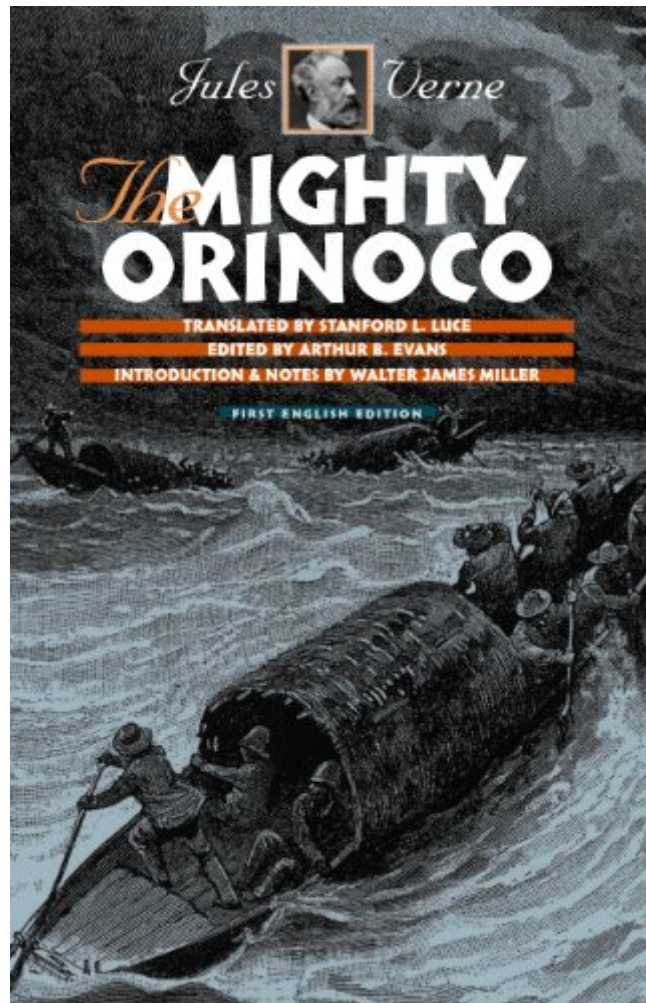




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# The Mighty Orinoco (Early Classics Of Science Fiction)



## Synopsis

First English edition of a classic Verne adventure, with a unique feminist twist.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Le superbe orénoque est superbe !

Another great book story by Jules Verne and I would recommend this to anyone who is into Jules Verne adventures. Adventure, jungles, river dangers, a little romance and more. I just love this story!! V. Lauria Shirley, NY

"The Mighty Orinoco" is the third Jules Verne book in the Early Classics of Science Fiction series, and the sixth book overall. The series is impressive, and this edition is no exception. The novel was first published as "Le Superbe Orénoque" in "Magasin" from January 1st through December 15th of 1898, and is the 45th of his scientific fiction stories. As with all the Voyages Extraordinaires, Verne builds an adventure story off of a solid scientific base. For this book, Verne used Jean

Chaffanjon's account of his real life journeys from his book "L'OrfÃ©noque et le Caura". Where that account leaves off, Verne is forced to invent, but for the vast majority of the story, Verne's descriptions of the river, rapids, flora, fauna, and human communities were all extremely accurate. It is easy for us today to not think of this novel as science fiction (or scientific fiction as Verne called it); however, in the days before satellites and space ships taking pictures of the Earth, matters of geography were definitely of scientific interest. While Verne endeavored to create a solid scientific basis for this story, there is much more to it than simply the search for the origin of the river. In addition to the search for the source of the river by M. Miguel, M. Felipe, and M. Varinas, there is a parallel story of the search by Jean Kermor and Sergeant Martial, who claim to be an uncle and nephew, searching for Colonel de Kermor who is supposed to be the father of Jean. Sergeant Martial tries to keep Jean and himself separate from the other travelers, but as they are following the same path for different reasons, there is no choice but for the groups to interact. Along the way they find Jacqus Helloch and Germain Paterne, and now the main characters are together for most of the journey. Verne does have some twists in the story, but unlike today's writers, he provides so many clues as to what these twists are, that the reader is well ahead of the characters. Still, it would not be fair to include any spoilers here, and so I will refrain from going into any further details of the story. One of the interesting themes which Verne touches on in this book is race and racism. At times, the reader has to forgive what appear to be racist comments in the text. On the other hand, Verne does have a significant number of characters from the "lesser" races in positions of unusual authority. One has to wonder if Verne isn't well ahead of his time in showing that the racist stereotypes are false. The novel is divided into two sections. The first section introduces most of the major characters, and they are together. It ends when the group reaches San Fernando, and with the revelation of one of the big secrets. The second section takes us the rest of the way, and in addition to the story lines which have already been mentioned, the story line of a group of outlaws and renegade Indians interweaves with the other story lines more and more. The pace of this story will feel slow, especially when compared with modern fiction. The book runs 370 pages, and those who don't like all the detail with which Verne fills the chapters will probably not care for it much. On the other hand, those who have read and enjoyed other Verne stories should enjoy this one. This is the first English edition of this book, translated by Stanford L. Luce. As with the other books in the Early Classics of Science Fiction, there is some supporting material as well. There is a short, but informative, introduction written by Walter James Miller, Professor of English at New York University. Professor Miller also provides some excellent notes for the story. There is bibliography of Jules Verne's works, and a short biography of Verne by Editor Arthur B. Evans.

From the 1870s, and for a quarter century, every new Verne novel had been issued in translation. Abruptly, in 1898, American and British publishers broke this tradition with *The Mighty Orinoco* (*Le Superbe OrfÃ©noque*), now available for the first time in English over a century later from Wesleyan University Press. Why did the publishers of Verne's time reject this book, and nearly every one thereafter, although one or two Verne books had appeared annually under his byline in France until 1910, five years after his death? Since 1880, Verne stories had been mainstays of Boys Own Paper in England. American publishers came to rely more and more on utilizing the English translations, rather than commissioning fresh ones for use in the United States. Hence, by the 1890s, the anticipated taste of the British market came to govern what appeared in English translations on either side of the Atlantic. The lack of a translation of *The Mighty Orinoco* has also been a factor in the conventional perception of Verne as a writer unable to place women in strong roles. The hero of *The Mighty Orinoco* is a 22-year-old woman undertakes a search for the father she has never known, whom she learns may have disappeared along the South American river that forms the book's title. To travel incognito, she dresses as a 17 year old boy, Jean, accompanied by one of her father's former military aides, Martial (whose name signifies his background). This is not simply the conventional story for youth of a girl proving courageous when faced with sudden danger. Instead it is a premeditated adoption of a new gender, a complete violation of the standard sex roles. Along the way, she and Martial meet two naturalists, also exploring the river, and join forces. One of them, Jacques, cannot account for the attraction he feels toward Jean, deeper than what can be accounted for by male friendship. For his part, Martial is frustrated at his inability to shield Jeanne from this potential future lover. Only when rescuing Jean from drowning does Jacques discover her secret, and at that point their emotions can follow a normal heterosexual development. Jean/Jeanne herself ultimately makes a similar transformation; for the search of her father, she had passed as a man, but once it is no longer necessary, she assumes feminine garb, which she had even brought with her. As noted in the critical commentary by the dean of American Verne scholars, Walter James Miller, Jacques remains attracted to the masculine side of Jeanne's nature, revealing Verne's insight into the dual aspects of masculinity and femininity present in individuals of either gender. As Germain exclaims of Jeanne, "Charming as a lad, and charming as a lass! It's true-I don't understand it at all!" (354) And on the return journey, calling again on those who knew them on the way out, Jacques has to explain how he married Jean! It is easy to see why such a premise, as readily comprehensible as it may be to older readers, would be precluded when Boys Own Paper was such a crucial outlet. And that fact, unfortunately, denied for English-language

readers one of Verne's best late colonial adventures. Verne's journey involves a perilous passage, through steadily greater natural dangers, climaxing in abduction by bandits. However, their destination reveals not the heart of darkness, but one of light and civilization. Jeanne's father has become a priest and head of a utopian community, named Juana for Jeanne. He combines the best aspects of both a man of faith and one who insures the defense of the city, and the forces of righteousness defeat the bandits. Verne well knew that his readers would quickly guess Jeanne's "secret," so he added mystery as the story unfolds, by initial withholding some of the motivations for her trip. Only in a fragmentary way are aspects of her past filled in, with the end jumping ahead to switch point of view entirely with her father's discovery of his daughter and his rescue of her (he had thought she had died as a child). As Miller notes, the development and interweaving of the five plot "strands is a lesson in plotting." (374) In this way the reversal and recognition on which the novel relies remains fresh and vivid. The book is well-paced, with a perfect balance of varied and intriguing characters. In typical manner for the genre, Verne reveals conflicting attitudes toward race and imperialism. There is a consciousness of racial difference, among Indians, Spaniards, and those of mixed blood (again, hardly likely to be approved of as reading for the Boys Own audience), but there are also no racist assumptions based on this background. Similarly, Verne sees typical benefits of "civilization," that is, white civilization, in the usual manner offered through missionary work, health, improvements in agriculture, and the like. The hope for the country's future is an Indian boy who has been educated at the mission, but who lost his father to the bandits, evoking parallels with Jeanne. The only true villain is the Spanish bandit Jorres, who, in another echo of Jeanne, is revealed to actually be the outlaw Alfaniz. Humor is derived from a trio of quarrelsome European explorers, true idiot savants, who are perpetually unable to agree on the river's tributaries. Fortunately, again Wesleyan University Press's ongoing series of the Early Classics of Science Fiction, which will include a number of previously untranslated Verne books, has included all the original engravings, reproduced in an even higher quality than their previous Verne volumes, *The Invasion of the Sea* and *The Mysterious Island*. Pioneering Verne scholar Stanford Luce, who wrote the first American doctoral dissertation on Verne, provides a highly readable translation.

Two separate groups of travelers arrange passage up the Orinoco River of Venezuela but end up traveling mostly together. The first group is 3 mapmakers who argue constantly over the actual origin of the Orinoco and which are its tributaries. The second group, a young man and his older companion, are much more mysterious about their objectives. They'll say only that they are seeking a certain man who is said to have gone up the same river many years before. This man they are

seeking turns out to be the father of the young man, and the young man turns out to actually be... well, that's a poorly kept secret of the story. Along the way they face dangerous rapids and unfriendly savages, as well as treasonous porters. While I was hoping for an old-fashioned adventure, I was rather bored by the story. To make it worse, the secrets and surprises were pretty obvious, and there just wasn't much excitement. While I found "The Mysterious Island" to be very interesting in spite of a generally slow pace, this book was just plain slow. This is a book probably best enjoyed by rabid Verne fans.

I am glad I took the time to read this book. It gets good toward the middle, with the best being the last few chapters. At first, the plot is a little hard to figure out, but like I said, it all falls together nicely. Personally, I like reading stories with good endings.

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