

RFID

The first book Tom remembers having read, when he was seven, was a reprint [school edition] of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and since 1977 he has amassed a collection of as many different editions of the book as he can find in used-book stores, Salvation Armies, thrift stores, and the like: Pocket Books, Magnum Easy Eyes, Fawcett Premiers, Signet Classics, Washington Square Paperbacks, Plumes, Mentors, Amazing Stories, Oxford World Classics, Everyman Editions, Serpent Books, Scholastics, a host of generic elementary-school editions sold through school book clubs, Norton Criticals, Dover Thrifts, Fantastic Stories, Penguins, Livres des Poches, Evergreens, Puffins, Pelicans, and Bantams. Every time he finds a new cover, he promptly goes home and speed-reads the book and he has now read *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* 137 times, carelessly, and in six different languages, including Spanish, Russian, Korean, French, Chinese, and Greek. He even tried learning Arabic once to half get through a version he found in a pensione in Florence.

One evening after drinking, Tom confessed to me that he had never really bothered to think about the book at all in all his years of reading, and that he had not really ever experienced anything while reading the book except the books' numerous covers: one-eyed octopi, riveted nautiluses connected to leathery breathing tubes, a lead balloon that looks like a manhole cover, photosynthetic seaweed, farm-like fields of layered oceans and raisin-shaped islands, barnacled or tentacle-entwined periscopes, and even what looks like a large manatee on a book from Brazil. For Tom, the 1930s with its images of red-eyed sea monsters becomes the 1950s with its Soviet-style submarines becomes the 1960s with its long-haired sea creatures becomes the 1990s with its sonar-guided Trident missiles. The book is impervious to history and to human reading habits, which are deeply repetitive and boring. People are basically animals that know how to read.

