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The Hunchback of Notre Dame

Victor Hugo (1802 – 1885)

Read by: Mark Nelson Length: 21 hours and 46 minutes
 Language: English Style: Solo
 Genre (s): Fiction, Poetry

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Hunchbacks. We stare. We cringe. We shudder. We think: the poor guy; glad that’s not me. Whether we’ve read, heard of, or have seen *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* in one of its many adaptations, the ineluctable image of the “monster with a good heart” is a window on a life not tethered to concerns of fashion, status, and power. Victor Hugo liked to turn the world on its head, much as the Parables of Jesus do. Appearance, be it physical, social, or the unquestioned acceptance of the unexamined priest, ultimately misleads. Things aren’t what they seem. Good turns out to be bad. Bad turns out to be good. On another level Hugo posits the inevitable conflict between the order imposed from above to placate angry gods (or God), with its concomitant benefits of power and position, versus those troublesome urges within that are not only part and parcel of life, but the very flowering of life itself. It’s hard to imagine a God who doesn’t need an army of arrogant, power-based, celibate men to keep the rabble in check. He doesn’t. And here, it’s the monstrous Quasimodo, who elevates lust to love, who shows that allowing the human to be human (as we allow “monsters” considerable freedom to be themselves) will yield an order that doesn’t require the strictures of church or state. Love, which is life, is holy, the substance of our best selves, as fully present in the babe as in the adult, no matter his or her appearance or conventional wisdom concerning same.

Victor Hugo (February 26, 1802 - May 22, 1885) was a French novelist, poet and playwright considered one of the greatest writers of all time. Worldwide he is best known for his novels *Les Misérables* (1862) and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831). In France, he is known primarily for his poetry, especially his collections *The Contemplations* and *The Legend of the Ages*. Hugo was an early and influential voice in the Romantic Movement, achieving recognition with his plays, five volumes of poetry between 1829 and 1840 in addition to his novels. He was born the youngest of three boys to a free-thinking republican and high-ranking officer in Napoleon’s army and his Catholic royalist wife. His childhood coincided with a period of intense political turmoil that was reflected in the opposing political and religious sentiments of his parents. After years of following her husband to postings, his mother separated shortly after Victor’s birth and settled in Paris with her children. Her devotion to King and Faith dominated his upbringing; unsurprisingly, Hugo was a committed royalist as a young man. His views shifted over time, and he became a champion of Freethought and Republicanism, spurred by the events of the 1848 Revolution. Hugo left France in 1851 after Napoleon III’s coup d’etat, settling in the Channel Islands of Jersey in 1852 and then Guernsey in 1855, where he lived until 1870, when returned to France after Napoleon III fell from power. His work was immensely popular, always on the cutting edge of artistic trends and dealing directly with the issues and events of his time. His many honors include his portrait on French currency and his burial in the Pantheon in Paris.