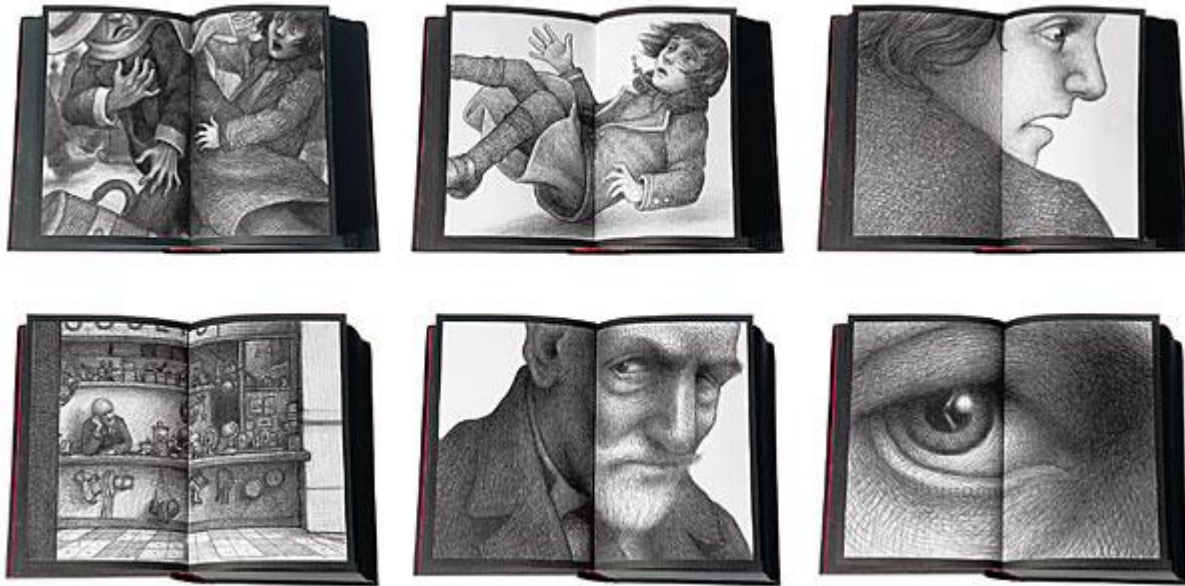


Children's Books

By [JOHN SCHWARTZ](#)

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Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

THE INVENTION OF HUGO CABRET

A Novel in Words and Pictures.

By Brian Selznick.

Illustrated. 533 pp. Scholastic Press. \$22.99. (Ages 9 and up)

In 1991, my wife and I wandered into Eeyore's Books for Children on the Upper West Side, looking to freshen the nightly round of bedtime stories. "The Houdini Box," by Brian Selznick, sat right by the cash register.

Selznick was working at the store at the time, which helps explain the great placement. Yet his handsome picture book, with its rich language and engaging pencil drawings, was a real find. It told a story with unexpected emotional power: A boy obsessed with Harry Houdini actually meets his idol in Grand Central Terminal. He is enthralled, then disillusioned, then — years later — triumphantly makes the connection he had been yearning for all his life. The book presents deep mysteries, shattered dreams and dreams regained. Our children loved it, and so did we.

In the years since, Selznick has become known more for his artwork than for his writing, illustrating books like "The Dinosaurs of Waterhouse Hawkins," written by Barbara Kerley (which won a Caldecott Honor in 2002). But he still has stories of his own to tell, and now here's a big one: "The Invention of Hugo Cabret."

It is wonderful.

Take that overused word literally: “Hugo Cabret” evokes wonder. At more than 500 pages, its proportions seem Potteresque, yet it makes for quick reading because Selznick’s amazing drawings take up most of the book. While they may lack the virtuosity of Chris Van Allsburg’s work or David Wiesner’s, their slight roughness gives them urgency. The result is a captivating work of fiction that young readers with a taste for complex plots and a touch of magic — think *Harry H.*, not *Harry P.* — can love.

This is much more than a graphic novel: it is more like a silent film on paper. The brief introduction states this explicitly: “I want you to picture yourself sitting in the darkness, like the beginning of a movie. ... You will eventually spot a boy amid the crowd, and he will start to move through the train station. Follow him, because this is Hugo Cabret. His head is full of secrets, and he’s waiting for his story to begin.”

And then it does, opening with a tight shot of the moon. As you turn the pages, the frame widens, the moon makes its way across the sky over Paris in 1931 and the dawn breaks over a train station. The imagined camera zooms through the doors to take in the crowd, and there is Hugo. Disheveled but intent, he skulks through the station and slips behind a ventilation grate in a dark passage, giving a glimpse of the holes in the sole of his shoe.

Hugo is 12, an orphan devoted to his father’s trade, clockmaking. Before dying, his father had taken Hugo to a museum where he worked part time and showed him an astonishing thing: a clockwork man, moldering and broken in the attic. The automaton sat at a desk and held a pen; when he was repaired and wound up, it was clear, he would write something.

The automaton is the sort of device magicians of earlier days made to amaze their audiences. They knew back then what Arthur C. Clarke would tell us: any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

The machines have a hold on Selznick too: the idea for the novel, he tells us in the acknowledgments, came after he read about the automata collected by Georges Méliès, the great silent filmmaker who created “A Trip to the Moon” in 1902. A museum neglected the machines and eventually threw them away. “I imagined a boy finding those machines in the garbage, and at that moment, Hugo and this story were born,” he writes.

The story takes Hugo through tragedy and isolation. His father dies in a fire at the museum, and the boy’s drunken uncle, the timekeeper at a train station, takes him in. The uncle soon disappears, and Hugo is left on his own, stealing food to survive and keeping the station’s clocks running so no one will notice his uncle is gone. Meanwhile, he retrieves the automaton from the wreckage of the museum and carries on his father’s efforts.

“Hugo had continued thinking about the note that it would eventually write. And the more he worked on the automaton, the more he came to believe something that he knew was completely crazy. Hugo felt sure that the note was going to answer all his questions and tell him what to do now that he was alone. The note was going to save his life.”

For the parts he needs, Hugo steals wind-up toys from an old toymaker who maintains a booth at the station. But when the old man, Georges, catches him, Hugo discovers he’s not the only one with secrets. Georges’s goddaughter, Isabelle, has the key to the intertwined mysteries — and the determination to help Hugo learn to trust others again.

The story is full of twists and surprises, and it is especially touching for being based in part on the real-life troubles of Georges Méliès, who went from being a magician to a visionary filmmaker, then suffered reversals that left him working at a toy booth in a railway station ...

Enough. Everybody hates the guy who gives away the ending. It’s enough to say that “Hugo Cabret” sits at the nexus of magic and storytelling and film, and that Brian Selznick — who, perhaps not so coincidentally, has the Hollywood legend David O. Selznick in his family tree — shows us a little magic of his own.