

Arno

*The Hunchback of
Notre-Dame*

VICTOR HUGO
Translated by Walter J. Cobb

Level 3

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Contents

	page
Introduction	v
Chapter 1 A Day of Surprises	1
Chapter 2 Broken Hearts and Broken Lives	11
Chapter 3 Evil Thoughts and Evil Actions	20
Chapter 4 One Honest Heart	28
Chapter 5 Together in Death	41
Activities	54

Introduction

Father Claude named the poor child Quasimodo and gave him a home in the cathedral. The boy could not exist in the outside world, but with the priest's help he made a life inside the walls of Notre-Dame.

The idea for one of his greatest books, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, came to Victor Hugo when he was still in his twenties, on a visit to the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. This wonderful church excited the young writer and he placed it at the center of the action. It plays an important part in the lives of the three main people in the book: Quasimodo, the hunchback; Esmeralda, the beautiful gypsy girl; and Father Claude Frollo, the lost priest. It is a sanctuary and a prison for all of them.

As a young priest, Claude Frollo finds his life's work in the cathedral. It is a sanctuary where he can study and work. He becomes a proud, successful churchman. But suddenly, after many years, he feels a need to escape from his life as a priest. Notre-Dame has become a prison that stops him finding love.

The cathedral is a prison for Quasimodo, too, because he cannot live outside it. He is ugly and different, and people are afraid of him. He is safe and happy inside its walls with Father Claude and with the great bells of Notre-Dame. But he also wants more from life.

The hunchback and the priest exist together in the cathedral until Esmeralda arrives. Without knowing it, the gypsy girl brings pain and suffering into their quiet lives. Notre-Dame also plays a large part in her story. It offers her sanctuary, but is also a prison. Death waits for her outside.

In English, this book is known as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. For most modern readers, this is a good title. Quasimodo is the person in the story that we remember most clearly. He has

problems and pain that we can understand. We want him to find happiness, but is this possible in his dark, lonely world?

Victor Hugo was born in 1802 in Besançon, France. He lived through an exciting time in the history and literature of his country.

Victor's father was a soldier who became a general under Napoleon. The young boy traveled with him until he was ten. After that his mother kept her three sons in Paris and put them in good schools. Victor was an excellent student and at seventeen he won an important prize for his poems. He received money from the government of King Louis XVIII after he wrote his first complete book of poems in 1822.

In that year, he also married Adèle Foucher. Their home became a meeting place for young French writers from the Romantic school of writing. This group wanted to change French literature by moving away from the style of the past. They wanted their stories, their plays, and their poems to show the importance of strong feelings. People's lives were more important to these writers than big ideas. Their imagination guided them, but they also used history. By describing important times in the history of their countries, these writers made their work more serious and more interesting to a large number of people.

Victor Hugo's two most popular books in English follow the ideas of this group of Romantic writers. *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) is about three people's lives, but it also tells the reader a lot about life in Paris in 1482. *Les Misérables* (1862), also a Penguin Reader, follows the life of one man, Jean Valjean. This time, the reader learns a lot about France in the early years of the 1800s.

In France, Victor Hugo is remembered for his many books and plays, and also as a politician. But more than anything, Hugo is remembered in his own country as one of the greatest writers of

poems of all time. When he died in 1885, the French government remembered his life at a state service. After this special service, three million people followed his body to its final resting place.

Why does *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* continue to be popular in the English-speaking world? First, the story and the people are important to us. Quasimodo is different from other people and he has suffered. But we believe there is room in the world for someone like him. His feelings are strong and true, and we want happiness for him. We also understand Esmeralda's life. Until the last minute, we hope that she will escape from her terrible problems.

Second, the story is exciting. There is good and evil, love and hate, life and death. Some people are kind and others are bad, but they are all real. We understand their actions. We want to find out how their stories will end.

Sometimes writers have changed Victor Hugo's ending to the story. There have been five different movies of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. The first one came out in 1923. The Disney company made a movie in 1996. Try to see it after you read this book. It is interesting to compare the two endings. Which one do you think is better?