

*Les Misérables*, a classic, everyone's heard of at least the musical, which is one of the most famed in existence. All know of Jean Valjean's struggles to escape the binding shackles of the title Prisoner 24601, with some of the best musical numbers to grace our ears, yet less know that it is based on the 19th Century book by Victor Hugo. Many classics however, can be bores, overrated, or dated. Does *Les Misérables* hold up today? You bet it does.

Unlike the musical, we pick up following the Bishop Myriel, a very selfless catholic priest. The start isn't really too engaging, and it took a bit of effort to push through the overwhelming wordiness and disinterest, but it is well worth it for the masterpiece that follows.

We then see a brief history of Jean Valjean's life, our protagonist. We see him and his sister's struggle with crippling poverty, all leading up to Valjean stealing a loaf of bread. He is caught and sentenced to five years in prison, which quickly escalates to nineteen after he tries to escape multiple times. The story gives a quick show of his prison life, before picking up at his release, in which he meets our antagonist, Inspector Javert.

Javert is a highlight of the book. His character is incredibly interesting and he is never painted as a bad person, because he isn't, he is merely misguided. He believes strongly in the law and it is for that reason that he ends up as the antagonist, regarding Valjean.

Being an ex-convict on permanent parole, Valjean is shunned by all. All, except the Bishop from earlier. He brings him in, feeds him, gives him a warm bed to sleep in, but desperate, in the dead of night, Valjean steals all of the valuable silver cutlery belonging to the Bishop and flees, but not long before being caught by the police and brought back to face the Bishop. However he says that it was a gift and in fact gives Valjean his last remaining silver, a pair of candlesticks. This act of extraordinary kindness causes an intense epiphany, which causes Valjean to break parole, start anew and begin his path to benevolence.

The book includes many other characters, such as Cosette, Valjean's adopted daughter who he rescues from an abusive home later on in the book, and who becomes our secondary protagonist. These two have such perfect father-daughter chemistry and their relationship is such a joy to read about. These two characters in themselves are amazing and that is one of the greatest things about this book, the characters.

Now, Valjean has next to no flaws, which seems like a bad thing. But he's no Mary-Sou. He has the best, most believable flaws and motivations and instead of making him the perfect man you hate, he's the perfect man you strive to be, and is a role model to all of us.

One of this books' greatest strengths is its ability to create an environment. With just a few sentences, you truly feel as if you're sitting by the fireplace with Valjean and Cosette, listening to them converse about burned bread. Victor Hugo's talent in this regard is outstanding and this book absorbs you to the extent that you'll forget everything else. It's masterful.

I've barely scratched the surface as this book is over one thousand pages and has a long winding plot that cannot be summarized reasonably. Do yourself a favour and find yourself a copy of this book. The characters are amazing, the environments are vivid, the setting is beautiful and so much more. Is it better than the musical? Honestly, I love them both equally for different merits. But if there is one thing I can say - this book is a masterpiece.