

Pocahontas, Iowa

Dear Victor Hugo,

It took me nine months to read *Les Misérables*. Soon after I started, all of your characters came to life, and Jean Valjean became a dear friend. I loathed Thenardier and Javert, cringing when they arrived in the story, and waiting with eager suspense to see how Jean Valjean would miraculously escape them once more. I pitied Eponine, Gavroche and their siblings, wishing that somehow I could help them. I wondered how Marius and Cosette's love story would end; for while I was certain that they would marry, I was unsure as to how this would happen. When I finally reached the end, I was sad that Jean Valjean's death, but happy at the peace he made with Marius, Cosette, and, most importantly, God.

Monsieur Hugo, I want to thank you for writing what is now my favorite piece of literature. *Les Misérables* touched my heart in a way that few books have, because it showed me what self sacrifice and unconditional love really mean.

I watched the bishop offer his most valuable possessions – his silver spoons and candlesticks – to Jean Valjean. Later on, Jean Valjean offered his most valuable possessions – his freedom – to a man who he had never met before in his life. By letting Combeferre go free, he sentenced himself to life in the galleys. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for Jean Valjean to let Combeferre take his punishment, and to remain monsieur Madeline himself. But he didn't.

This is not the only time I noticed the theme of self sacrifice in the book. The instances that gripped me the most were near the end, at the barricades and afterward.

At the barricades, I was close to tears as little Gavroche gathered bullets while the enemy was shooting at him...and then he died, giving this life for others. Would I knowingly place myself in danger for my friends? Could I walk directly into the enemy's fire to save my friends or just to give some of them the chance to make it out alive? When Jean Valjean spared the life of Inspector Javert, this too surprised and convicted me. Do I love my enemies that much? Am I willing to sacrifice myself not just for my friends, but also for those who hate me?

Although these incidents were truly amazing, it was when Jean Valjean bore Marius through the sewers to save his life that I truly saw just what unconditional love is. I don't think I would ever walk through a quicksand-like mire of human waste for my best friend, yet Jean Valjean did this for someone he had no reason to love. Someone of whom he was insanely jealous. Why? Because God had changed him.

The power of God in the life of Jean Valjean is truly inspiring. God took a broken harsh and criminal man and enabled him to give of himself. God gave one of the vilest human creatures imaginable the strength to have a selfless attitude, and He can give me that same strength. This encourages me, Monsieur Hugo. Your book has reminded me that as a Christian, redeemed by God, I, too, have the power to sacrifice myself like this.

Your book also challenged me. It reminded me that I need to be willing to sacrifice myself. Since God will give me the strength, as He did Jean Valjean, then I need to be willing to lay down my life, my money, my freedom, my dignity, and anything else required, for other people – even those I might deem “unlovable.”

But the final challenge of your story lay in the last few chapters. When Jean Valjean refused to tell anyone all of the wonderful things he had done, even when It would have redeemed his image in the eyes of Marius, I was once again forced to consider my own attitudes. Jean Valjean was humble enough that, ignoring all of the sacrifices he made, he simply confessed that he was a criminal and left their lives. Obviously, he didn't save others for the credit. Were I in the same situation, would I respond as Jean Valjean did? Would I humbly fade into the background, or would I seek glory for my deeds? It is here that the encouragement in your book comes back into play, reminding me simply of one thing.

By the grace of God, I too, can sacrifice as Jean Valjean.

Sincerely yours,

Kristen E. Ekstrand