

# **The Invention of Hugo Cabret Study Guide**

**The Invention of Hugo Cabret by Brian Selznick**

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## Plot Summary

“The Invention of Hugo Cabret” is a young adult mystery novel by Brian Selznick, told in both words and pictures. The novel revolves round 12-year-old orphan, Hugo Cabret, who lives in an old apartment above a train station in Paris, where he tends to the 27 clocks in the building each day. It is explained that Hugo’s father perished in a fire before the novel begins, and it is Hugo’s uncle who brought him to work as an Apprentice Timekeeper in the train station, though Hugo’s uncle also subsequently died before the novel begins. Hugo, for fear of being thrown out, carries on work as if his uncle is still there.

Hugo, like his father and uncle, is very gifted with mechanical skill. Hugo has been stealing toys from the old man who runs the toy booth at the station, hoping to use the parts to fix an automaton Hugo’s father had discovered in an old museum attic. Hugo’s father explained to him that automatons are mechanical devices designed to look like people or animals, that carry out specific functions or do specific tricks, usually to impress the audiences of magicians. The automaton that Hugo’s father discovered is designed to write. Both father and son are very interested in repairing and seeing what the machine may write, but Hugo’s father died before his work could be completed. However, Hugo keeps a notebook from his father with written observations and detailed drawings about the automaton, hoping to complete his father’s work, and imagining his father may have changed it so the automaton will spell out an entirely new message for Hugo from his father.

One day, the old man catches Hugo stealing from him and orders Hugo to turn out his pockets. The old man is especially interested in the notebook, stunned by its contents, and will not give it back to Hugo. The old man’s goddaughter, 12-year-old Isabelle, seeks to befriend Hugo, and vows to get the notebook back. The old man, Papa Georges, explains to Hugo that he may earn the notebook back if he works off the cost of all the items he has stolen. Hugo reluctantly agrees. However, he soon discovers he does not need the notebook to repair the automaton, for he can do it himself. He notices that there is one thing missing from the automaton: a heart-shaped key which will start it. He discovers that Isabelle wears such a key on a necklace, and he steals it from her. Later, as Hugo is about to start the automaton, Isabelle barges in, and though angry, is more interested to see the automaton work. But rather than write, the automaton draws a beautiful picture of the moon, and Hugo recognizes it as a scene from his father’s favorite movie. The automaton signs the drawing with the name Georges Melies – Isabelle’s godfather. Both children are stunned.

Hugo turns to an older friend he meets through Isabelle, Etienne, who studies and works at the French Film Academy, to help him research old films. Hugo borrows a book from the Academy’s library, which reveals the scene the automaton draws is from a film by Georges. Etienne, and his professor, Rene Tabard, go to visit Georges, having believed that he died years before. They are thrilled he is still alive. Georges reluctantly confesses the truth about his past: the he began work in his parents’ shoe factory, was impressed by the mechanical devices within it, later sold his share of the factory to



become a magician and to build automatons, and eventually got into film. The entire time, his wife, Jeanne, was his best friend, closest companion, and muse. For Georges, film was about creating beauty and dreams. But after World War I, things changed for him. Competition in the film industry increased, and the death of close friends – Isabelle's parents, her father being a cameraman for Georges – caused him to turn his back on the film industry. He burned nearly everything related to his past, except the automaton, which was donated to a museum where it was discovered years later by Hugo's father. Georges has since been sad and without purpose in life.

Six months later, things have changed dramatically for both Georges and Hugo. Georges and Jeanne have taken Hugo in, and with a grant from the Film Academy, things have improved. Georges is honored and celebrated for his work, and it appears as if he will again begin work in film. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that all of the words and drawings contained within the book have been created by an automaton designed by Hugo himself.



# A Very Brief Introduction – Part 1, Chapter 2

## Summary

A Very Brief Introduction - Professor H. Alcofrisbas explains that the reader is about to meet a boy named Hugo Cabret, and that his story unfolds in 1931 in Paris, France, having once discovered a mysterious drawing that would change his life. Alcofrisbas explains that, as the reader turns the page, they will see Hugo moving through a crowded train station, and that the reader should approach the book as though the reader was watching a movie.

Part 1, Chapter 1 – It is the winter of 1931. A boy named Hugo Cabret moves through a crowded Paris train station, makes his way down a deserted corridor, and sneaks into an air vent. He carries a small notebook in his pocket. Inside the vents, he climbs through the station to a massive grandfather clock, from which he looks out through the number five at a toy seller's shop stall. The seller, an old man, glances at the clock, awaiting the arrival of a young girl. The girl always arrives at the toy booth with a book under her arm. That day, the old man and the girl seem to be arguing, and Hugo wonders if it is because the old man has discovered some of his stock is missing. Hugo, it is explained, needs the toys he has stolen. The girl eventually leaves, not wanting to argue anymore.

Eventually, the old man appears to fall asleep. When he does, Hugo creeps down to steal more toys, but the old man awakens and catches Hugo. He calls for the Station Inspector, and demands Hugo empty his pockets, which Hugo does to reveal everything from screws and nails to clock gears and wheels. Of specific interest to the old man is the notebook Hugo carries. One page in particular catches the old man's attention. It is a drawing of a mechanical man. The old man demands to know if Hugo has drawn the pictures or stolen the notebook, but Hugo says that he did not. The old man will not return the notebook when Hugo demands it, and expresses discontent about ghosts eventually finding him. He threatens to burn the notebook if Hugo does not tell him about how he came into possession of it, but Hugo calls the old man a thief instead, before running off.

Part 1, Chapter 2 – Hugo rushes back into the air vents, and winds his way through various passages to a series of upstairs apartments, originally constructed for people who ran the train station, but have since long been abandoned, except for one. It is full of toys stolen by Hugo, an old bed, and a small table of uncashed paychecks for his uncle. Hugo works at the station, repairing clocks. All of them are repaired from the inside, and it is precise, mechanical work that Hugo excels at. He looks out through the clock inside the Station Inspector's office, to find the jail cell inside, empty. He reflects on having seen people, young and old, in the cell before, and then never seeing them again. He then moves on to adjust the final clock, which is near the toy booth.



Altogether, Hugo must keep 27 clocks running, all of them made of brass, as his uncle taught him to do.

## Analysis

When Brian Selznick's young adult novel, "The Invention of Hugo Cabret" begins, Hugo Cabret is a 12-year-old orphan who has taken it upon himself to repair and keep the clocks in a Paris train station running after the death of his father, and the disappearance of his uncle. Hugo is introduced by Professor H. Alcofrisbas, though there is no explanation given as to who Alcofrisbas himself is, or what connection he might have with Hugo. It is just one of several mysteries which are subsequently revealed in the first few chapters. As a result, the theme of mystery is introduced immediately -both in the form of what it is that Hugo is seeking toy parts for, why he is an orphan at the train station, and why the notebook is so important to Hugo.

Of paramount importance to Hugo is that same notebook, full of technical drawings and notes about an automaton, or mechanical man, that Hugo has hidden in his apartment. The old man discovers the notebook, and asks a number of questions that Hugo refuses to answer, which include how it was he came into possession of the notebook. Compounding the mystery surrounding the notebook is the old man's saddened claim that ghosts will find him no matter where he goes. As such, the old man refuses to return the notebook to Hugo, threatening to burn it if Hugo does not reveal the truth about its nature and how he came into possession of it. Hugo doggedly attempts to get the notebook back, but to no avail. This further deepens the aura of mystery that so far pervades the novel.

The reader is also given a glimpse of Hugo as Hugo carries out his daily work: repairing and maintaining all 27 clocks at the train station, accessible only by secret passages, known about only by a few people. Among these is the dreaded Station Inspector, whom Hugo fears will find out the truth about him and his uncle. One can see, as Hugo goes about his work, that he is mesmerized and enraptured by working on mechanical things; yet, for all the pride Hugo takes in his ability to work well with them, he is not happy at all. Much of this undoubtedly stems from the death of his father, the disappearance of his uncle, and his day-to-day struggle to survive by having to steal the food he eats, but the reader supposes that an existence in the shadows repairing clocks is not what Hugo wants to do with the rest of his life.

## Discussion Question 1

Brian Selznick's young adult novel is one that is full of mysteries. From the start, mysteries arise. What are some of these mysteries? Based on the reading so far, what might be the truth to these mysteries?



## Discussion Question 2

What appears to be one of Hugo's most important possessions? What about the notebook interests the old man at the toy shop so much?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you believe the old man is justified in his threats of burning Hugo's notebook? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

mysterious, cautiously, illumination, accumulating, miniature



# Part 1, Chapter 3 – Part 1, Chapter 7

## Summary

Part 1, Chapter 3 – Hugo approaches the old man as he closes up shop. He tells Hugo he hates the sound of heels clicking on the floor. He tells Hugo to stay away from him, or he will bring Hugo to the Station Inspector's jail, himself. Hugo wants his notebook back, but the old man again says he will burn it. It is snowing outside, and Hugo follows the old man, demanding the notebook be returned. The old man tells Hugo to stop clicking his heels on the streets, and that he hopes the snow will cover everything so no heels click. Hugo continues to follow the old man, through a graveyard and across the street, to an old, run-down apartment. The old man says that clicking boot heels can summon ghosts, and then goes inside.

Part 1, Chapter 4 – Hugo is cold standing outside, but does not want to give up. He throws a pebble at a window, but instead of the old man appearing at the window, it is the young girl. She puts a finger to her lips to tell him to be quiet, and then slips outside. Hugo tells her that her grandfather stole her notebook. She responds that the old man, whom she calls Papa Georges, isn't her grandfather, and that Hugo is the real thief. She tells him she has seen him steal before. She wrestles him to the ground to get him to be quiet. She asks why the notebook is so important, but Hugo refuses to tell her. She promises that she will make sure Papa Georges does not burn the notebook, and that Hugo should ask for it the following day. Hugo reluctantly gives in, and goes home.

Part 1, Chapter 5 – Hugo returns home, and heads into his secret room. He pulls out a large, wrapped object hidden in the wall, and uncovers it. It is an uncompleted mechanical man, built from clock pieces and mechanical parts. Hugo reflects on his father first telling him about the mechanical man, and how the mechanical man would become central to Hugo's own life. Hugo's father, a clockmaker and repairman, took care of the clocks in an old-museum, and one night, he tells Hugo about an intricate, beautiful piece of machinery in the museum attic, called an automaton –windup figures which perform tricks. Hugo's father explains that no one knows how the automaton got into the attic, and Hugo's father explains that he believes the automaton he had found can write, but the automaton is currently in a bad state of repairs.

Hugo's father goes on to explain that automatons are mainly used by magicians in their shows, to amaze audiences. The automatons are very similar to clocks, and Hugo believes his father has the power to make the mechanical man he has discovered work again. Hugo's father does not know if it is possible. Hugo himself has the desire to see if the automaton can be fixed, for from a young age, Hugo, like the other men in his family, had the skill to fix clocks. Hugo also has the ability to create little animals out of spare clock parts. Hugo asks to see the automaton, so his father shows him the mechanical man a few nights later. Hugo is amazed, and encourages his father to fix the automaton. His father decides to try.





As Hugo's father disassembles the automaton in the museum attic to repair it, he makes careful and precise drawings and notes. Both father and son become obsessed with getting the automaton to work, and seeing what message it may write out once it is completed. One night, the museum guard accidentally locks Hugo's father in the attic. A fire breaks out, which no one knows the source of, and Hugo's father is killed. Hugo blames himself for the death of his father, for he has insisted his father repair the automaton. Hugo is taken in by his Uncle Claude, who vows to train the boy in the art of clocks as an Apprentice Timekeeper, in the family tradition of horology –clock making. Hugo has considered becoming a magician, but decides against this as his uncle is determined to make him a clockmaker.

Uncle Claude is a strict, but fair, master clockmaker and repairman who lives and works at the train station. Hugo revels in learning how to make clocks run, and imagines he himself is full of mechanical parts. However, food is scarce, so Uncle Claude teaches Hugo how to steal, which Hugo hates. Claude often goes out late at night, but eventually, stops coming back. Hugo decides to leave the train station, and ends up at the burned-down museum, where he discovers the automaton in the wreckage. Hugo picks up the broken automaton, and decides to return to the train station to live, for he has nowhere else to go. A voice inside Hugo tells him to fix the mechanical man, and he decides to at least try, so that if the man is fixed, Hugo will not be so alone.

In order to make it seem like his uncle is still around, Hugo continues repairing and setting the station clocks, and takes his uncle's paychecks when no one is around. Three months have since passed, and Hugo is more determined than ever to fix the automaton and see what message it may write. He believes that his father may have altered the mechanisms, so that the automaton would write a different note than originally intended, one meant just for Hugo. But to do this, he needs his notebook back.

Part 1, Chapter 6 – The next morning, Hugo meets the old man as he arrives at the toy stall. He hands Hugo a handkerchief full of ashes, and Hugo is horrified and nearly cries. Instead, he attacks the old man, who demands to know why the notebook is so important. Hugo begins to cry, and leaves to begin work. He is so sad that he even considers turning himself in to the Station Inspector. He is stopped only by the thought of losing the mechanical man, which is too much for him to bear. After work, to calm down, Hugo draws pictures of the automaton, over and over. He then goes to bed. The next morning, Hugo buys some coffee, and then sets about stealing only things people do not need, such as clothes from the lost-and-found, and day-old bread in the garbage. Hugo receives a note which tells him to be at the bookseller's on the other side of the station, and that the notebook wasn't burned.

Part 1, Chapter 7 – Hugo goes to the bookstore, owned and operated by R. Labisse, as instructed. The smell of books reminds him of his old life, when he used to attend school. He wonders how his best friends, Antoine and Louis, are doing. He also wonders if they miss him. He also remembers his father reading Jules Vern and Hans Christian Andersen to him. It is then that he sees the little girl, who confirms that the old man, Papa Georges, still has the notebook, and is trying to trick Hugo. She has been



reading a book on photography, and explains she is helping Hugo because she wants to know what is in the notebook.

Hugo confronts the old man about the notebook. He tells Hugo that the notebook was not burned, but it will never be returned. Hugo tries several times over the next few days to get the notebook back, only to be turned away each time. Finally, the old man instructs Hugo to sweep around the stall with a broom, and then gives Hugo money to buy them both coffee and croissants. After they eat, the old man puts a broken windup toy mouse – accidentally crushed by Hugo during his first encounter with the old man – in front of him, and tells Hugo to fix it. Hugo carefully and successfully reassembles the mouse. The old man is impressed, and tells Hugo that the notebook, perhaps, can be earned back for the price of the items Hugo has stolen. Hugo argues that he has another job, but the old man tells him thievery is not work. Hugo nevertheless consents to coming back the next day to work for the old man.

## Analysis

The confrontations between Hugo and the old man over Hugo's notebook continue on in the next few chapters. Hugo is unfazed by the old man's refusals, and dogged in his determination to get the notebook back. Hugo, who has only ever been able to rely on himself, truly, since the death of his father, finds an unexpected source of help from the old man's goddaughter, who remains nameless until the eighth chapter of Part 1 of the book. The little girl, who is about Hugo's age, promises that she will not let her godfather burn the notebook; she is, however, vastly intrigued by what it contains for all the value that Hugo has attached to it. The reader suspects that the value of the notebook may not necessarily be for its contents, alone: there might be an emotionally intrinsic value to the notebook for Hugo as well. This will be borne out in later chapters as the themes of purpose and dreams come to the fore.

Dreams are incredibly important here. The notebook, it turns out, is the work of Hugo's father, who first discovers the automaton that ultimately becomes the central focus of Hugo's world. Hugo's father, having discovered the mechanical man in an old museum attic, is determined to repair the device at the insistence of his son – but a fire claims his life, and Hugo blames himself for his father's death. The emotional intrinsic value Hugo attaches to the notebook is plain: It is all he has left of his father, and the threats of the old man by way of burning the notebook essentially pour salt into an open wound for Hugo, for his father has died in a fire. Furthermore, the notebook appears to be the key to Hugo's existence, for Hugo believes the notebook is the key to the automaton. It becomes Hugo's dream to restore the automaton -and in so doing becomes his purpose.

Meanwhile, the little girl confirms – much to Hugo's relief – that the notebook has not been burned, but rather that the old man, Papa Georges, is trying to play a trick on him. Hugo decides that he will approach the old man once more in an effort to retrieve his notebook, but the old man has a fair bargain for Hugo: work off the cost of the stolen



goods, and the notebook will be returned. It will complicate Hugo's schedule, but Hugo is desperate to get the notebook back, and so agrees to the arrangement.

There is something to be said for honesty and secrets, it would seem. Hugo has a great share of secrets, adding to the theme of mystery, to which only he and the reader are privy. These secrets are so integral to Hugo's existence that he cannot even talk about a notebook with the old man or the little girl. Inadvertently, the old man reveals that he has secrets as well, for the notebook brings ghosts to his mind, and he clearly understands the contents of the notebook to be so shaken up by it, and to demand answers of Hugo about the notebook. Interestingly enough, it is the old man who gives Hugo a lesson in honesty, when he expects that Hugo perform honest work to account for the accrual of stolen toys from the old man's stall. The work that Hugo performs for the old man will not be in the shadows, but in the broad light of day. The old man senses something promising in Hugo, it appears, but what that is, is not yet revealed. As Hugo awaits events to turn in his favor, he commits to repairing clocks and keeping time - the task for which he has been trained. Yet, for Hugo, times seems to have come to stand still - around himself, and around the automaton - for his father is dead and his uncle is disappeared. His purpose appears to have disappeared, just as with the purpose of the automaton. His father and his uncle made things better for him in many ways, and defined his purpose through time - but without them, time no longer matters to Hugo, beyond taking care of the clocks.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the truth behind Hugo's notebook? What are the reasons that it is so important to him?

## Discussion Question 2

Do you believe the bargain the old man strikes with Hugo to work to earn the notebook back, and to defray the cost of the stolen goods, is fair? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Why are the secrets Hugo keeps so important to him? What are these secrets? What does he fear may happen if they get out?

## Vocabulary

adjusted, decrepit, interlocking, summon, instinctively, cluttered, frayed, automaton, complicated, artificial, vaguely, horologist, jagged, intricate, bustle



## Part 1, Chapter 8 – Part 1, Chapter 12

### Summary

Part 1, Chapter 8 – Hugo begins working for the old man at the toy booth in the hopes of getting his notebook back. He is enticed by the sheer number of gears and mechanical parts around him, and cannot resist stealing a few. The old man plays cards while Hugo works, and it reminds Hugo of the card tricks his own father used to show him. Hugo is amazed by the tricks the old man can do with the cards, and asks to be taught how to do the same things. The old man refuses to tell him.

Hugo later meets the little girl at the bookstore. She tells him she has been looking for his notebook. She thinks she knows where it is being kept. Hugo tells her not to look inside if she finds it, and the little girl asks him why he is being so mean, but Hugo again presses her not to look inside the notebook. Just then, a young man with an eye-patch, named Etienne, walks into the shop, and says hello to the little girl, who, it turns out, is named Isabelle. She introduces Hugo as her friend to Etienne, who works at a nearby movie theater, and sneaks Isabelle in because Papa Georges won't let her see movies. Etienne explains that he always helps people who love movies. Hugo tells them that he saw a movie with his father for his birthday, called "Safety Last" with Harold Lloyd. Etienne is leaving to visit family for a few days, but will be back at work on Tuesday, and promises to sneak both Isabelle and Hugo into the theater.

Isabelle then leaves with a book on Greek mythology, and Etienne goes to look for a book. Hugo decides to stick around the shop as well, looking at all the books. He comes across a volume on card tricks and magic. Hugo decides to steal the book, but Etienne sees him, and gives him money to pay for it instead. Etienne explains he lost his eye while playing with fireworks as a little boy.

Part 1, Chapter 9 – Hugo spends most of the night reading, studying, and memorizing the card trick book, and learning the tricks and magic inside. He also thinks back to his introduction to Etienne, when Isabelle told Etienne that Hugo was her friend. Before going to bed, Hugo studies the mechanical man, and fixes part of the man's arm socket. He is thrilled, because for the first time, he believes it may be possible to fix the mechanical man without the notebook. As the days pass, Hugo spends most of his time working –either on the clocks, at the toy booth, or on the automaton.

A few days pass, and Hugo goes to meet Isabelle and Etienne at the theater. Isabelle explains that she doesn't know why Papa Georges and his wife, Mama Jeanne, refuse to let her see any movies. She goes on to explain that they are her godparents, and took her in when her own parents died when she was a baby. Both of them are incredibly kind, except about movies. As they wait for Etienne, they learn from the manager that he has been fired for sneaking children into the movies. Isabelle picks a lock to a back door at the theater, and reveals she learned how to do it in a book. Hugo



is amazed. They go into a theater, and await the movie. Hugo is entranced by the sound of the projector and the bright white lights on the screen.

The afternoon begins with newsreels that range from the Depression in America to the World's Fair in Paris that will be opening in a few months, to politics in Germany. They are followed by a cartoon about a clock store. Finally, the main feature, "The Million", directed by Rene Clair, begins. It is about an artist and a lost lottery ticket. At the end of the film, Isabelle and Hugo are caught and thrown out by the manager. Isabelle tells Hugo about all the movies that she loves, including the actors and actresses she admires.

Back at the station, Hugo is horrified to discover the Inspector looking at one of the clocks, and making notes. He panics, believing the Station Inspector has learned the truth about his uncle, and mentally curses himself for ever having gone to the movies instead of staying with the clocks. Isabelle can see how worried Hugo is, and presses him for answers. Hugo will not give any. She wants to know how they can be friends if Hugo knows everything about her, but she knows nothing about him. He runs away from her, and she pursues, but crashes into a traveler, and falls to the ground. Hugo stops and goes back to help her up, at which time it becomes apparent she is wearing a heart-shaped key necklace. He asks her where she got it, but she refuses to tell him if he will not tell her where he lives. He asks again, and again, she refuses, asking instead why he is so interested in the key. They end up staring at each other instead.

Part 1, Chapter 10 – The next morning, the old man accuses Hugo of breaking into his house to take the notebook. He is enraged, saying that he was going to return the notebook. He begins to cough, during which time Isabelle shows Hugo the notebook. She asks him quietly about the drawings inside, and Hugo tells her he told her not to look. He then hugs her, and flees.

Part 1, Chapter 11 – Hugo returns to his apartment, and pulls out the automaton. He has repaired all of the broken pieces, had dealt with rust, and had created a new outfit for the mechanical man. Even the pen the man holds is newly-created. In the middle of the man's back is a heart-shaped hole that is outlined in silver. Hugo, when hugging Isabelle, had managed to steal her heart-shaped key necklace, and now holds it in his hands.

Part 1, Chapter 12 – Hugo nervously inserts the key into the automaton's back. It fits perfectly. Just before he can turn the key, Isabelle bursts into the apartment. Hugo tells her to get out; she refuses, and the two of them wrestle to a standstill. Hugo admits that he lives where Isabelle now stands. She recognizes the automaton from the notebook, and Hugo lies, telling her that his father designed it. She doesn't understand why her key would fit into his father's machine. Isabelle turns the key several times, but Hugo realizes the pen needs ink. Hugo puts an inkwell in the man's hand, and the machine moves beautifully. Both Hugo and Isabelle wait tensely as the machine works. The machine, however, does not write sentences – but merely disconnected lines, marks, and etchings. He demands his father's notebook from Isabelle, who hands it over, and Hugo hurriedly checks to see if he did something wrong. It turns out that the automaton



is not writing, but drawing. The complete piece is a beautiful etching of a moon with a face – an image that Hugo recognizes immediately.

As Part 1 ends, Professor H. Alcofrisbas posts a second brief note, in which he closes the first part of the book, and begins the second. Alcofrisbas explains that stories lead to other stories, and the coming story will lead to the moon.

## Analysis

As Hugo works for the old man, he begins to develop a different opinion of him. The old man knows some amazing card tricks, which he performs as if they were second-nature to him, so much so that he can perform them absentmindedly. Hugo is also amazed by the old man's skill with mechanical devices and parts, and he wonders how and why such a clearly talented person can be so mean. It ultimately leads to Hugo learning card tricks on his own, by way of a book Etienne gives him money to purchase. Etienne serves here as a reminder of the honesty that Hugo is learning from the old man.

At the same time that Hugo learns card tricks, he also comes to realize that he may be able to fix the mechanical man on his own, without the notebook. It would make sense to the reader, after all, that this should be possible: Hugo has repaired the blue mouse toy without instructions, and Hugo has had to rely on only himself for months to survive. Nevertheless, the honest, hard work that Hugo is doing for Georges, and the positive role model he now has in Etienne, as well as the friendship of Isabelle, are all pushing Hugo in a much better direction in life. He is still utterly secretive and guarded about his life, but his life is changing without him realizing it. The reader should pay careful attention to the heart-shaped key in this instance. A key is needed to activate the automaton; but this particular key happens to be heart-shaped. Hearts have long been equated with life and love - and the insertion of the heart-shaped key into the automaton is like giving the automaton a heart, which is key to its life. Restoring the automaton is not only a measure of purpose and a dream of Hugo's, but an act of love as well, which can itself be symbolized by the heart-shaped key.

Isabelle, especially, becomes a fixture in Hugo's life, refusing to leave him alone even when he wants to be left alone. Hugo's theft of Isabelle's heart-shaped key does not, interestingly enough, end their friendship, but brings them closer together. Indeed, it is Hugo's theft of the key that brings Isabelle right into his apartment to see the automaton. She has unwittingly come into the focal point of Hugo's world, and become a part of it by sharing in his deepest secret, despite the fact that he would rather not have had her there at all. She will, however, become his greatest ally and partner in the quest for the truth behind the automaton, and what it means.

This is especially important because allusions are also frequently made to time – and not just the act of keeping time. Time is running out, for the Station Inspector seems to realize that something is amiss, and Hugo realizes he is racing against the clock to uncover the truth behind the automaton – and this is why Isabelle will prove vital to him, though he does not yet understand this. It is only at the end of the first part that the



reader – as well as Hugo and Isabelle – discover that there is much more to the automaton than they could have ever imagined, for the mechanical man does not write, but draws. There is also a cryptic note from Professor Alcofrisbas, whose own relation to the story is still not revealed. Though some answers have been revealed through the working of the automaton, even more questions have been raised.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is so important to Hugo about the automaton? What does Hugo come to realize about the automaton, the notebook, and his own abilities? Does this influence the course of the plot? Why or why not?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What does Hugo steal from Isabelle? Why is this stolen item so important? What does it do? How does Isabelle react? Why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What does the automaton create? What mysteries does this in turn create? What possible answers could there be to these mysteries?

## **Vocabulary**

fascinated, illusions, diagrams, projectionist, anxiously, painstakingly, dexterity, yelped, calibrated, feverishly





## Part 2, Chapter 1 – Part 2, Chapter 7

### Summary

Part 2, Chapter 1 – The scene of the moon drawn on the paper by the automaton Hugo recognizes as a scene from his favorite movie as described by his father. He is convinced that his father has left him a message – but he does not know what it means. Hugo and Isabelle both watch in fascination as the automaton signs a name to the piece of artwork – that of Georges Melies, Isabelle’s godfather. Isabelle knows at once that Hugo has lied to her about the machine belonging to his father. Isabelle now believes that Hugo stole the automaton as well as the notebook. Hugo says the notebook was his father’s, and the automaton wasn’t stolen, but Isabelle does not believe him.

They struggle for the drawing, tearing it in half. Isabelle leaves with her half, saying she is going to Mama Jeanne for answers. Hugo follows her, knowing that he should be working on the clocks instead. He asks her about the key and where she got it, but she goes inside her house, accidentally crushing Hugo’s fingers, leading to him shouting and crying, and causing Mama Jeanne to see what is going on. She is surprised to see Hugo there, for Papa Georges has mentioned Hugo working for him at the stall. She begins to tend to Hugo’s injuries. He decides to ask her about the drawing, during which time Isabelle surrenders her half.

Mama Jeanne immediately knows what Hugo has in his possession. He tells her that he found the automaton, and did not steal it. It then becomes apparent to Mama Jeanne that Isabelle has stolen the heart-shaped key from her. But rather than scream, she tells the children to hide the drawing, and not let Papa Georges see it. She tells Isabelle to keep the key, but to take good care of it. The only thing she will tell the children is that she needs to protect her husband, and that she must forget about what she has seen – and that the children must not ever speak of it again.

Part 2, Chapter 2 – Hugo and Isabelle wait in an upstairs bedroom for Papa Georges to eat his dinner, after which time Mama Jeanne will bring him to the bathroom, and will allow Hugo to leave. As she tells them this, she glances at an armoire. It is enough to interest the children. When she leaves, they go through the armoire, which seems to be full of only clothes. But at the top, they find a decorative panel, which they remove to discover a large box with a heart-shaped keyhole. But as Isabelle struggles to bring the box down, the chair on which she is standing breaks, and she and the box fall. The box breaks, sending papers, covered with drawings, everywhere. Georges and Jeanne appear at the door an instant later.

Hugo is directed to clean up the drawings, which he notices are all signed by Georges. They are beautiful and elaborate. Georges, meanwhile, tries to destroy the drawings, but the children try to stop him. However, he cannot be detained. Jeanne intervenes while the children safely hide the drawings once more. The old man says that they





cannot be his drawings, for he is a penniless merchant, a prisoner, a shell, and a windup toy. He is beside himself, and Jeanne apologizes to him.

Part 2, Chapter 3 – In the kitchen, Hugo helps Isabelle ice her foot. Mama Jeanne appears, and the children ask her about the drawings. She quiets them, checks their wounds, and allows Hugo to spend the night on the couch until a doctor is summoned in the morning, for Papa Georges has developed a fever. When they are all asleep, Hugo takes Georges's keys from his coat pocket, and goes to the toy booth.

He looks through everything he can, finally finding a wrapped item in the back of a drawer. It is the blue windup mouse Hugo has fixed. He begins to wonder why the parts from the toys he has stolen in the past fit so well in the mechanical man. As he goes to leave, he sees one of Isabelle's books, which gives him an idea. He returns to his apartment to hide away the mechanical man with difficulty, due to his hand. He knows his job of keeping the clocks is now in peril, for he will not be able to do what must be done. That night, his dreams are of the past and the present, and end in nightmares of the Station Inspector reaching for him.

The next morning, Hugo does his best to tend to the clocks, but can barely wind them. He knows his time is running out. He goes to the bookstore, asking Monsieur Labisse for books about the very first movies ever made. He directs Hugo to the Film Academy Library.

Part 2, Chapter 4 – Hugo heads into the subway from the station for the Film Academy Library. The receptionist, Madame Maurier, tries to send Hugo away, telling him he is too dirty and unaccompanied by an adult, and so cannot enter. It is then that Etienne appears, and brings Hugo in, vouching for him. Etienne explains that since being fired, he has been working at the Film Academy, and taking classes to become a cameraman. He brings Hugo to the library, where Hugo sees a massive, beautiful painting of a person holding fire and projecting a beam of light from his index finger. He helps Etienne track down a book from the previous year, called "The Invention of Dreams: The Story of the First Movies Ever Made", by Rene Tabard.

Hugo learns that one of the first films ever shown was a short piece of a train coming into a station, during which time the people watching screamed and panicked because they believed the train was going to run them over. Eventually, Hugo comes across a still from his father's favorite film – "A Trip to the Moon" – by Georges Melies. The book explains that Georges was originally a magician, who got into film, and used film to illustrate the belief that film did not have to reflect real life, but could capture dreams. Georges is widely credited with perfecting the substitution trick, which makes it possible for things to appear or disappear in an instant on film. "A Trip to the Moon" is his most famous film. The book notes that most of his films are now lost, and that Georges himself is believed dead, having passed away sometime after the end of the Great War in 1918. Hugo tells Etienne that Georges is not dead, that he is Isabelle's godfather.

Part 2, Chapter 5 – Etienne arranges for Hugo to borrow the book on early films, and he spends hours reading and rereading it, until Isabelle shows up at his door. She is on



crutches, and her foot is heavily bandaged. She explains she has snuck out. She begins to cry, saying she is sorry for not telling her godparents the truth about who took the notebook, and for slamming Hugo's fingers, but she was mad at him for taking her key. She explains that Papa Georges's fever is very high, and he cannot work – so there is no money for medicine, food, or anything else.

Hugo tells her that everything will be alright, and then he shows her the book. Isabelle is amazed. Hugo tells her about the Film Academy Library and seeing Etienne. He goes on to explain that he invited Etienne and his teacher-author, Rene Tabard, to meet with Georges. Isabelle thinks it is a very bad idea. Hugo thinks it is a good idea, because there will be many people who are glad that Georges is alive. He goes on to explain the truth about the mechanical man, about his father finding the automaton in the museum attic, his uncle, and how he himself came to live in the train station apartments. Isabelle thanks him for telling her the truth.

Part 2, Chapter 6 – Hugo opens the toy booth for the old man, and sets to work running it. He wonders about the old man and what the old man thinks while building toys. Isabelle comes by after school to keep Hugo company, and tend to his bandages. She explains she routinely borrows books from Labisse, and has read the book she now has – on Greek mythology – at least twenty times. She tells Hugo about Prometheus creating humankind, and then stealing fire to give to man to survive, only to be agonizingly punished for the crime. Hugo wonders if the painting in the Film Academy Library is a version of Prometheus. Hugo also compares himself to Prometheus, wondering if he, too, will be punished for his thievery. He looks at the big clock on the wall, and wonders when it will stop running. He wants more out of life than running a store or repairing clocks.

Hugo pulls out the blue mouse toy Georges has kept, and Isabelle says it means he must like Hugo, because Georges has kept all the drawings she made him when she was little. It makes Hugo think about drawings and the automaton's purpose being for drawing. He believes that people, like machines, have purposes, and if they lose their purposes, they become broken in a way. Hugo and Isabelle both believe this is the case with Georges, and they want to fix him. Isabelle wonders what her own purpose might be. Hugo brings her up to the station tower, to the glass clocks the overlook the city. They are supposed to light up, but they have long since stopped working. They can see the whole city. It is beautiful. Hugo compares the whole world to a machine with intricate parts, and each part having a purpose. Hugo tells Isabelle that she, too, has a purpose. Hugo remembers a film he and his father had seen a year before, about time stopping in Paris, except for a few people. He wonders what it would be like for time to stop.

Part 2, Chapter 7 – It takes a week, but Hugo and Isabelle earn enough money for medicine for Georges. Hugo also sees a note has been left for his uncle by the Station Inspector, asking for a face-to-face meeting. Hugo prays that the truth can be avoided long enough for all of his questions about the automaton to be answered. The night before Etienne and Rene are to meet Georges, Hugo dreams of an accident at the Paris train station 36 years before, when a train's brakes fail, it derailed, and crashes through



the building. He wakes up, is unable to sleep, and steals some croissants to eat and waits for the meeting.

It is raining when Etienne, Rene, and Hugo arrive. Mama Jeanne is stunned by their presence. Isabelle tells her that they have discovered who Papa Georges is. Rene apologizes, believing that the meeting was expected, and says that he will return when requested. He explains he met Georges when he was a young boy, when his oldest brother was employed as a carpenter in many of Georges's early films. Rene often tagged along. On one such occasion, Georges told Rene that all of his dreams at night were made in the studio. He grew up wanting to make dreams, so he went into filmmaking. He now wants to thank George Melies for that gift. Etienne has discovered one of Georges's old films in the archives, and they have brought along a projector to play it. They do so at the request of Isabelle and Hugo. It is a scene of Georges in "A Trip to the Moon". They are all amazed. They discover that Georges himself has entered the room. Isabelle explains everything, from the automaton to the Film Academy. Georges brings the projector upstairs into his bedroom, and locks the door behind him.

## Analysis

Perhaps the greatest mystery that Hugo and Isabelle have encountered yet when it comes to the automaton is the fact that the mechanical man signs the picture that has been drawn with the name of Georges Melies – Isabelle's godfather. When Hugo asks Isabelle's godmother about the drawing, she is surprised but not angry, protective of her husband, but not scolding of the children. Nevertheless, she tells them they need to keep quiet about the things that they have found, for she must protect her husband. The reader is given to understand that the automaton must somehow be a painful part of Georges's past, but the children are only further intrigued by yet another new mystery, further adding to the theme of mystery in the novel.

However, when the revelation of the past is made apparent to Georges, he succumbs to fits of nervousness and takes to bed with a fever. Ironically, it is Hugo – later aided by Isabelle – who seeks to provide for Georges's medicine, not by stealing, but by working in an honest and open fashion at the toy booth at the train station. However, Hugo's preoccupation with Georges's health, and the toy stall, lead to him neglecting many of his own duties in timekeeping. For the first time in his life, it appears as if Hugo is thinking outside of himself, and on behalf of others – an entire family of people, which includes Isabelle and both her godparents. And he is providing for them in an honest and upright fashion, rather than resorting to thievery.

Hugo seeks further answers to the mysteries he has been confronted with. His search brings him to the Film Academy, where he is assisted in his search by Etienne, who has become a student and worker there. Hugo learns that Georges is actually a famous filmmaker, former magician, and automaton creator, who the world believes has died sometime after World War I, then known as the Great War. Etienne and his professor, Rene Tabard, are stunned, amazed, and thrilled that Georges is still alive. But, as one



mystery is solved, more questions are raised. The children wonder why Georges, despite his successful past, has shut it away, and is now working in a toy store.

This causes Hugo to reflect on the reasons and purposes that automatons have for existing. So too, Hugo reasons, do human beings have reasons and purposes for existing, and broken human beings can no longer do what they are meant to do, or when human beings can no longer do what they are meant to do, they become broken. This is an especially poignant scene and revelation in which Isabelle and Hugo discuss human nature and purpose. Hugo vows that they will restore Georges's purpose. Thus, the theme of purpose becomes clear, and Hugo's purpose, in part, becomes to help Georges find his own purpose once more.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the greatest mystery Hugo and Isabelle encounter by way of the automaton? When they ask Jeanne about this, what is her response? Why?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What does Hugo do in order to help Georges, Jeanne, and Isabelle when Georges is sick? What does this say about the evolution of Hugo's character?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What comparison does Hugo make between automatons and human beings? Do you believe this is a true observation? Why or why not?

## **Vocabulary**

dredge, divert, makeshift, grimacing, substitution, straggled, skeptical



## Part 2, Chapter 8 – Part 2, Chapter 12

### Summary

Part 2, Chapter 8 – Everyone waits outside Georges's door while Jeanne knocks and asks what he is doing. Suddenly, they all hear a loud crash. More sounds follow and everyone panics. Etienne and Rene try to force the door, but it will not open, so Isabelle picks the lock. Instead of destroyed furniture, they find George's drawings scattered all over the room, the panel on the armoire pried off. Georges sits at the desk in the center of the room as if he was the automaton himself.

He explains his parents wanted him to work in their shoe factory, but he hated the shoe factory, apart from the mechanical parts. So when he was old enough, he sold his share of the factory, bought a theater, and became a magician, using a special workroom to design things for the act, including the automaton, which audiences loved. When the Lumiere Brothers invented movies, he fell in love immediately and decided to go into film. They would not sell him a camera, so he built his own. His wife became his muse and his inspiration. He made hundreds of films that were loved.

Then, World War I broke out, and afterwards, competition in the film industry increased tremendously. During that time, a young cameraman and his wife, a teacher, were killed in a car accident, but their baby daughter, Isabelle, survived. Saddened and unable to compete in a rapidly expanding field, Georges sold his films to a shoe company, which turned them into shoe heels; and then he used the money to buy the toy stand, asking his wife to never again speak of his past, wanting to shut out the pain. He destroyed everything from his past, except the automaton, which was donated to the old museum, and never put on display. The only thing he kept was a heart-shaped key, which he gave to his wife.

Georges asks that the automaton be brought to him, and Hugo agrees to do so.

Part 2, Chapter 9 – Hugo rushes back to the train station, wondering how he'll be able to carry the automaton back to Georges with a hurt hand. While stealing some ice at the café in the station, he overhears the newspaper vendor, Frick, speaking with the café owner, Emile, about the body of the station timekeeper being found at the bottom of the Seine River. They wonder how the clocks have kept running for so long, and believe it must have been his ghost – but the disturbing of the body has disturbed the ghost, for the clocks are now beginning to break down. Emile suddenly spots Hugo, and realizes he is who has been stealing from her. Hugo runs to his apartment, and prepares to leave with the automaton, but is burst in upon by the Station Inspector, Frick, and Emile. The Inspector demands to know what is going on, seeing the uncashed paychecks, and Hugo makes his escape. The Inspector pursues him across the interior passages of the train station, until Hugo rushes out of an air vent and into a crowd of people. The Station Inspector continues his pursuit. Hugo is stopped by Frick and Emile, and then taken away by the Inspector, who tells Hugo he is going to prison.



Part 2, Chapter 10 – Hugo is put into the jail cell in the Station Inspector’s office. He then leaves, vowing to bring the police. He is worried about prison, and worried about what will become of the mechanical man. When the Inspector returns to bring Hugo to a waiting police car, Hugo makes a break for it. As Hugo flees, he crashes into a passenger, hurts his hand even worse, and tumbles onto the tracks and into the path of an oncoming train, but is saved by the Inspector. The Inspector prepares to hand Hugo over to the police. Hugo blacks out from the pain and terror.

When Hugo comes to, he sees stars, and realizes Isabelle is with him at the Station Inspector’s office, as is Georges. Georges defends Hugo, and tells Hugo to explain the truth to the Inspector. Hugo reveals the truth about himself and his uncle. Georges promises that payment will be made for the things Hugo has stolen, and then brings Hugo home. Hugo says that the automaton in the apartment is broken, having been dropped during the escape. Georges is not worried, knowing that he and Hugo can fix it. As they head home, Georges envelops both children in his cape – which has the shapes of stars on it.

Part 2, Chapter 11 – It is now six months later. Hugo puts on a tuxedo in his room, a converted storage room in the back of the Meliezes’ apartment. Rene Tabard arranges for a grant for Georges and his wife from the French Film Academy, some of which furnishes Hugo’s new bedroom. He has a workbench for mechanics, and a desk for studying. In the corner of the room is the automaton, now perfectly repaired. Hugo collects Isabelle from her bedroom. She is wearing a beautiful white dress. They join Georges and Jeanne in the living room, where they prepare to leave for an evening of celebration at the Film Academy. Etienne also arrives just before two cars show up to bring them to the Academy. Isabelle brings along a camera, asking Hugo to hold extra film for her in his pockets. She also gives him a photograph she has taken of Hugo with his old best friends, Antoine and Louis. In the cars, Georges looks forward to seeing the painting of Prometheus – which he himself painted. Georges reveals that, in the end, Prometheus was rescued and set free.

At the Academy celebration, it is revealed to those in attendance that Georges is still alive, and not all his films are lost. Etienne has made it his mission to find as many of the more than five hundred films as possible, and save them. So far, he has saved more than eighty. For the first time in more than ten years, Georges’s film – his life, in essence – is projected onto the screen. The films are stunning. The last film shown is “A Trip to the Moon”. It makes Isabelle cry in happiness. Georges then addresses the audience, telling them that they are all dreamers. Afterward, a crowd of people gathers to watch Hugo do some magic tricks. Georges lovingly refers to Hugo as Professor Alcofrisbas, a character who appears in many of Georges’s films, an alchemist who was able to turn anything into gold, but is really a magician who has appeared in real life that night in the form of Hugo.

Part 2, Chapter 12 – The final chapter of the novel is narrated by Professor H. Alcofrisbas through his own automaton, which explains that Alcofrisbas was once a boy named Hugo Cabret. He believed then that a broken automaton could save his life. Now, he is a well-respected and much-admired magician, and knows that the





automaton did indeed save his life, by giving him a new purpose. He goes on to explain that he built a new, more complex automaton, which tells the story of his own life in 26,159 words, and 158 different pictures – the book that has just been read.

## Analysis

The closing chapters of the novel reveal the answers to several remaining mysteries, as well as bringing together the themes of art, tragedy, dreams, and purpose, including the truth behind the automaton that Hugo has so carefully repaired and so zealously guarded. It is revealed that Georges began life working in his parents's shoe factory, where he became enamored with the mechanical devices and machinery, ultimately moving on to magic and creating automatons. He had a passion for art and for film, and his participation in the film industry was one of making dreams come true, creating dreams, and was done primarily for love of the art form itself. He didn't seek to become rich or famous, but his passion showed through. However, after World War I, the film industry became more competitive, and art for art's sake became impossible. This, coupled with the death of Isabelle's parents, lead Georges to turn his back on the film industry, burning all of his film and magic-related paraphernalia, and selling his films to a shoe company, which turned them into shoes – which explains why Georges cannot stand clicking heels, for they summon ghosts.

Dreams thus form an important component of the novel, and readers realize why it is that Georges has taken such an interest in Hugo: Hugo reminds Georges of himself. Both begin their lives with an interest in machines and mechanics, though the jobs they have are less than desirable to them. Both feel called to do something other than what they have been born into – for Georges, shoes; for Hugo, clocks. But whereas Georges had Jeanne alongside him, and sought to make his way in life honesty, Hugo's good influence dies with his father, and so he commits to dishonesty to survive. While the morality of Hugo's actions may be debated, the fact that they are ultimately dishonest work against Hugo's prospects. Indeed, Georges becomes something of a father-figure to Hugo as time passes, from getting Hugo to do honest, hard work, to encouraging Hugo's true passions and dreams.

It is, after all, Georges intervenes on Hugo's behalf against the Station Inspector. Georges makes it possible for Hugo to begin a new life, and completes Hugo's journey of self-discovery, from that of an uncertain but talented timekeeper and thief, to a much-admired and well-respected magician who fashions his own automatons, one of which is responsible for the story and pictures the reader has just come through.

The importance of Hugo on George's life should also not be missed: Hugo's entry into Georges's life reminds Georges that, at any age, dreams are worth having and pursuing, and are never worth giving up on. Hugo not only reminds Georges of this, but brings into Georges's life the possibility of second chances through the French Film Academy. This allows Georges to leave the toy business, and allows him to return to the art that he loves.



## Discussion Question 1

What is the truth about Georges's past? Why does he leave the film industry? Do you believe he is justified in having done so? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do dreams form such an important component and theme of the novel? How do dreams affect both Hugo and Georges? How does each help the other realize their dreams?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the ultimate influence that Georges and Hugo have on each others lives? What sorts of changes occur because of this? Do you believe their lives would have been different had it not been for Hugo's father finding the automaton in the first place? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

muse, competition, miraculously, reeling, staggered, dramatic, enveloped, celestial, diligence,





# Characters

## Hugo Cabret

Hugo Cabret is the main character and principle protagonist in the novel “The Invention of Hugo Cabret” by Brian Selznick. Hugo is twelve years old when the story opens, and is an orphan who lives in a dingy apartment over a train station in Paris where he works as a timekeeper, repairing, adjusting, and winding the 27 clocks in the station. Hugo is the keeper of an automaton, discovered by his father in an old museum attic. At Hugo’s insistence, his father worked on the automaton, during which time he was killed in a fire. Hugo carries guilt, believing had caused his father’s death.

Hugo was then taken in by his uncle, who managed the clocks at the train station, and he taught Hugo how to do the same – and to steal. Hugo is not thrilled about stealing, but understands it is necessary for him to survive, no matter how wrong it might be. When Hugo’s uncle later disappeared, Hugo carries on keeping the clocks in order as though his uncle were still around, so Hugo will not be found out and thrown out of the station.

Hugo’s true passion, it turns out, is not keeping time, but trying to get to the bottom of the mystery of the automaton. It becomes his purpose in life to get the machine to work, to see if his father had adjusted the automaton to leave a message meant only for Hugo. He is guided by a notebook kept by his father about the automaton, and he steals toys from a store in the station, seeking to use the parts on the mechanical device. Hugo is ultimately found out by the old man who runs the store, who holds the notebook as ransom for Hugo working off the debt he has incurred by stealing toys. The old man is stunned by the drawings and details in the notebook, for the old man, as Hugo later finds out, is the inventor of the automaton he has in his possession. The old man is Georges Melies, a magician-turned-filmmaker, who ultimately takes Hugo under his wing and sets him on the right path. Hugo, in turn, makes Georges realize that dreams are always worth pursuing, no matter at what age one might be.

It turns out that Hugo’s story contained in the novel has been written and drawn by an automaton created by Hugo himself.

## Georges Melies

Georges Melies, referred to at various points by the narrator and Hugo as “the old man”, and routinely by Isabelle as “Papa Georges”, is an elderly man who sadly runs a toy store when the novel begins. He is the victim of multiple thefts by way of Hugo, whom he ultimately catches. He discovers Hugo is carrying a notebook full of sketches and information about an automaton, and he is stunned, wanting to know where Hugo found the notebook.



It is later revealed that George is the creator of the automaton, having begun life as a worker in his parents' shoe company. He was enamored with the machinery, but had bigger dreams. When he was old enough, he sold his share of the company and became a magician, creating automatons, and earning widespread acclaim. Ultimately, he went into films, building his own camera, and realizing that movies are an art form in which dreams can be made. Following World War I, however, competition in the film industry increased, which forced out people like Georges, who were mainly interested in film for the sake of itself, for beauty, and for art. Following the death of Isabelle's parents, Georges loses all heart and gives up on his own dreams of making films.

Hugo changes everything, and Georges sees much of himself in Hugo. He puts Hugo on the right path in life, and ultimately takes Hugo under his wing. He learns from Hugo that dreams are never worth giving up on, no matter what has happened. When the novel ends, Georges's life and work are celebrated at the French Film Academy.

## **Isabelle**

Isabelle is the goddaughter of Georges and Jeanne Melies. Isabella is about twelve years old, highly intelligent, an avid reader, and loves films, though she is not allowed to see them. She quickly befriends Hugo, having observed him stealing from her godfather's toy stall. She intervenes on Hugo's behalf, making sure that her godfather does not burn Hugo's notebook, and ultimately helping Hugo to unravel the mystery of the automaton he has in his possession. Isabella is stunned to discover that her godfather is the inventor, and that he used to be a famous filmmaker. She also learns that her parents were good friends with the Georges and Jeanne, and that her father was one of Georges's cameramen. Her parents are killed in a tragic automobile accident, and she is taken in by her godparents, Georges and Jeanne.

## **Uncle Claude**

Uncle Claude is the brother of Hugo's father, and is uncle to Hugo himself. Claude lived in a ramshackle apartment above a Paris train station, where he worked as timekeeper, tending to the clocks. When his brother died, Claude took Hugo in, and trained him in the arts of clock maintenance. Claude also taught Hugo how to steal, which Hugo disliked, but does out of necessity. Claude was notorious for staying out late, and sometimes not coming home at all. Eventually, he disappeared completely, and his body was later found at the bottom of the Seine River, leading people to believe his ghost had been maintaining the clocks at the station.

## **Hugo's Father**

Hugo's father was a well-respected, kind, and talented clockmaker and repairman. He owned his own business, and did well enough that various businesses hired him to keep their clocks. It was in an old museum attic that Hugo's father first discovered the automaton, in a bad state of repair. At his son's urging, he began working on the



automaton, seeking to repair it, and keeping careful notes and drawings of his progress in a notebook, which later fell into Hugo's possession. Unfortunately, Hugo's father was killed in a tragic way, as a fire broke out in the museum while he was working on the automaton.

## **Jeanne Melies**

Jeanne Melies is the wife of Georges Melies, and the godmother of Isabelle. Jeanne is a loyal and gentle wife, who loves and cares deeply for her husband and her goddaughter. Jeanne protects Georges from the past, for she knows it has broken his heart. But when Hugo, Isabelle, Etienne, and Rene come to see her about Georges's past, she reconsiders her position. Ultimately, she helps Georges to chase his dream once more, for she is his best friend and his muse as well.

## **Etienne Pruchon**

Etienne Pruchon is a young man who has befriended Isabelle, and later Hugo. He is gentle, kind, and morally upright. He wears an eye patch due to an accident when he was a child which involved fireworks putting out his eye. He works at a movie theater, sneaks children in for free, and is later fired for this. He ultimately comes to work at the French Film Academy, where he is also studying to become a cameraman. He helps Hugo in his quest to learn about the history of film. Etienne is a huge fan the work of Georges Melies, and has made it a mission in life to recover and restore as many of Georges's films as possible.

## **Monsieur Labisse**

Monsieur Labisse owns the bookstore at the train station. He is a wise, kind man, who directs Hugo to the French Film Academy library for more information about old films.

## **H. Alcofrisbas**

H. Alcofrisbas is a character who appears in numerous films by Georges, as an alchemist and a magician who can turn things into gold. There is much of Georges in Alcofrisbas, and Georges ultimately compares Alcofrisbas to Hugo. Hugo eventually goes on to assume the identity of Alcofrisbas, becoming a magician, and naming the automaton which tells his story Alcofrisbas as well.

## **The Station Inspector**

The Station Inspector appears to be a mix of a security guard and manager who works at the train station in Paris in the novel. He is responsible for turning over thieves and criminals to the police, but also can be seen observing the clocks and taking notes on



things he sees throughout the train station. The Station Inspector is called when Hugo is caught stealing, and he is prepared to turn Hugo over to the police until Georges intervenes and convinces him not to.

## **Rene Tabard**

Rene Tabard is a professor and writer who works at the French Film Academy. He is the author of the book “The Invention of Dreams: The Story of the First Movies Ever Made”, published in 1930. He is thrilled to learn that Georges Milies is still alive, and helps to secure a grant on Georges’s behalf.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Clock

Clocks are devices used to keep time, and are found throughout the novel in both public and private residences and buildings. Clocks require great mechanical care and setting, and Hugo's family has long been established in clock maintenance, building, and repair. Hugo himself is trained to take care of clocks, and cares for 27 brass clocks that are arranged throughout the train station in which he lives. They come to symbolize time for Hugo, for time seems to have stood still following the death of his father and the disappearance of his uncle: time becomes Hugo's life.

## Notebook

A notebook full of detailed notes and technical drawings about the automaton was kept by Hugo's father. When his father died, the notebook becomes one of Hugo's two most prized and valued possessions, including the automaton. Much of the novel is spent in agony for Hugo, for the old man has taken his notebook, and Hugo believes that only the notebook will help him to repair the automaton. The notebook is also incredibly valuable to Hugo because it is the last piece of his father that he has with him.

## Automatons

Automatons are mechanical devices designed to look like people, animals, and other objects, each with a specific function or purpose. They are often used by magicians to amaze audiences. The automaton that Hugo's father discovers is a man who draws pictures, and was originally part of a show run by magician Georges Milies. The automaton was donated by Georges to a museum, where it was forgotten in the attic until Hugo's father found it, and restored it. It was nearly destroyed in the fire that killed him, but Hugo pulled the automaton from the ashes, and later repairs it himself. It is ultimately given to him as a gift by Georges, where Hugo keeps it in his room at the end of the novel.

## Toys

Toys are built and designed by Georges as a way to make a living following his departure from the film industry. He is saddened by having to make simple toys to survive. It is Georges's toys that Hugo steals in the attempt to repair the automaton.



## Armoire

An armoire is kept by Georges and Jeanne Melies in their bedroom, and it is used to store clothing. In a secret compartment behind a decorated panel, hundreds of Georges's old works of art are kept and later discovered by Georges and Isabelle.

## Moon Drawing

A moon drawing depicting a scene from the Georges Melies film "A Trip to the Moon" is created by the automaton he designs. It is a drawing that both Hugo and Isabelle are amazed by, and tips them off to the fact that there is much more to Georges than meets the eye.

## The Invention of Dreams

"The Invention of Dreams: The Story of the First Movies Ever Made" is a book published in 1930 by Rene Tabard, which is a history of early moviemaking, and of which a copy is kept at the French Film Academy library. It is in the book that Hugo first learns about Georges Melies and his film "A Trip to the Moon".

## A Trip to the Moon

"A Trip to the Moon" is a film by Georges Melies, and involves an expedition to the moon. It is a movie seen by Hugo's father, and described to Hugo in great detail. The automaton that Georges Melies builds draws a scene from "A Trip to the Moon" and is instantly recognizable by Hugo. When the novel ends, "A Trip to the Moon" is shown at the gala celebration thrown in George Melies's honor.

## Camera

A new camera - a gift from Georges and Jeanne - is nearly forgotten by Isabelle on her way to the celebration of Georges's life and work at the Film Academy. Isabelle has been taking many pictures with the camera, including one of Hugo with Antoine and Louis.

## Heart-Shaped Key

A heart-shaped key is the missing piece that Hugo needs to operate the automaton. He discovers it around Isbaelle's neck, and steals it from her to operate the automaton. It turns out that Isabelle herself had stolen the key from Jeanne, who in turn had been given the key as a gift by Georges, presumably the sole-surviving artifact of their past as magicians, automaton builders, and filmmakers. The shape of the key itself -that of a heart -should not be lost on the reader. Hearts are symbolic of life, and a heart-shaped



key is needed to give life to the automaton: a life-giving heart, the joining of the heart to the body of the automaton. Likewise, the love between Georges and his wife, Jeanne, is also symbolized by the giving of the heart-shaped key -Georges's heart, truly -to Jeanne. As his love and inspiration, she is his Georges's life.

# Settings

## Paris

Paris is the capital city of France. Paris is a beautiful city, known for art and culture, which runs the gamut from painting and fine art to sculpture and architecture, to film and photography. It is in Paris that the novel is set primarily at a train station. Paris is also home to the old museum where Hugo's father first found the automaton, and home to the French Film Academy where Etienne studied, and Hugo first learns about Georges Melies. It is also where Georges, Jeanne, and Isabelle live.

## The Train Station

The train station is located in Paris, France, and is described as a large, beautiful building replete with shops that range from a bookseller to a toy stall to a café. It is in the train station that Georges Melies has his toy store, and it is in the train station that Hugo lives in an old apartment building where he keeps the automaton. There are 27 clocks made of brass in the train station which Hugo sets and keeps in good working order throughout the novel, accessible only by secret passages in the walls of the station.

## The Old Museum

The old museum is where Hugo's father does jobs handling clock maintenance, apart from his own shop. The old museum has an attic full of amazing artifacts and objects, including the automaton which Hugo encourages his father to repair. Hugo's father is tragically killed while working in the attic by a fire that no one knows the source of. It is in the wreckage of the museum that Hugo discovers the automaton, and rescues it.

## Labisse's Bookstore

Labisse's Bookstore is located in the train station in Paris, and is owned and operated by Monsieur Labisse. Labisse has a vast array of books in the shop, and kindly allows Isabelle to borrow all the books she wants without having to purchase them.

## The French Film Academy and Library

The French Film Academy and Library is an institute in Paris, France, dedicated to preserving and advancing the art of filmmaking. It is where Etienne works and studies to become a cameraman, and where Professor Rene Tabard instructs. Hugo travels to the Academy to learn more about the early history of film, and Georges Melies, and the



Academy later serves as host to a grant and a celebration in Georges's honor at the end of the novel.

# Themes and Motifs

## Dreams

Dreams form a core component and theme in the novel “The Invention of Hugo Cabret” by Brian Selznick. Dreams appear in the novel in two distinct ways: those of the mind, and those of the heart. The theme of dreams primarily affects the characters of Hugo and Georges, in both distinct ways, and secondarily affect Etienne and Rene Tabard as well.

Dreams of the mind appear in the novel when Hugo is asleep, and appear in the films of Georges Melies. Hugo’s dreams more often than not take the form of nightmares, while Georges’s dreams on film take the form of beauty and fantasy. Hugo dreams of terrifying things, such as train wrecks, and the Station Inspector catching him and finding the truth out about him. Hugo’s nightmarish dreams often serve as precursors and omens to bad events in the novel. For example, Hugo dreams of the train wreck the night before Etienne and Rene are to go to meet Georges, and the following day, Hugo is apprehended by the Station Inspector. George’s dreams on film, meanwhile, involve extraordinary images, such as journeying to the moon, mermaids, and fantastical creatures.

Dreams of the heart ultimately involve that which people aspire to do, and in large part, form much of their purpose in life (see the theme “Purpose” as well). Hugo dreams of bigger things for his life, other than repairing clocks, as Georges once dreamt of more to life than making shoes. Indeed, Georges’s dream eventually became the ability to make dreams through film, to create beauty through them. Georges sets Hugo on the right path to pursuing his own dreams, and has also been the inspiration for Rene and Etienne to pursue their own dreams to create dreams. Because dreams form such a central part of who people are, it is important to follow those dreams –no matter how difficult things may be, or how old one may get –as Georges comes to realize through his encounters with Hugo.

## Art

Art is a major and dominant theme in the novel “The Invention of Hugo Cabret” by Brian Selznick. Art – which involves any number of forms that range from painting and fine art to music, literature, architecture, sculpture, and photography – primarily revolves around film in the novel. The novel is set in Paris, a city renowned for its love of art, culture, and beauty, and this can be seen not only in the elegance of everything from the bronze clocks which Hugo cares for, to the fact that there is an institute in the city dedicated wholly to moviemaking, the French Film Academy.

Indeed, much of the novel focuses on the life, career, and creations of Georges Melies, a magician and filmmaker. Georges is a brilliant man and artist, who values art for art’s



sake, alone. He is not interested in fame or fortune, but in creating dreams and things of beauty, and this can be clearly seen in both his automatons and his films. Indeed, he is also responsible for the beautiful painting of Prometheus in the Film Academy. His love of beauty can also be found in his passion for the drawings created by the automatons, and the care and consideration put into creating the automatons themselves. Indeed, Georges relates in the novel how, in the time before the Great War, he was the happiest he had ever been, for he was creating beautiful dreams and he thought that such days of creation would never end.

Following World War I, however, the film industry exploded, and competition commercialized movies in ways never before seen. Those interested in film purely for the beauty and art of it were either forced out, forced underground, or forced to adapt to be able to survive. Georges took another route. Following the death of Isabelle's parents, Georges voluntarily walked away from the industry, shutting it out –and his past –with it. What he did not realize, however, was that entire generations of filmmakers had grown up with his movies, and loved and respected him. It is why Etienne and Rene are so insistent that Georges come out of hiding, at the very least, for he has been an inspiration in ways that no one else has been – all because of his passion for true art.

## Purpose

Purpose is a major and underlying theme that becomes central to the later part of the novel "The Invention of Hugo Cabret" by Brian Selznick. Purpose defines the reason a person has for existing or being alive, and it is best explained by Hugo while he is talking with Isabelle. He makes comparisons between machines and automatons, and people. He explains that he is always saddened by a broken machine, because the machine cannot fulfill its purpose, and do what it is meant to do. He comes to understand that people are much the same way: they have purposes and reasons for existing, for being alive, often referred to as dreams, for these are things the people want to do or to achieve. If these people are unable to fulfill their purpose or reasons, they become sad.

Georges, Hugo and Isabelle realize, has lost his purpose in life, though they later come to find out that Georges has walked away from it because it was too painful and too difficult for him to handle. Nevertheless, Georges is far sadder without making films than he was making them, so Hugo and Isabelle plan to help Georges find his purpose again. Hugo takes the extraordinary step of letting Etienne know that Georges is still alive, and this ultimately leads to Georges's reentry into the arts and film communities, and changes his life for the better.

Hugo himself is broken without realizing it. He is dealing with the death of his father, the disappearance of his uncle, and though he does not want to spend his life repairing clocks, he is not exactly sure what he wants to do beyond getting to the truth behind the automaton. It is only through his experiences with Georges that he begins to realize he can do more than be a thief and repair clocks. Hugo comes to realize that his own



purpose in life has to do with far more than getting to the truth behind the automaton, but to create them himself, to become a magician in his own right.

## Mystery

Mystery is a major and important theme that perforates the novel "The Invention of Hugo Cabret" by Brian Selznik. Mysteries, which involves the unknown, are layered successively from the very start of the novel through the very end, when the final mystery is solved. Each mystery, as it is solved, often gives rise to new mysteries, which Hugo and Isabella must then solve to continue on.

The first mystery - and the last to be solved - involves just who Professor H. Alcofrisbas is, and what his relation to Hugo and Hugo's story might be. When the novel begins following Hugo, the reader is hard-pressed to know why Hugo lives alone keeping time. The reader soon learns what happened to Hugo's father, but knows nothing (until later) about what has happened to Hugo's uncle. Likewise, the notebook that Hugo carries - and why the old man is so stunned by its contents - are not immediately revealed, either. One of the larger mysteries - about who invented the automaton, and what its purpose are - are also left up in the air, though suspicions are raised that they have something to do with the old man, based on his reaction and his familiarity with what the notebook contains.

When the old man's identity is finally revealed, the mystery only deepens. Hugo finds himself wondering why someone so talented and with such a passion for filmmaking could simply walk away from his dreams, and become a toymaker. Hugo begins to suspect that there might be more to the story than first meets the eye, and this is later borne out to be true. Other mysteries, such as why Isabelle lives with the Melies, and how Rene was inspired by Georges, are ultimately dealt with, as are the fate of Hugo's uncle, and the true identity of Alcofrisbas.

## Tragedy

Tragedy becomes a major, underlying theme in the novel "The Invention of Hugo Cabret" by Brian Selznik. Tragedy, which involves sad, unhappy, or traumatizing events often beyond the control of those whom they befall (though sometimes they are indeed of the individual's own making), appear routinely throughout the novel, and affect primarily the characters of Hugo and Georges, in similar and different ways.

Death is a tragedy that both Hugo and Georges must confront. For Hugo, it is the tragic death of his father in a fire in the old museum while he is working on the automaton. For Georges, it is the death of two of his closest friends, Isabelle's parents, in a car accident. The deaths faced by Hugo and Georges affect them in different ways. Hugo blames himself for his father's death, for it was he who encouraged his father to fix the automaton. For Georges, the death of his friends is the final act that drives him out of the movie business for good. Both individuals end up doing things they truly do not want



to be doing with the rest of their lives. Hugo works on clocks, and Georges works on toys.

Tragedy also appears throughout the novel in a background format. The Great War, later known as World War I, is mentioned several times. Much of Europe was turned into a battleground, and tens of millions of lives were lost in the war. The Great Depression is also referenced, with a newsreel reporting on its effects in America. Meanwhile, the rise of Nazism in Germany is also referenced - which will itself become one of the two greatest tragedies ever faced by Europe (with the other being Communism). Additionally, Hugo dreams of a tragic train accident in Paris 36 years before, in which a train's brakes fail and it crashes through a building, which serves to be an omen of bad events to come in Hugo's own life the following day, as he is finally apprehended by the Station Inspector.

# Styles

## Point of View

With the exception of the introduction and the final chapter in the second part of the novel, Brian Selznick tells "The Invention of Hugo Cabret" from the third-person limited omniscient point of view. The narrator, as it turns out, is Hugo himself, telling a story through the workings of an automaton he has crafted to tell his own story, as though he were an outsider to the events that transpired in his life. The novel is told in limited-omniscience in order to create suspense and build up mysteries which must then be solved. The reader only discovers, learns, and understands things as Hugo comes into the possession of such knowledge, making the suspense and mystery possible. The introduction and final chapter are told in the first-person perspective, from the point of view of Hugo himself, writing through his automaton. This is done so readers know who Hugo has become, and what he has done with his life.

## Language and Meaning

Because the novel is directed toward a young audience, and is about young people (Hugo is 12, and Isabelle is described as being about 12), the language employed by Brian Selznick is simple, straightforward, and to the point. This proves important as the number of mysteries that develop require absolute attention, and proves especially important when Selznick reveals a deeper meaning and message in the novel - that people all have dreams, purposes, and reasons for living, which they must fulfill and achieve in order to be happy and do what they are meant for. The importance of this revelation is clearly apparent by way of the simple, straightforward language that has been used, and so the reader cannot miss the point.

## Structure

Brian Selznick divides his novel "The Invention of Hugo Cabret" into two main parts preceded by a short introduction. Each part of the book is further subdivided into twelve chapters, with written words and drawn pictures interspersed throughout. The intent, according to the introduction, is to create a book that reads like a film, and the placement of pictures -many of which are arranged in sequential fashion nearly resembling a flipbook- makes possible that concept. The very visual nature of the book is clearly indicative of film, and lends credence to the idea that a picture is worth a thousand words.



## Quotes

The old man looked agitated today. Had he figured out some of his toys were missing? Well, there was nothing to be done about that now. Hugo needed the toys.

-- Narrator (Narrator Part 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Early in the novel, Hugo's sole purpose in life is made apparent: he is determined to make the automaton in his possession work again. To do this, he needs parts to fix the automaton, and he gains many potential parts from the toys he steals from the old man's toy shop. But eventually, the old man notices that toys are going missing, and Hugo is about to be caught.

Ghosts..." the old man muttered to himself. "I knew they would find me here eventually.

-- Georges (Part 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 26)

**Importance:** The old man, later revealed as Georges Melies, is horrified that his past has caught up to him. He sees his past as something like ghosts which haunt him, and the ghosts have been brought about through the notebook containing sketches of the automaton which is a part of his past.

Don't you know that the sound of clicking boot heels can summon ghosts? Do you want to be followed by ghosts?

-- Georges (Part 1, Chapter 3 paragraph 16)

**Importance:** At first glance, what appears as either some arcane French superstition or legend about clicking shoes summoning spirits later proves to be an incredibly deep and complex statement. Georges, upon leaving the film industry, sells all of his films to a shoe company, which turns the films into shoes. Whenever he hears the clicking of shoes, Georges is reminded of his past. In some respects, this references Yeat's poem "He Wishes For the Cloths of Heaven", in which the narrator's dreams are tread upon underfoot.

From the very first moment his father had told him about it, the mechanical man had become the center of Hugo's life.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 5 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Hugo's primary purpose in life becomes fixing the automaton his father has discovered. Hugo comes to believe that, before his death, his father transformed the automaton to create a message intended only for Hugo. Thus, the notebook and the automaton serve as a link to his father, and the notebook itself is the final link Hugo feels he has to his father.

He had often imagined that his own head was filled with cogs and gears like a machine, and he felt a connection to whatever machinery he touched. He loved learning how the clocks in the station worked, and there was a kind of satisfaction in knowing how to climb through the walls and secretly repair the clocks without anyone seeing him.



-- Narrator (Narrator, Part 1, Chapter 5 paragraph 40)

**Importance:** Here, Hugo's love of, and fascination with, mechanical devices and implements is explained. He imagines that people are like machines, full of different parts -but the relevance of Hugo comparing himself and others to machines will only become apparent much later in the novel, as Hugo delves into dreams and purpose.

The note was going to save his life.

-- Narrator (Narrator, Part 1, Chapter 4 paragraph 58)

**Importance:** Hugo holds fast to the belief that his father has reworked the mechanical man to write out a note meant only for him. Hugo believes that the note will be of such vast importance, it will save his life and change it in immeasurable ways. Ultimately, Hugo discovers that he is only half-right. The machine has not been reworked, but what it does will, indeed, save his life.

After making his morning rounds with the clocks, Hugo showed up at the toy booth the next day prepared to work. He could feel the cogs and wheels in his head spinning in different directions. One moment he felt hopeful that he'd get his notebook back, the next he felt angry and resentful. But he did his work.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 8 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Here, the narrator describes Hugo's commitment to his appointed job to earn back the notebook. It is a fair deal that is reached, so that Hugo can not only earn the notebook back, but pay off the cost of the toys he has stolen.

So Hugo had been right. The message was from his father. But what did it mean?

-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Hugo is stunned to see that the automaton draws instead of writes, and the image drawn - that of a moon from his father's favorite movie - and so Hugo is convinced there is a reason for the message, and that reason is given to him by his father.

I'm surrounded by thieves!

-- Jeanne (Part 2, Chapter 1 paragraph 60)

**Importance:** Jeanne, discovering that Isabelle has stolen her heart-shaped key necklace, and Hugo's theft of toys, exclaims that she is surrounded by thieves - but her statement is much deeper than that. Her former life, and that of her husband's life, have been stolen by many circumstances beyond her control.

He tried to imagine what the old man was thinking as he built these toys. He must have hated being stuck here all day long.

-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 6 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** For the first time, Hugo begins to think beyond himself. He tries to imagine





what the old man must feel building toys when he used to invent dreams and make films. He understands why the old man must be so sad and so angry all the time, for he is not living up to what he was meant to do.

Did you ever notice that all machines are made for some reason? ...Maybe that's why a broken machine always makes me a little sad, because it isn't able to do what it was meant to do... Maybe it's the same with people... If you lose your purpose... it's like you're broken.

-- Hugo (Part 2, Chapter 6 paragraph 19)

**Importance:** In the defining message of the novel, Hugo observes that people, like machines, are intended for specific purposes, and when people don't achieve what they are meant for -their dreams, their purpose -they are broken. Hugo understands all too easily that Georges is broken.

These words.

-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 12 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** When the novel ends, it is revealed that the entire story has been written and drawn by the automaton which Hugo has himself created -the very words that even then are being read.