for Victorian SF?**

**Jess Nevins:** I'll set aside the science fiction published before the 1860s, when Jules Verne essentially began the modern genre, and focus on the sf published during and after Verne. (*Frankenstein* didn't create the genre of science fiction, but did create a path for a kind of science fiction—but it wasn't widely imitated and I don't think you can make an argument for it being particularly influential during the 19<sup>th</sup> century).

The later into the century you get, the more anxious that the British in particular got about—well, about everything. Queen Victoria was getting old, and most Britons worried about what would happen to the British Empire once she was gone. There were fears of a workers' revolution, fears of the new economic competition the British were facing from the Germans and Americans, fear of men no longer being sufficiently manly & masculine, fear of the physical fitness of the British not being up to par (famously, many of the men applying to be British soldiers in the 1880s & 1890s weren't athletic or fit enough to join the Army), fear of cultural

decadence, fear of immigrants, fear of women's progress and the feminism of the time leading to an erosion of men's position, fear of a coming war with Germany (this was a big one), fear of the British colonies being invaded and conquered (especially India), fear of where scientific and technological advances were leading to—lots and lots and *lots* of fears.

It was a very anxious time for the British. So you can look at just about any British science fiction story or novel of the time and see the fears of the British reflected. H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* was—and Wells wrote this—a worry about aliens doing to the British what the British had done to others when the British were conquering countries to make colonies. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is about a fear of science & scientists. Wells' *The Time Traveler* is about the fear of evolution and regression. And so on. Even the novels that don't seem to be about fears—the really escapist stories and novels—are about British fears, one way or another.

**Ed Newsom: Verne and Wells seemed to focus on large scale devices, mostly transportation and war machines, in their extrapolations. Were there Victorian SF writers inspired by the smaller scale golden age of automata?**

**Jess Nevins:** Interesting question! There were a few stories about life on the atomic level—Fitz-James O'Brien's "The Diamond Lens" is probably the best of them—but I can't think of any stories or novels that thought small rather than big when it came to automata. For much of the Victorian era the major work of advanced technology in people's lives was the locomotive, and those tended to be large and built ever larger during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. You can see this bleeding into the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the way robots are portrayed in the pulp magazines of the 1920s & 1930s and the science fiction films of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s—the robots are all big and bulky and clumsy. SF writers thought bigger-is-better until the 1950s, I think.

**Ed Newsom: The legend of Prester John (and the exploration it triggered) feels like proto-science fiction. Is there evidence it influenced the lost land writers, Haggard, Doyle, Burroughs, or the various hollow Earth novelists?**

**Jess Nevins:** To a certain degree, yes. There was always the idea of fabulous other kingdoms somewhere over the horizon just waiting for "ordinary" people to find. But Prester John really set the standard for lost land and lost race stories—you can see this in the medieval ballads and epics, where he becomes the guardian of the Holy Grail. When Marco Polo wrote about Prester John he pretty much solidified PJ's existence in the eyes of everyone. But I think it's a case of the legend of Prester John adding to the momentum of the idea of a lost land/lost race somewhere out there, rather than creating it.

**John Grayshaw: Who are some of your favorite Victorian Sci-fi authors? What are some of your favorite Victorian Sci-fi novels and stories?**

**Jess Nevins:** To be completely honest I tend to enjoy Victorian horror stories more than Victorian science fiction novels and stories—I think the writing is better in the horror stories than in the sf. That said, H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* is still pretty good, I think—the Martians he writes about are a lot more interesting than the movies make them. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is also worth reading, if you haven't taken a look at it since high school. Fitz-James O'Brien wrote some very interesting science fiction stories that are only a little dated—I think his stories are available online. Same with Nathaniel Hawthorne; he's better known for things like *The Scarlet Letter*, but wrote some sf stories which are worth reading. Ambrose Bierce's "The Damned Thing" is a deserved classic. Guy de Maupassant's "The Horla" is a really good piece of science fiction horror.

Those are pretty much the major ones I can think of. My tastes in sf are more modern. I can find interesting aspects of most Victorian sf novels and stories, but a lot of them aren't that enjoyable as reading experiences.

**John Grayshaw: How did you become interested in researching Victorian Era Science Fiction?**

**Jess Nevins:** When I decided to start writing my encyclopedia, I decided that I wanted to cover all the genres that don't get included in the major encyclopedias of the Victorian era, or that get only a small amount of space devoted to them. That meant things like mystery & detective fiction, horror fiction, and science fiction. So I read up on Victorian science fiction and made a list of authors and novels and short stories I should read—I wanted my encyclopedia to be as complete as I could. And I included all those novels and short stories, and then found a bunch more as I did more research, and included them in the encyclopedia, too.

As I'd originally suspected, the Victorian science fiction novels and stories turned out to be pretty interesting. When you read the old sf stories and novels today, and you keep in mind that they were written by the Victorians, in some cases two hundred years ago, you find all sorts of strange and fascinating elements in them. *Frankenstein*, for example, is science fiction, but it's also a Gothic, part of a decades-long tradition of Gothic horror fiction. *War of the Worlds* is an argument about how the British Empire went about its business overseas. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* is also a criticism of the British Empire, too. And so on.

**John Grayshaw: How did you research your encyclopedia? How long did you work on it?**

**Jess Nevins:** To take your last question first, I worked on it on and off for three years and then worked on it continuously for another two. I'm writing the second edition now, which means



I'm doing a lot of editing and revising and adding material, and it's been about six months of continuous work, and I've probably got another couple of months of continuous work to go.

I researched it by using all the resources I had available to me at work. I'm a college librarian, so I had access to a large number of books (in our library) and a much larger number of magazine articles (through our research databases). This was back in 1998-2004, of course—the Internet wasn't anywhere near what it is now. So I couldn't just Google things, I had to go into databases like Academic Search Complete and JSTOR and do research in them.

For the second edition, well, I've still got all the databases to use, but now there's Google, and Google Scholar, and electronic books, and all these theses and dissertations in one database, and old newspapers online in another couple of databases...it's an entirely different world now. It's a lot easier now, since nearly all the books and stories I include in the encyclopedia are online (I'd say about a third of the books I included in the encyclopedia I had to go to Washington D.C. or London or Paris to read), and in most cases I don't have to try very hard to find interesting research about the authors and stories and novels I write about. For the encyclopedia's first edition, I had to work hard to find people writing about some of these obscure authors and novels. That's not true any more.

**John Grayshaw: What are some fun anecdotes about your research? Like quirky, unexpected, or amusing discoveries?**

**Jess Nevins:** Let's see now. Anecdotes—there's the H. Rider Haggard story. He wrote *King Solomon's Mines*, which was an ENORMOUS hit. And he wrote it because he read Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and told his brother "I could write a better book than this." Haggard's brother said, "I bet you can't write anything nearly as good." So Haggard spent only thirteen weeks writing *King Solomon's Mines*, and wrote a better and more interesting novel than *Treasure Island*, and a much, much, *much* more successful novel.

There's a similar story about *Dracula*. This other writer, Richard Marsh, supposedly made a bet with Bram Stoker about who would finish their supernatural novel first. Marsh finished first, and his novel, *The Beetle* (which starts out really well—better than *Dracula*--but then falls off) was initially a much bigger than *Dracula* was.

Quirky discoveries...one of my favorites is a book called *Sammy Tubbs, the Boy Doctor, and "Sponsie," the Troublesome Monkey*. It's a five-volume book, written by a guy named Edward Bliss Foote in 1874 & 1875. The first four volumes are about human anatomy and physiology as they were understood in the 1870s. Pretty dry stuff. The fifth volume is a sex education manual, about a freed slave named Sammy Tubbs who learns medicine at a young age and begins teaching it to a mixed black and white audience. Then he starts teaching sex ed. to those same audiences, only they're not only mixed black and white, they're mixed men and women. Tubbs

ends up engaged to a white woman, and the accompanying illustration shows him kissing her, which I think is the first interracial kiss in American fiction.

Finding something like that written in 1874 was a real surprise to me, and hinted that Edward Bliss Foote's audiences were a lot more progressive than I would have guessed.

Another quirky one was in the dime novels. You may or may not have heard of Nick Carter, the detective—he first appeared in 1886 (a year before Sherlock Holmes) and by 1920 had appeared in something like 3000 dime novel issues. (There were a *lot* of dime novels back then, and they were usually weekly publications). Nick Carter was huge, in his day. Well, one of his villains is a bad guy named Doctor Quartz who is, in nearly every respect, Hannibal Lecter (from *Silence of the Lambs*) except that he's appearing in these cheap dime novels in the 1880s & 1890s & 1900s. The Doctor Quartz novels are actually pretty entertaining, and the writers made sure to make Quartz as creepy and intimidating as possible.

Unexpected discoveries...so many to choose from, but I'll choose only one. Everyone knows about Lorna Doones, the cookies. But most people have forgotten that they're named after a novel, *Lorna Doone*, by R.D. Blackmore, from 1869. *Lorna Doone* is what they called a "triple-decker," a big fat three volume book about a farmer in western England and his feud with a local clan. I wasn't in a good mood when I started it, and I really didn't want to read another long 800 page novel right then—I was in a hurry to finish the encyclopedia, and it felt like *Lorna Doone* was going to slow me down a lot.

I ended up loving *Lorna Doone*, which I think is one of the best historical novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It blew me away, and I ended up being sorry it wasn't longer. I push *Lorna Doone* on everyone I can.

**John Grayshaw: What information did you find that really surprised you?**

**Jess Nevins:** There were female private detectives all over the place! I wanted to do research into the real-life basis of detective fiction, so I started researching the history of private eyes, and what I found was that department stores started employing women as floorwalkers as soon as the Civil War ended—the women had a sharper eye for female thieves & shoplifters than men did. Only five years later, women started opening private detective agencies and applying for private detective permits, so that by 1890 there were female private detectives and all-women or mostly-female private detective agencies everywhere from Maine to Florida, and in a number of cities in England. I was surprised by this—it had never occurred to me that there would be female private eyes in Victorian England or America, but there were, and there were a lot of them.

**John Grayshaw: What makes Victorian Era Science Fiction different than other eras of Sci-fi? And what makes it similar?**

**Jess Nevins:** What makes Victorian SF different is that up until the 1890s writers only had one person to model themselves on: Jules Verne. It's not like today, where there's a solid century's worth and more of science fiction novels and stories that people have read, and when most people have a rough idea of what the canon of great SF novels are. Victorian SF writers were pretty much on their own as far as what to write about and how to write about it, so you got a pretty wide range of science fiction, from mainstream (like Jules Verne & H.G. Wells) to much more out-there stuff (Martians visiting Earth turn out to be literal angels, for example).

The other thing that's really different about Victorian SF is that during the Victorian era nobody had really divided literature up into genres yet. There was no tendency on anyone's part—writers, reviewers, readers, or publishers—to say “oh, this book is science fiction” and for everyone to expect certain things out of the book and to expect it to be written a certain way and to contain certain things and to not contain certain things. Genres, as we know them today, really only came into existence in the 1900s and 1910s. During the Victorian era, science fiction novels were generally treated the same as mainstream novels and romances and Westerns and detective novels—it was all just “literature.” So after *War of the Worlds* got published, Henry James (who is in the canon of great literature and is about a mainstream late-Victorian writer as there is) got in touch with H.G. Wells about writing a sequel. James didn't dismiss *War of the Worlds* as science fiction (neither did anyone else)—he just saw it as literature.

What makes Victorian SF similar to the science fiction of other eras is that it primarily deals with aliens and travel into outer space and other classic science fictional elements and plot devices and stories. Victorian SF can be a lot cruder in dealing with these things than writers from the 1950s or 1980s or today—but it's still aliens and spaceships and trips to the moon.

**John Grayshaw: George Griffiths? Why isn't he better known today? What was his significance to the genre at the time?**

**Jess Nevins:** Ah, Griffith! One of the more entertaining late-Victorian SF writers. The problem with Griffith was that he didn't really think much of America or Americans, and he tended to make Americans look bad in his novels. So American publishers didn't pick up Griffith's novels and publish them in America, which meant that when science fiction developed in the U.S., the SF writers and readers of SF didn't have Griffith's novels to read. It's not that Griffith was forgotten in the US; he was never known here.

I'd say the main reason he's not better known today (apart from the whole “never being published in America” thing) is the same reason that 9/10<sup>ths</sup> of Victorian SF writers are forgotten about. That's how it goes, for writers. Unless you're both good and lucky, you're

going to be forgotten about within a few years of your death. (Until someone like me includes you in an encyclopedia decades after you die).

He was significant in SF in the 1890s because he was H.G. Wells' main rival (they didn't like each other) and Griffith's work sold well enough for him to be a major name for a few years. Griffith died in 1906 at the age of 49; if he'd lived as long as Wells did, who knows how much SF he might have written and how he'd be remembered?

So I'd say he was significant as a bestseller, as Wells' main rival for about ten years, and because Griffith tended to include a different set of politics in his SF than Wells did. Griffith's *Angel of the Revolution* is about the creation of a utopia in the near future through the use of air power, but the people doing it are anarchists from a group called "Terror." Which is some distance from Wells' more mainstream politics.

### **John Grayshaw: What was Flatland's impact at the time?**

**Jess Nevins:** It got a lot of attention for the way it incorporated physics education and fiction, and a lot of writers wrote unofficial sequels to it. Science education combined with fiction was a minor genre of Victorian literature, and while some of it was rather charming (I'm particularly fond of Edwin Pallander's *The Adventures of a Micro-Man* (1902), which is "Honey, I Shrank the Kids" done Victorian-style) none of it was done with the very light touch that Edwin Abbot brought to *Flatland*.

### **John Grayshaw I just heard about "Edison's Conquest of Mars" by Garrett P. Serviss an unauthorized sequel to "War of the Worlds". Was the Serviss book at all influential or just an obscure footnote? And was stealing like this common at the time?**

**Jess Nevins:** Serviss' book wasn't influential—it was forgotten about pretty much immediately. But it's an interesting representative of the reaction to *War of the Worlds*. There were a *lot* of ripoffs of *War of the Worlds* published in the US. *War of the Worlds* was serialized in major newspapers in the US, and a lot of writers rewrote *War of the Worlds* and placed their versions of the Martian invasion in Boston or New York City or San Francisco, etc.

Stealing like that wasn't common during the 1890s, no. Up until 1891 the United States didn't respect the copyrights of non-American authors, so American publishers would (for example) publish the work of Jules Verne in lousy translations, in lousy-looking editions, and not pay Verne anything. The US was notorious for this through most of the century, and British authors in particular really didn't like American publishers because of it. But in 1891 Congress passed a law that gave copyright protection to foreign authors, which led to a big drop in the sort of piracy that Jules Verne, among many others, suffered from.

Which is why all the pirating and unauthorized copying of *War of the Worlds* came as such an unpleasant shock to Wells—he thought that the US was over that sort of thing. Wells complained a lot about it to his British and American publishers, but there wasn't much he or they could do about it, and eventually Wells just learned to live with it.

**John Grayshaw: Did the writers of the era know they were creating a new genre? If not, what did they think they were doing? And what did the readers think?**

**Jess Nevins:** No—like I said, people weren't really thinking about genres in the same way that we do now. But after Jules Verne became popular writers and publishers and reviewers and readers began thinking of science fiction as something different and discrete from mainstream publishing. Sometimes the reviewers and writers and publishers and advertisers would use phrases like "in the spirit of Jules Verne." Other times they used phrases like "scientific romance," "scientific fiction," "scientific adventure," "romance of science," "imaginative fiction," and so on. So while none of them were thinking that they were creating a genre in the way we do, as a marketing term and as something that libraries and bookstores use to separate different kinds of books, I think nearly all of them were aware that they were doing something different and unique.

**John Grayshaw: Was it difficult for Victorian Sci-fi authors to get published? How popular was the genre at the time? Was it a "niche" market?**

**Jess Nevins:** Science fiction was relatively popular during the Victorian era—I wouldn't say it was a niche market—but with one or two exceptions it wasn't really ever a bestselling genre. The big names, like H.G. Wells, became bestsellers, and sometimes a writer would hit it big with one book (just like today). But, no, it wasn't difficult for Victorian SF authors to get published—not any more difficult than it was for detective writers or action-adventure writers to get published. There weren't any publishers specializing in science fiction back then, but none of the publishers refused to publish SF, either. In that respect it was easier to get published—big-name publishers published science fiction alongside smaller presses.

**John Grayshaw: Was there a community of Victorian Sci-fi authors or did they write in isolation?**

**Jess Nevins:** No, there wasn't a community of Victorian sf writers—there wasn't really a fandom or a genre to which they felt they belonged. But, there wasn't the idea of genre to divide writers and publishing, either, so that Victorian sf writers were often members of communities of writers of all genres. No genres meant no genre snobbery, and most writers were judged (by other writers) only on the quality of their writing and the sales of their books.

**John Grayshaw: Why have H.G. Wells and Jules Verne stayed so popular?**

**Jess Nevins:** That's a good question. I think it's a combination of how famous they were when they first published, combined with how easy their books are to read, combined with people inside science fiction wanting to have "classics" they can point new readers to, combined with librarians wanting "respectable" authors and novels to point kids at, combined with a substantial amount of good luck on both their parts.

**John Grayshaw:** I think Verne's most well known novels are "Journey to the Center of the Earth," "From the Earth to the Moon," "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea," and "Around the World in 80 Days." Which of his other works SHOULD be more widely read?

**Jess Nevins:** *The Steam House* is fun (engineer and pal travel across India in a giant elephant-shaped vehicle). *Robur the Conqueror* is interesting (the aerial version of Captain Nemo). But the problem with Verne is that all of his translations in the 19<sup>th</sup> and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were bad—the translators and editors and publishers didn't do him any favors. They translated him badly, they cut out a lot of what Verne wrote to save space, and when Verne made political statements in his fiction the American and English publishers and editors usually removed the political statements or even changed them without Verne's knowledge or permission. So the editions of Jules Verne we read as kids, though we probably remember them fondly, aren't anywhere near what Jules Verne actually wrote.

This began to change in the 1990s, when a few American and English publishers began doing much better translations of Verne's novels. But apart from the ones you named, nearly all his novels in English are the same lousy and bad translations from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So it's hard to recommend any of Verne's works, apart from the ones you named, because the translations aren't good.

**John Grayshaw:** I think H.G. Wells most well known novels are "The Time Machine," "the Island of Dr. Moreau," "The Invisible Man," and "War of the Worlds." Which of his other works SHOULD be more widely read?

**Jess Nevins:** His short SF stories are definitely worth reading. *When the Sleeper Wakes* was the last of his really good SF—after that he began devoting his energy to other things.

**John Grayshaw:** What classics were big hits at the time vs. which ones have become significant over time?

**Jess Nevins:** I already mentioned George Griffith's *Angel of the Revolution*. Similarly big then but not now were Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Walter Besant's *The Inner House*, and J.A. Mitchell's *The Last American*.

The French writer Camille Flammarion's work has become increasingly significant as time has passed. Others...there were a *large* number of French science fiction novels and stories, published in the Victorian era, like J.H. Rosney's "The Shapes," which are being rediscovered and retranslated, because so much of the science fiction we read about today was anticipated by the French. It's not that the French invented science fiction—nearly all these lost French sf stories and novels were never translated into English, and English writers didn't hear about them, and so the lost French sf stories and novels weren't influential on American and English science fiction. But the more we discover 19<sup>th</sup> century French science fiction, the more we find writers doing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century what Americans did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Everything from space opera to intelligent aliens who are really alien and not just humans in disguise—the French pretty much got there first.

**John Grayshaw: Were there big hits at the time that aren't really considered classics now?**

**Jess Nevins:** Oh, yes. In that respect Victorian SF isn't much different from modern SF. You've got works that were popular for a little while, like Griffith's *Angel of the Revolution*, but ended up being forgotten about.

**François Ptoul/John Grayshaw: What do you think is the legacy of Victorian SF in modern times, apart from the obvious and ubiquitous elements such as tripod Martians? Why is it still relevant?**

**Jess Nevins:** Well...modern science fiction was invented in the Victorian era. (There was science fiction before the Victorians—Mary Shelley only created one kind of science fiction). To a very large degree what we read today developed out of Victorian science fiction. What we read today is quite different from Victorian SF, of course, because of changing tastes on the part of readers and because of how writing has developed since the Victorians, but however you define science fiction, the core of it—the basics—are present in and were created in Victorian SF. So modern SF itself is a kind of legacy of Victorian SF.

As for it being still relevant...I think Victorian SF's primary relevance is as the beginning of modern SF. I'm not sure that Victorian SF classics like *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *War of the Worlds* are particularly relevant to modern readers (although they are still fun reads, and in the *War of the Worlds'* case there's a lot more going on in the novel than the movies of the book have shown). But if you're at all interested in the history of science fiction, in seeing where it all began—and of course not every reader of SF will be—you pretty much have to start with the Victorians, in much the same way that fans of mysteries and detective fiction don't *have* to read Edgar Allan Poe or Arthur Conan Doyle, but if they want to know about where the modern genre came from, they *should*.