

The Book that Changed My Life

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I began reading Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* when I was a sophomore in high school. It took me six months to read it all the way through, because the only copy I had was in my English teacher's classroom, and I would read it only when my classmates were working on assignments

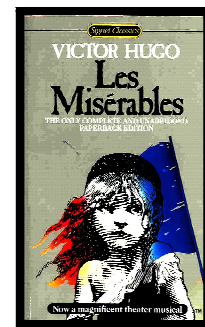
*"And remember
The truth that once was spoken,
To love another person
Is to see the face of God."
-Victor Hugo*

that I had was able to finish first. My interest in this book stemmed from the local production of the musical that many of my friends were participating in. I went to see the show, and I was so touched by the story line that I wanted to read the book.

Victor Hugo spent 33 years working on the book he wanted to change society with, and it changed me in the course of six months.

How could I read about the tragedies of Fantine, Eponine, and Gavroche without being forced to reexamine my life? Hugo's words that penetrated the pages with black ink that smudged my thumbs dispelled complacency in me, and I could never return to the person I was before reading his book.

Les Miserables examines the eternal conflict between justice and mercy. I now own my own copy of the book, and the pages are marked and notated in the same way my scriptures are. There is so much power and truth in Hugo's words. I was young when I first read it, but I think that is precisely the reason it had so much impact on me. I was trying to figure out who I was. At sixteen, I was much too old to be relying on my parent's perspective of the world, but too young to understand how I wanted to see things on my own. *Les Miserables* gave me deep questions to think about and forced me to answer them for myself. Is justice the better good? Or is mercy the right choice? I began to examine how I looked at the world, and how I treated those around me.



In Hugo's character of the kind bishop, I saw a reflection of the type of person I wanted to become. Gentle, merciful, self-sacrificing. And in Javert, the personification of justice, I discovered the frightening question of whether full justice really can be considered good. I cried when Javert threw himself into the River Seine, because he was unable to live with the fact that mercy had been given to him by the man he had given only justice. I found parallels to the Savior in Valjean's sacrifice of himself to save the innocent man who was to be condemned for a crime that Valjean committed. I learned about grief, suffering, and the power of love to change the world.

Les Miserables also taught me about the power of the written word. For example, how else would I learn about humanity and suffering than from reading the memory and words of a Victor Hugo? I did not live during the French Revolution. I never knew Bonaparte. But because he was willing to write these things down, because he was willing to trust that his words would be valuable to someone else in the world, I was able to learn and experience these things that changed my view of the world forever.