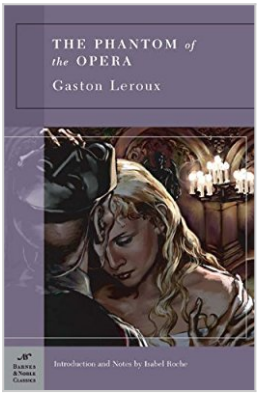

The Phantom of the Opera (Barnes & Noble Classics)

By Gaston Leroux

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The Paris Opera is haunted—everyone knows it. Everyone, that is, except for the new managers, who spark a violent dispute with the Opera Ghost when they refuse to acknowledge his existence or submit to his demands. Sometimes surfacing as a disembodied voice in Box Five or appearing as a gentleman in evening dress with a death’s-head, the phantom is obsessed with Christine Daaé, a lovely and enigmatic novice singer endowed with an amazing voice. But impetuous Viscount Raoul de Chagny is in love with Christine, and he and his brother, Count Philippe, are swept into the phantom’s deadly illusion with horrifying consequences.

Police reports, newspaper clippings, and witness interviews help a sleuthing narrator reconstruct the events of French author **Gaston Leroux**’s most famous

tale, one that had a significant impact on contemporary detective fiction.First publishedin 1911, *The Phantom of the Opera* has since been the basis for many adaptations, including Lon Chaney's silent film and Andrew Lloyd Webber's Tony award-winning Broadway musical. Today, this thriller is recognized not only as a compelling yarn with gothic overtones, but an engrossing romance of stirring theatricality.

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- Sales Rank: #758916 in Books
- Published on: 2007-02-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1

- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .80" w x 5.19" l, .57 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 320 pages

Editorial Review

About the Author

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From Isabel Roche's Introduction to *The Phantom of the Opera*

Long before *The Phantom of the Opera* became a perennial film favorite and a Broadway fixture of enormous success, it was a novel of modest critical and commercial acclaim, written by one Gaston Leroux, a lawyer turned journalist turned novelist. First published serially in the newspaper *Le Gaulois* from September 1909 to January 1910, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* might well have shared the fate of the bulk of Leroux's fiction—which is largely unread today—had it not been for its elevation to the big screen with Rupert Julian's 1925 film version starring Lon Chaney as the phantom. Chaney's astonishing performance in the role, coupled with a tale that lends itself particularly well to visual rendering, inspired such a considerable number of remakes in various mediums over the course of the twentieth century that the phantom's story has taken on a life of its own.

Indeed, readers picking up Leroux's novel for the first time may be surprised to discover the extent to which the novel differs from the many versions that they have seen or heard. For while the adaptations have generally remained faithful to the novel's core themes—attraction and repulsion, artistry and suffering**,** love, loss, and redemption—they have taken more extreme liberties in regard to the narrative elements: Leroux's original plot has been streamlined and at times greatly altered, the pacing quickened, and the journalistic tone of the novel has been expunged in favor of dramatic suspense. Whether or not the many cinematic interpretations have improved upon Leroux's original is a matter of taste; what is more certain is that *The Phantom of the Opera*, the novel, merits our attention: Not only does the very readable story capture the mood and sentiment of the years immediately leading up to the golden period of art and innovation that would later be dubbed *La Belle époque* (literally, "The Beautiful Age"), it also serves as an interesting marker in the history and evolution of the French novel. It is indebted to the Gothic tradition and the fantastic literature and serial novel of the nineteenth century; at the same time it is a precursor of the twentieth-century detective and mystery story that would flourish both abroad and in France with the fiction of Agatha Christie and Georges Simenon, among others.

Leroux had already published nearly a third of the more than thirty novels that would appear in his lifetime when *The Phantom of the Opera* came out in 1910. A well-respected and talented journalist with a law degree and particular strengths in the areas of court and political reporting, he had turned to full-time fiction writing in 1907 after becoming weary with the pressures and travel required by his job. This shift allowed him to wed his love of writing with his imaginative impulses, which had been nourished by his journeys to such exotic locales as Russia, Africa, and Asia, and Leroux churned out relatively successful potboilers with an impressive regularity. As an art and theatre critic for the newspaper *Le Matin* at an earlier point in his career, he had visited the Nouvel Opéra (opened in 1875 and known today as the Palais Garnier or the Opéra Garnier) many times and was impressed by the building's grandiose and imposing architectural design. The

catalyst for *The Phantom of the Opera*, by his own account, was a private visit to the usually sealed-off lower depths of the Opera House during which his curiosity and his imagination were piqued by both the preserved traces of the building's historical and political importance and the palpable sense of secrecy that the underground labyrinth evoked.

The circumstances surrounding the construction of the Opéra Garnier were the material of legend and lore. On an 1858 visit to the then-official opera house on the rue le Peletier, Emperor Napoléon III (nephew of Napoléon Bonaparte) was the target of a politically motivated attack that ultimately spared him but resulted in the death of 150 people. It was at this moment that the Emperor conceived of replacing the rue le Peletier building (which had been designated the home of the Paris Opera following the assassination of the Duc de Berry in 1820 at the previous opera house at the square Louvois) with a new, more secure structure (with a private, imperial entrance), one whose grandeur would be representative of his ambitious reign. He gave his controversial city planner, Baron Haussmann, who was in the process of reconfiguring Paris with a new layout, the task of organizing a competition to select an architect to design the new building, which would be one of the hubs of his plan of connected boulevards and avenues. Chosen from among the nearly 200 entries was that of the more or less unknown Charles Garnier. Garnier impressed the judges by labeling his eclectic architectural approach "Napoleon III style," and the resulting structure indeed remains the prime example of Second Empire construction in Paris.

Erecting such a daunting edifice—distinguished by its imposing polygonal shape, crowning dome, ornately sculptured facade, and gigantic interior complete with an enormous foyer and a majestic, gilded double staircase—was a monumental task that was stymied during nearly a twenty-year period by financing issues, construction difficulties, and most directly, political upheaval. The French defeat at Sedan during the Franco–Prussian war of 1870–1871 resulted in the Emperor's capture. A Third Republic was proclaimed, but the fragile provisional government was then menaced by the siege of the capital by German troops. The still-unfinished Opera House was designated an arsenal and warehouse, and then became the headquarters and eventually a military prison of the Communards—the name given to working-class Parisians who formed their own army in an effort to overthrow those at the helm of the new French regime following France's capitulation. The violent civil revolution lasted three months and resulted in the loss of thousands of lives before the rebellion was squashed by government forces in May 1871. It was not until 1875 that Garnier's building—whose cost had escalated to more than 47 million francs—was finally ready to be unveiled with a gala event thrown more to demonstrate the political stability attained by the Third Republic than to celebrate the architect's achievement (Garnier, in fact, was famously asked to pay to attend the opening!). The Paris Opera—which also had its own ballet company—would draw an increasingly large public during the next few decades as cultural appreciation took on a new importance as part of the *joie de vivre* mentality that enveloped France before World War I.

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