

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



A Wild Ride Through The Night

Walter Moers

Contents

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Also by Walter Moers
Chronology
Title Page

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16

Copyright

About the Book

Using twenty-one drawings from the work of Gustave Doré, the most successful illustrator of the 19th century, Walter Moers has created a wondrous and utterly delightful tale. In a world between legend and dream, in a time between childhood and adulthood, *A Wild Ride Through the Night* describes the exhilarating and comic adventures of 12-year-old Gustave, a boy who aspires one day to be a great artist. But before he can achieve this, Gustave must first tackle Mysterious Giants and a Siamese Twins Tornado; he also finds himself encountering the Greatest Monster of All, freeing a maiden from the claws of a dragon, riding through a forest full of ghosts, navigating a Galactic Gully and meeting a dream princess, a talking horse, scantily-clad Amazons and even his own self. Having made a wager with death for nothing less than his life and his soul, he must travel from the earth to the moon and back in a single night.

About the Author

Walter Moers was born in 1957 and is a writer, cartoonist, painter and sculptor. He has refused to be photographed ever since his comic strips *The Little Asshole* and *Adolf* were published, the latter leading him to be declared persona non grata by the political right in Germany. The *13½ Lives of Captain Bluebear* was published to superb reviews and has sold 250,000 hardback copies in Germany. Walter Moers lives in Hamburg.

Also by Walter Moers

The 13½ Lives of Captain Bluebear

GUSTAVE DORÉ

GUSTAVE DORÉ, French painter and illustrator, b. Strasbourg, 6 Jan. 1832, d. Paris, 23 Jan. 1883, displayed an outstanding talent for drawing as a boy and lithographed sketches for a history of manners in his tenth year. He moved to Paris at the age of thirteen and was employed as a caricaturist by the *Journal pour rire* two years later. In 1854 he published his earliest illustrated work, Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. This was only the first of the numerous series that made him one of the most popular, prolific and successful book illustrators of the mid nineteenth century. His inexhaustibly fertile imagination and exceptional facility led ultimately to the grotesque lack of moderation that marred his last major work, the drawings for Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*.

Chronology

- 1832 Gustave Doré born on 6 January at 5 rue de la Nuée-Bleue, to Pierre-Louis-Chistophe Doré and his wife Alexandrine Marie-Anne, née Pluchart.
- 1837 Doré's talent first attracts attention when, at the age of five, he draws caricatures of his relations and teachers in his exercise books.
- 1839 He starts to learn several musical instruments, becoming a virtuoso on the violin.
- 1841 The family moves for professional reasons to Bourg-en-Bresse in the Jura. Doré attends the local collège. His first attempt to illustrate Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
- 1847 First published work: *Les Travaux d'Hercule*, Aubert, Paris.
- 1848 First visit to Paris with his parents. Doré makes contact with Charles Philipon, a magazine publisher, who puts him under contract as an illustrator. Death of his father.
- 1849 Doré's mother moves to Paris.
- 1851 Publication of his early work, *Les Désagréments d'un voyage d'agrément*. He joins the staff of the magazine *L'Illustration*.
- 1853 Doré illustrates Lord Byron's *Œuvres complètes*.
- 1854 He publishes his first major illustrated work, *Gargantua et Pantagruel* by Rabelais, which causes a great stir. The same year sees the publication of *Histoire pittoresque de la Sainte-Russie*, a satirical and stylistically audacious illustrated history of the Crimean War which may safely be classified as one of the most imaginative forerunners of the comic strip. Doré gains his first successes as a painter.

- 1855 World Exhibition, Paris.
Doré illustrates Balzac's *Contes drolatiques*.
Together with his Rabelais cycle, this lays the foundations of his international renown as a book illustrator. John Ruskin condemns Balzac's text as shamelessly blasphemous and Doré's illustrations as monstrous and disgusting.
- 1857 Doré illustrates the Comtesse de Ségur's fairy tales. In the ensuing years he devotes himself to a wide variety of projects, some of a non-literary nature.
- 1861 Dante's *Inferno* marks the beginning of Doré's grand design: a world library of illustrated works. His artistic output becomes steadily more industrialised, and he tackles more and more assignments simultaneously.
- 1862 Doré illustrates Charles Perrault's fairy stories and Gottfried August Bürger's *Münchhausen*. Preliminary sketches for *Don Quixote*.
- 1863 *Don Quixote*, his most successful work to date, appears. Only his *Bible* exceeds it in number of editions printed.
- 1864 Napoleon III invites Doré to spend ten days at his court.
- 1866 *Don Quixote* becomes an international bestseller and Doré the highest-paid artist of his day. The *Bible* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* appear with Doré's illustrations. His paintings are less successful. The merciless verdict of one contemporary critic: 'Wallpaper is worth more.'
- 1867 Doré illustrates La Fontaine's *Fables* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.
- 1868 Disappointed by the failure of his paintings in France, Doré temporarily emigrates to London, where he triumphs as a painter and illustrator. Opening of the Doré Gallery at 35 New Bond Street. He illustrates Dante's *Purgatory* and *Paradise* and undertakes numerous excursions through the more disreputable districts of London, sometimes with a police escort, for the

- purpose of making drawings for a *London* volume based on texts by Blanchard Jerrold.
- 1870 Fall of the French Empire; Napoleon III captured at Sedan.
- 1872 Doré has begun to sculpt as well. The *London* volume appears, together with several historical works.
- 1875 He is received in audience by Queen Victoria. Illustrates *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Coleridge.
- 1877 Joseph Michaud's *Histoire des croisades* published with illustrations by Doré.
- 1878 Preliminary illustrations for *A Thousand and One Nights*.
- 1879 Publication of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Doré's last major cycle. He is appointed an officer of the Légion d'honneur.
- 1880 Death of Jacques Offenbach, one of Doré's closest friends.
- 1881 Doré's mother dies.
- 1883 Gustave Doré dies of a heart attack in Paris on 23 January. The same year sees the publication of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*, his last illustrated work.

Walter Moers

A WILD RIDE
through the
NIGHT

suggested by twenty-one illustrations
by Gustave Doré

Translated from the German by
John Brownjohn

Secker & Warburg
LONDON

IT WAS DARK when Gustave put to sea. He preferred to travel by night. In any case, visibility seemed unimportant to someone who had no idea where his voyage would take him. The sky was enshrouded in clouds as black as ink. Now and then a star or the moon's pock-marked face would peep forth, shedding just enough light for him to see the ship's wheel in his hands. Gustave had read somewhere that it was possible to get your bearings at sea by observing the position of the stars. He wanted to master that art some day, but at present he had to rely on his instincts.

'Hard-a-port!' he shouted, and spun the wheel to the left. Was 'port' on the left or the right? Did a ship turn right when you turned the wheel to the left, or was it the other way round? Temporarily brushing these questions aside, Gustave spun the wooden wheel vigorously so as to give his crew an impression of grim determination.

'We'll never outrun it, Cap'n!' Dante, his trusty, one-eyed boatswain, had come up behind him. The experienced seaman's voice was trembling with fear. 'We can't possibly outrun it, can we?'

Although Gustave was only twelve, the crew of the *Aventure* looked up to him as if he were a giant—even though they had to bend down to do so. Kneading his cap in his calloused hands, Dante regarded his young skipper with a look of hope in his lone eye. Gustave turned to face the wind and sniffed it. The air was as warm and moist as it tends to be before a violent storm.

'Outrun it?' he called over his shoulder. 'Outrun what, my faithful Dante?'

'The storm, Cap'n! Or rather, the storms.'

‘The storm?’ said Gustave. ‘What kind of storm do you mean?’

‘I mean a *Siamese Twins Tornado*, Cap’n. It’s hot on our heels, too!’ Dante levelled a trembling forefinger at something beyond the ship’s stern, and Gustave followed the direction of his gaze. What he saw there was terrifying indeed: two enormous waterspouts had arisen from the sea. Their whirling shafts towered as high as the dark clouds overhead, sucking the water and all its contents into the sky. Roaring like maddened giants, they sped towards the *Aventure* at a rate of knots.

‘Oh, so it’s a *Siamese Twins Tornado*,’ Gustave said in a deliberately casual tone. ‘An unpleasant phenomenon, but absolutely no reason for anyone to lose control of his knee joints.’ He cast a reproachful glance at Dante’s trembling legs.

‘Take in sail!’ he ordered briskly. ‘Steer three—no, four degrees to starboard!’ The boatswain pulled himself together and saluted, shamed by his imperturbable young skipper’s death-defying composure. ‘Aye-aye, Cap’n!’ he cried. He clicked his heels and strode off, stiff-legged.

Gustave’s own knees did not start knocking until Dante had stalked off. His hands gripped the ship’s wheel tightly. A *Siamese Twins Tornado*, eh? Great! The most dangerous natural phenomenon anyone could encounter anywhere on the seven seas! A pair of tornadoes, two meteorological twins who seemed to communicate by telepathic means and hunted ships as a team. If one failed to sink you, the other finished the job.

Gustave looked back at the roaring waterspouts. They seemed to have doubled in size in no time. He could see huge octopuses, whales and sharks being plucked from the sea and hurled through the air. Shafts of lightning darted back and forth between the gigantic, whirling tornadoes, creating a dazzling white network that lit up the *Aventure* like a ghost ship.



'Ah, so *that's* how they communicate!' Gustave told himself. 'By electricity! I must convey this information to the International Tornado Research Centre without delay—if I survive.'

He looked straight ahead again. 'It doesn't matter a row of beans which way I steer,' he reflected. 'If we go left, the left-hand tornado will get us. If we go right, the right-hand one will.'

This disheartening thought had only just occurred to him when the *Aventure* was borne upwards by a huge wave. For a moment the ship hung almost motionless in the air, poised on its foaming crest. The ocean seemed to pause in its eternal undulations, almost as if it had become the tornadoes' accomplice and were serving up the fleeing ship on a tray of white froth.

'We've come to a standstill,' Gustave thought desperately. 'We're done for!'

At that moment the left-hand tornado seized the *Aventure*, enveloping her in darkness. A fearsome gurgle from the bowels of the ocean drowned every other sound including the sailors' cries of terror. Gustave strapped himself to the ship's wheel with his belt and shut his eyes.

He was prepared to die—prepared to plunge with his ship to the bed of the ocean if the sea-gods so ordained; as her captain, it was his duty to do so. In his mind's eye he could already see his skeleton nibbled clean by fish, still lashed to the wheel of a wreck lying on the seabed with stingrays swimming through its splintered remains.

Then silence fell: not a sound, not a whisper, no motion at all. Gustave felt as if he were floating, weightless, in space. Only the wheel in his hands reminded him that he had been in the thick of a raging storm just a split second earlier.

'I'm dead,' he thought. 'So that's what it's like: you don't hear a thing any more.' He risked opening his eyes and looked up. Overhead was a kind of enormous funnel, and

through it he could see straight into the cosmos, a black disk filled with scintillating stars. Around him was a vortex of sea water, splintered wood and whirling air, all of it being propelled outwards by centrifugal force: Gustave was in the eye of the storm, the zone of absolute stillness in the heart of the tornado.

He watched in horror as the grey tube sucked his men into the sky, but he could only see their gaping mouths and staring eyes, not hear their heart-rending cries.

The *Aventure* was lifted into the air once more. Gustave thought she would soar straight into outer space, but the tornado suddenly detached itself from the surface of the ocean and rose into the air. It released its hold on the ship and whirled skywards, growing thinner and thinner. Closely followed by its twin, it plunged into the dark mass of clouds like an immense serpent composed of sea water, air, sailors, and ship's wreckage. The two storms emitted a last, triumphant bellow from inside the clouds. Then they were gone.

But the *Aventure* herself fell back into the sea. The impact snapped her rigging and made the nails pop out of her planks like bullets. White foam blossomed around her hull as she landed. Timber splintered, sailcloth ripped, anchor chains rattled. Then came silence, absolute silence: the waves had subsided. The ship rocked gently to and fro, sending a few barrels rumbling across the deck, but that was all. The tempest was over as suddenly as it had begun.

Gustave unbuckled himself from the ship's wheel. Still thoroughly bemused, he tottered off on a tour of inspection. The *Aventure* was nothing more than a wreck, her sails in shreds, her hull riddled with holes, her deck bristling with sprung planks like the body of a half-plucked chicken. She was slowly but steadily sinking.

'This is the end,' whispered Gustave.

'Yes ... "All that comes into being is worthy of perishing,"' replied a voice from the ship's stern. Gustave

turned to look. Amid the snapped masts and crazy tangle of rigging he saw a horrific figure perched on the taffrail. It was a skeleton, a man devoid of skin and flesh attired in a voluminous black cloak. His bony hands were holding a casket, his empty eye sockets facing in Gustave's direction.

At his feet knelt a young woman who must once upon a time have been very beautiful. Now, however, her fine features were distorted into a mask of insanity as wild and disordered as her flowing fair hair. She was in the act of rolling two dice across the deck.

'Goethe!' said the skeleton.

'You mean ... you're Goethe?' Gustave asked, puzzled.

'No, the quotation was from Goethe. I'm Death, and this is Dementia, my poor, mad sister. Say hello, Dementia!'

'I'm not mad!' the young woman retorted in an unpleasantly harsh and strident voice, without interrupting her game of dice.

'And what is your name?' asked Death.

'Gustave,' the boy replied stoutly. 'Gustave Doré.'

'Good,' said Death. 'I'm in the right place, then. I've come to fetch your soul.' He indicated the casket in his hand, which, Gustave now saw, was shaped like a miniature coffin. 'Do you know what this is?'

Gustave shook his head.

'It's a soul-coffin,' Death announced with a touch of pride in his sinister voice. 'Yes indeed! My own invention. I'm not interested in your body. That will either feed the sharks or be dispersed in the ocean by a process of decay as natural as anything ever is on this pitiless planet of ours. I want your soul, just your soul, so that I can burn it.'

'No, he belongs to me!' screeched Dementia, pointing to the dice. Having just thrown a double six for the second time, she scooped them up and threw them again.

'Hm,' Death said sullenly, 'we'll have to see about that.' The dice came to a standstill: a five and a six.

‘Five sixes and one five,’ sighed Death. ‘That’s hard to beat.’

‘He’s mine!’ Dementia exclaimed in triumph, and uttered a hysterical laugh. Her glowing eyes flickered nervously as she gazed at Gustave.

‘It’s like this,’ Death explained. ‘I’ll get you anyway, sooner or later, but if you’re *really* unlucky, my esteemed sister will also get a slice of the cake. That means you’ll go mad before you die. In your case the process will probably take the following form: you’ll spend a few weeks drifting around on a raft until the merciless sun dehydrates your brain and you start seeing water sprites, or maybe your dead grandmother, who’ll address you in the voice of your violin teacher—or something of the kind. And then you’ll start to eat yourself alive.’