There is a theory which states that if one ever discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.

— Douglas Adams The Restaurant at the End of the Universe (1980)

A shadow, a minor character, projects mythic proportions in John Verne’s The Underground City. The lesser-known novel by a pioneer of the science fiction genre was originally published in 1877 as Les Indes noires (The Black Indies), and is also known by other titles including Child of the Cavern and The Unknown City.

Set in the coalmines of Aberfoyle, 43 km northwest of Glasgow, the story pivots around the Ford family. Simon Ford, the old overman, who has lived in a subterranean dwelling, collapsed out in the cloudburst rains, buried fifteen hundred feet below the earth. They prefer to remain in the mines, after it’s been mined out, where they are happy together, with their own opinions, ideas, and tastes.

From the outset there are malevolent forces at play. After the discovery of a new vein of coal, an underground town is established on the banks of Loch Malcolm, beneath the eastern point of Loch Katrine, Sir Walter Scott’s favourite loch as described in The Lady of the Lake. Simon Ford, the old overman, with his family lives in a subterranean dwelling, hollowed out in the schistous mass, buried fifteen hundred feet below the earth. They prefer to remain in the mines, after it’s been mined out, where they are happy together, with their own opinions, ideas, and tastes.

The Republic, Plato’s best-known work about the origin of knowledge, describes how the world of shadows is to be renounced in order to attain true understanding. The philosopher describes a distinction between two forms of reality: the reality of the visible world and the (ideal Forms or true) reality of ideas. The world that we perceive is not absolute reality and functions like the shadow world experienced by the chained prisoners in the cave. The shadow, which Plato linked with images or copies, is negatively charged. In the words of Stoichita, Plato “has the perverse vision of a philosopher who enjoys the sensation of ignoring as much as he enjoys the quest for knowledge.”

In The Underground City, the “daughter of the cavern,” she’s a stranger to the natural world beyond the confines of the cavern. She has a huge, gravelly voice, and a mind that seems to be trapped in the light. The world before her is a shadow of what she once knew. She’s a Wunderkammer, a museum of memories: where Superman’s origin story, Quatremère de Quincy links the cave to the origin of science fiction, Verne’s Travels in Hyperreality, which elaborates on the story of the Manacled Hunters and Gatherers.


Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane.

James and Eleanor Avery are represented by Ryan Ronkner Gallery, Brisbane.

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