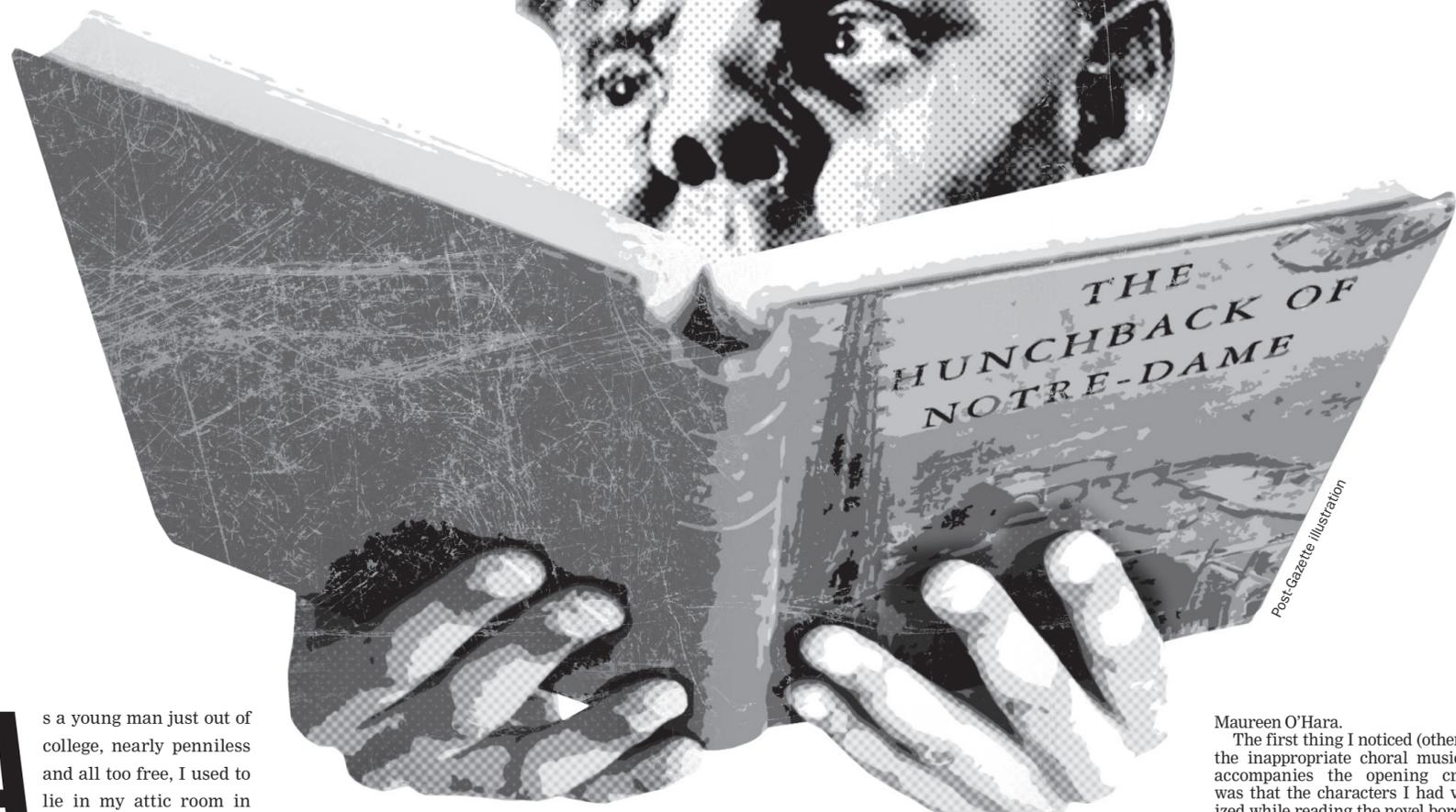


# IN PRAISE OF THE MASSIVE, SPRAWLING 19TH- CENTURY NOVEL: (OR, UN-HUNCHBACKING THE MIND)



Post-Gazette illustration

As a young man just out of college, nearly penniless and all too free, I used to lie in my attic room in Paris reading through the classics of French literature. I still recall, as vividly as any real-world experience, clawing my way into 19th-century Parisian *société* with Balzac's Rastignac; strolling through the countryside around Combray with the narrator of Marcel Proust's "À la recherche du temps perdu"; belting out drinking songs with Rabelais' Pantagruel in 16th-century Chinon; and wandering haphazardly into a 15th-century *Fête des Fous* (a Festival of Fools) in Victor Hugo's "Notre-Dame de Paris" (misleadingly known as "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" in translation).

Everyman's Library has recently republished "Hunchback" in a new English-language edition that reproduces the eminently readable, anonymous translation used in the first Everyman edition of 1910. I decided to voyage back to the Paris of Claude Frollo, La Esmeralda and Quasimodo not merely for the satisfaction of visiting it a second time but because I wondered how it would affect me after all these years.

I felt a warm *frisson* of familiarity as I became lost, once again, in cramped, twisted streets, surrounded by vagabonds and gossips, philosophers and priests, narcissistic soldiers and jealous heiresses. I also discovered byways and alleys that I had failed to notice during my previous sojourn.

To read "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" is to follow the intersecting fortunes of sharply defined, often contrasting characters: an indigent, self-important writer who blames his audience for failing to admire his work; a tortured, passionate priest; a beautiful gypsy girl whose stubborn naivete becomes her undoing; a misfit whose ugliness is exceeded only by his wisdom and sense of honor. It is to have one's mind pumped up with reflections about inner and outer beauty, love and infatuation, "science" (or learning) and passion, architectures of stone and desire, intolerance, hypocrisy and the church.

Victor Hugo filled his first full-length novel with a great deal besides characters and story: entire chapters of expository prose, reflections on progress and decay, quotations from the classics and lavish descriptions that go on and on until it seems the narrator has explored every nook and cranny of a room or street — or a cathedral — and made it all dazzlingly real.

Hugo uses his exhaustive knowledge of history as the backdrop for his tale, not its source. We encounter a profusion of surprising details, such as the fact that the city of Paris was once confined to the walled Ile de la Cité (where Notre Dame was later erected), with the Seine as its moat, or that in the 15th century the St. Michel bridge was covered with houses. But Hugo allows himself the freedom to create *ex nihilo* characters whose conflicting desires and ideals are big enough to position them in the foreground of his vast canvas.

The character whose emotions and behaviors drive the story is not Quasimodo, the hunchback, but Dom Claude Frollo, the archdeacon. Hugo paints his "villain" as a man of lofty principles struggling with himself at every step along the path to perdition. Dom Claude supports both his wastrel brother, Jehan, whom he tries desperately to steer toward an honorable life, and the hunchback Quasimodo, whose own mother rejected him because of his deformities. Frollo believes — erroneously, as Hugo demonstrates — that the pursuit of "science," or knowledge as opposed to passion, should advance men toward goodness, and applies all his energies toward this goal. His struggle to dominate his passions becomes a war against his own being, with tragic results.

As its French title suggests, however, "Notre-Dame de Paris" is not just the story of a man. It is a tableau that aims to re-create a time and a place, at the center of which stands the magnificent church. Notre Dame is described as the sprawling, complex, irreducible product of myriad, often-conflicting architectural ambitions and thus becomes a symbol not only of its time but of Hugo's novel itself.

In all these ways, "Notre-Dame de Paris" defies 21st-century notions about what a historical novel should be. Most contemporary historical novels are based on biographies of people who really existed. Editors and teachers of writing warm aspiring novelists not to "drown" their narratives in research or provide too many details or digressions. Books like "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," though, written during the 19th-century heyday of the novel, were rich, heady concoctions in which philosophy, melodrama, essays on history, and satire all simmered together like leeks and oxtails in a savory pot-au-feu.

Not only did Victor Hugo provide reams of information tangential to his story, he employed an enormous vocabulary that is sometimes compared with Shakespeare's for its breadth and nuance. Today, in contrast, authors are instructed to avoid unusual words. Editors and publishers, including those who market books primarily to an educated readership, remind writers that simplicity is synonymous with literary elegance.

One of the hallmarks of Western culture, of course, is that it changes as technologies advance. Many of Bach's contemporaries resisted the well-

Mitchell James Kaplan picked up the new edition of 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame' to re-read. He was struck with awe.

And then he re-watched the movie. Of course, the book was better. *Way better.*

Not to knock cinema. It can be brilliant, too. *Vive la différence* and all that.

And yet: *Nothing* transports like an immersive novel.

tempered clavier, but it proved more durable than older tuning systems. As a result, baroque musicians were able to modulate (change keys) more readily than their Renaissance forebears. Music became quite complex ... until the classical revolution, led by Mozart and others, heralded a return to simplicity and elegance.

Similarly, the advent of a relatively new narrative technology — the movies — has affected the way we create and tell stories.

Movies, of course, owe a great deal to literature. The innovators of cinema translated tried-and-true literary devices into visual and auditory experiences that moved audiences to laughter, tears and wonderment in fairly predictable and sometimes profitable ways.

What the consumers of culture often

ignore, though, is that movies, in turn, have influenced literature, too.

The book publishing industry today is financially tethered to the movie industry. When movie producers believe a novel can be translated into a successful film, they pay handsomely for the rights, and if the resulting movie does become a hit, its success can lead to vastly increased sales of the book. Many editors therefore dream of acquiring novels that will be adapted into movies. Books by authors like Dan Brown and Michael Crichton, indeed, read like blueprints for films.

Novels, however, are not movies or even screenplays. A typical screenplay is only about a 120 pages long, double-spaced. Of all the words therein, only the dialogue makes it into the movie *as verbal information*. The other words on the page suggest to the director and cameraman what they are to shoot and to actors how they are to move and behave.

In a screenplay, dialogue is written with wide margins, down the center of the page. Movies therefore contain few words, compared with novels. And in order to be believable, dialogue must employ only commonly spoken language.

Novels, on the other hand, are *nothing but* verbal information. Those qualities of Hugo's "Hunchback" that make it different from most novels today — lengthy descriptions, sometimes going on for 20 pages or more; whole chapters of exposition; narrative digressions — are precisely the characteristics of 19th-century novels that rarely translate to film.

There are exceptions. A poetic movie that relies heavily on photography, design and creative editing, like F.W. Murnau's "Sunrise," David Lynch's "Eraserhead" or Godfrey Reggio's "Koyaanisqatsi" can certainly be called "descriptive." Movies like "Pulp Fiction" call attention to their use of digressive dialogue and storytelling. Such films, however, tend to be independent productions, challenging movie studio norms. And exposition per se almost never works in movies. Indiana Jones may nominally be a professor, but he spends little time lecturing, at least while on-camera.

Because most movies emphasize storytelling and characterization and de-emphasize description, digression and exposition, and because movies are (perhaps) the dominant form of storytelling within our culture, audiences have come to expect these qualities in all forms of narrative. Sensitive to the demands of their marketplace, editors and creative writing teachers reinforce these values.

What happens, then, when filmmakers try to translate a book like "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" into cinema? To find out, I re-read the most widely praised of the many movies based on Hugo's novel, the 1939 production starring Charles Laughton and

Maureen O'Hara.

The first thing I noticed (other than the inappropriate choral music that accompanies the opening credits) was that the characters I had visualized while reading the novel bore little resemblance to those in the movie — even though I had seen the movie years before. In casting Maureen O'Hara as La Esmeralda, for example, the filmmakers bowed to the studio requirement that the face of a screen star adorn the poster, rather than respecting the author's depiction of a naive, spirited teenager. Thus they destroyed her character and much of the story itself.

From there on, despite Laughton's memorable performance as Quasimodo, it is nearly all downhill. Unable to contain a rambling, multifaceted novel within the 90-minute movie paradigm, and clearly afraid of offending audiences with what might be perceived as the anti-church message of Hugo's tale, the adapters cut and pasted the scenes they thought most dramatic, misinterpreted characters and invented others, placed anachronistic, on-the-nose dialogue about the evils of racism and aristocracy in their mouths — and utterly ignored the author's intent. They reduced the complex, fascinating character of Frollo into a cliché movie villain. And again, this is generally considered the best of the film adaptations.

Of course, it is not fair to compare a classic novel with its disappointing cinematic derivative. Movies can be, and often are, moving and memorable. Nor would I claim that linear narrative, concision and simplicity are bad aesthetic values. The point is not that movies are evil or their influence pernicious, but that we should continue to cherish the different kinds of experiences that movies and novels can offer. As the French say, *vive la différence!*

With the digital age transforming all manner of media, Everyman's Library makes a good case for the printed book. It preserves classics in an affordable but collectible-quality format, with original introductions, authors' bibliographies and chronologies for those who desire context. Printed on smooth, acid-free paper, with silk ribbon markers and half-round spines, these volumes are conceived for readers who enjoy turning physical pages, sitting in an easy chair before the fireplace on a chilly evening. This new "Hunchback of Notre Dame" is an exquisite pleasure to hold and explore.

Fortunately, there is still room in our culture for competing aesthetics. Many contemporary authors still produce inventive, fecund, immersive novels. Readers consume them just as eagerly as other, equally worthwhile books whose focus may be more narrow or whose structure more disciplined. Book lovers still cherish, too, the great novels we have inherited from bygone times, despite changes in our culture and tastes.

Mitchell James Kaplan, a novelist living in Mt. Lebanon, has worked as a translator in France and a screenwriter in Los Angeles. His historical novel "By Fire, By Water" (Other Press) received the 2011 Independent Publishers Award Gold Medal for Historical Fiction and, last month, the Adelina Della Pergola Prize in Venice, Italy. He is at work on a second novel, set in Roman Judaea during the birth of Christianity and modern Judaism (mitchelljameskaplan.com).