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Fiction Chronicles: The Intoxicating Attraction of the Abyss

The spirit of Jules Verne infuses three thrilling works that face the extremes of nature.

By

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Martin Michael Driessen's "Rivers" (Amazon Crossing, 180 pages, \$14.95) brings together three novella-length dramas set on or alongside those bodies of water. In "Fleuve Sauvage" an alcoholic actor takes a solo canoe trip down the Aisne River in northeastern France in order to sober up before a performance. "Pierre and Adèle" recounts the generational feud between two Breton families—one Catholic, the other Protestant—whose adjoining land is divided by an ever-shifting stream. Konrad, the gentle hero of "Voyage to the Moon," steers logging rafts down Germany's Main River. A lifelong bachelor, he's a man of faithful habits, endlessly traversing the same waterway just as, in the evenings, he reads and rereads the same six books by Jules Verne.

Konrad does eventually embark on a melancholy expedition, piloting the Rhine all the way to the ocean to help his employer—a closeted gay man—escape Europe on the eve of World War II. But Verne's influence here is less as a fantasist and more as a writer of moral fables. In Jonathan Reeder's sturdy translation from the Dutch, the novellas in "Rivers" read like durable, old-fashioned confrontations between good and evil.

The devil has the upper hand in "Fleuve Sauvage," which propels the drunken actor into a spree of lunatic violence worthy of "Macbeth," the play he's preparing to appear in. Konrad is Mr. Driessen's lonely, ascetic saint, whose quiet decency and riverine devotion sets him apart from his country and its lust for war and domination. Unappeasable atavistic hatreds seem to control the feuding neighbors of "Pierre and Adèle," but in a marvelous about-face, a startling Solomonic judgment paves the way for their reconciliation.

At the height of their dispute, the neighbors blame the meandering boundary stream for cheating them of their property—both are "convinced that nature had systematically dealt them a bad hand." But the disquieting beauty of Mr. Driessen's rivers is in their indifference to human imbroglios. The conflicts that Mr. Driessen dramatizes are often petty and cruel, but his settings—and these wise, accomplished tales—feel ageless.