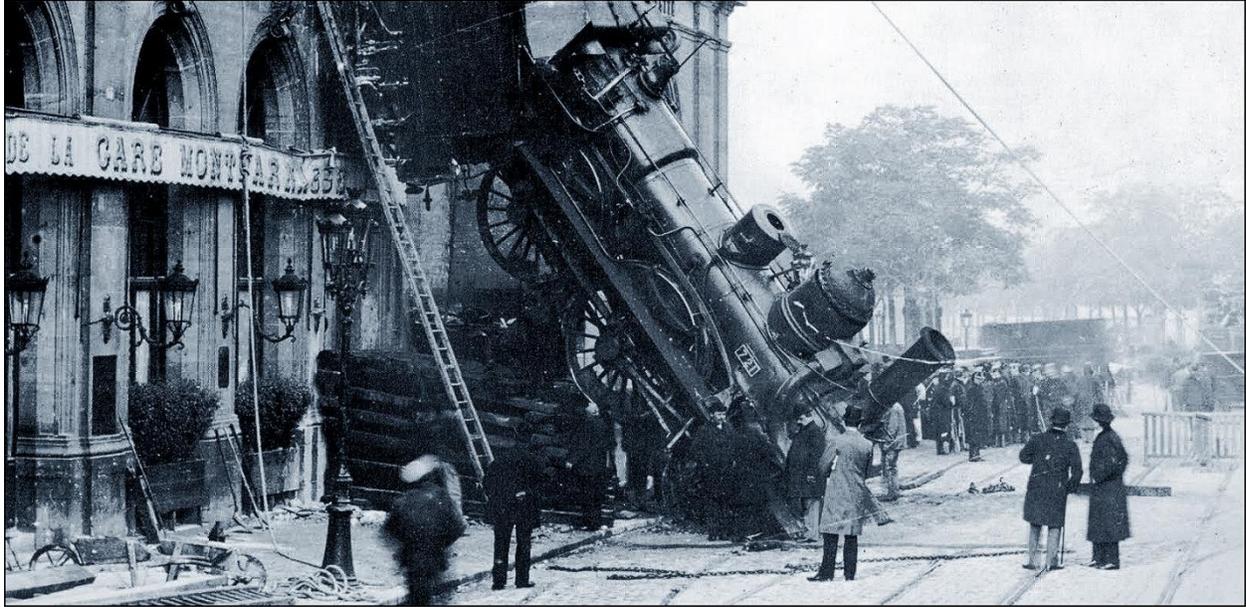


# The Story Power of Iconic Photographs

by Chip Hartman



*Photographs like the one above cry out for an explanation — and occasionally invite rich storytelling, too.*

The photo above falls into both categories. It captures an actual event — the bizarre nosedive of a steam locomotive onto a 19th century Paris sidewalk. It also inspired an enchanting children's story that became a blockbuster movie in 2011.

The photograph was taken on October 22, 1895 shortly after 4 pm when a Granville-to-Paris express train overran the buffers in the Montparnasse railway station, careened through the concourse at full throttle, plowed through the building's façade, then toppled 30 feet down onto the street below.

Miraculously, the only fatality that day was a woman who had been selling newspapers in front of the station. She was struck in the head by falling masonry. There were only minor injuries to passengers on the train.

## Putting The Story in Motion

The Montparnasse train wreck became one of the key elements in a 2008 children's book written by Brian Selznick called *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. The story is a haunting portrait of 12-year-old Hugo Cabret, the only child of a widowed clockmaker who ekes out a living in the hidden chambers and passageways of the railway station, struggling to survive after his father dies in a museum fire. The year is 1931, thirty-six years after the accident.

The boy is obsessed with completing an automaton (mechanical man) that his father had been trying to restore. The robot is missing one essential component: a heart-shaped key — which turns up on the necklace of an enigmatic young girl, a relative of the train station's cantankerous old

toy shop owner. The key, the girl, the old man, and the robot are all connected and Hugo knows it; he just doesn't know how.

Although Hugo is tormented by the loss of his father, he carries on the tradition of winding the big station clocks, even if it means occasionally being chased by a stern Station Inspector and his Doberman sidekick. He has heard the stories about the famous train wreck and has nightmares about it — including one in which he may have been directly involved.

## An Expert Blend of Fact and Fiction

Brian Selznick drew some of his inspiration for [The Invention of Hugo Cabret](#) from two key facts, then wove some fascinating fiction around them:

1. Fact # 1 was the train wreck itself and all of the stories that swirled around about the events of that fateful day.
2. Fact # 2 was that the Montparnasse Railway Station did, in fact, have a toy shop run by a man named Georges Méliès (pronounced *mel-YEZ*).

But it turns out that Georges Méliès was no ordinary shopkeeper. He had been an inventor, a magician, an artist, a filmmaker, a director, an actor, a choreographer and a master storyteller. He was (and still is) widely regarded as "the father of cinematic special effects." He built the first movie studio in Europe and was the first filmmaker to use production sketches and storyboards. He also created the first on-screen double exposure, the split screen and the transitioning technique called a dissolve.

Three years after Brian Selznick's book was published, award-winning film director Martin Scorsese transformed [The Invention of Hugo Cabret](#) into a popular motion picture, entitled simply *Hugo* — which included a breathtaking scene of the boy's train wreck nightmare.

Both the book and the movie are tributes to the brilliance and vision of Georges Méliès. Scorsese extrapolates the cinematic genius of Méliès into modern day big screen magic, complete with long, swooping camera shots through the train station, complex chase scenes through crowds of people, and impossibly beautiful 3D photography.

If you haven't read the book or seen the movie — and plan to do neither — [at least treat yourself to this 3-minute video clip](#) showing Hugo's "train wreck" dream sequence.

After watching the video clip, take another look at the photograph at the beginning of this post. It's easy to imagine being in the Montparnasse Railway Station on that day in 1895 and witnessing first-hand the horror of a runaway train jumping the tracks and barreling toward you at full speed.

Now put yourself in the mind of author Brian Selznick: a bizarre train wreck and the "father of cinematic special effects" in the same place and time in history! How could a master storyteller ignore the tantalizing intersection of these two facts in creating a wildly imaginative children's story?

## Postscripts

1. The woman killed in the train wreck was Marie-Augustine Aguilard. Her husband had a newspaper kiosk just outside the railway station. On the day of the accident, Monsieur

Aguilard ran some errands while his wife filled in for him; if not for that last-minute substitution, she would have never been in front of the railway station on that day. The rail company paid for her funeral and an annuity for the two children.

2. A nearly identical accident (and outcome) occurred on Valentine's Day, 1900 in Dublin, Ireland. This time the train was carrying cattle. After smashing through the buffer stops, [the engine crashed through the station wall and was left suspended over Hatch Street.](#)

## Links of Interest

About The 1895 Accident in Paris (Gare Montparnasse)  
<http://theoldmotor.com/?p=71014>

About the book The Invention of Hugo Cabret by Brian Selznick  
[http://www.theinventionofhugocabret.com/about\\_hugo\\_train.htm](http://www.theinventionofhugocabret.com/about_hugo_train.htm)

Hugo Cabret: 3D-Animation Making-of von Pixomondo (9:01)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVQ6hiIPkvM>

CreativeCOW.net (behind the scenes article on Hugo with Pixomondo video, above)  
[https://library.creativecow.net/legato\\_rob/magazine\\_30\\_HUGO/1](https://library.creativecow.net/legato_rob/magazine_30_HUGO/1)

The Dublin, Ireland Accident of 2/14/1900  
<http://comeheretome.com/2012/02/13/valentines-day-1900/>

General information about the movie, "Hugo"  
<http://www.hugomovie.com>

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