

How Daniel Handler Gave Baudelaire Another Life

What one writer can teach us about the world a book creates — and how far that world might travel.

There is a lovely moment in Daniel Handler's story that begins in the San Francisco Public Library.

Long before millions of readers knew him as the man behind Lemony Snicket, Handler was a young writer spending time among books, following his curiosity wherever it led. One of the writers he encountered and admired was Charles Baudelaire, the nineteenth-century French poet whose *Les Fleurs du mal* explored beauty, melancholy, corruption, suffering and the strange poetry that can be found in an imperfect world.

It would be difficult to imagine a less obvious route to a mass audience of children. And yet, decades later, millions of young readers around the world came to know the name Baudelaire. They knew it because Violet, Klaus and Sunny — the unfortunate children at the centre of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* — are the Baudelaire orphans.

That choice of name was no accident.

Handler constructed a fictional universe steeped in books and literary memory. Edgar Allan Poe becomes Mr Poe. T. S. Eliot's Prufrock finds its way into Prufrock Preparatory School. Other literary names, fragments and echoes are scattered throughout the stories. Libraries matter. Reading matters. Knowledge matters. Again and again, when the Baudelaire children confront a world governed by foolishness, cruelty or incompetence, their capacity to think becomes one of their few reliable forms of defence.

Handler once described his ambition as creating a universe governed entirely by books. That is a wonderful description of what he achieved. But there is something even more interesting happening beneath it.

A child does not need to know who Charles Baudelaire was to enjoy *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Handler does not interrupt the story to explain the reference. There is no literary lesson attached to the surname. Nothing

depends upon recognising it. The name simply enters the reader's imagination.

And waits.

Perhaps years later that reader encounters Baudelaire in a bookshop, a university course or an anthology of French poetry. Suddenly there is a flicker of recognition.

Baudelaire. I know that name.

Handler has spoken about precisely this possibility: the pleasure of imagining young readers encountering these literary references much later and discovering where they came from. Something planted in childhood suddenly acquires another meaning.

Think about what has happened. Handler has not promoted Baudelaire. He has not summarised Baudelaire. He has not attempted to persuade children that nineteenth-century French poetry ought to be relevant to them.

He has done something far more subtle.

He has made Baudelaire part of their imaginative inheritance.

And that offers us a rather beautiful way of thinking about the life of a book.

A book creates more than readers

When we think about the impact of a book, it is tempting to think in fairly direct terms. Someone buys it. Someone reads it. Someone recommends it. Perhaps the author gives talks, writes articles or appears on podcasts. We measure the book's reach by the number of people who encounter the book itself.

But ideas do not always travel so obediently. Sometimes they escape their original container. A phrase becomes part of somebody else's vocabulary.

An argument changes how another person approaches a problem. A distinction introduced in one book appears years later in a completely

different conversation. A reader takes an idea into a classroom, a company, a community or another creative work.

And occasionally, as Handler demonstrates so wonderfully, one writer creates an entirely new doorway into the intellectual world of another.

The extraordinary thing is that the people walking through that doorway may not even realise they are doing it.

Baudelaire could never have imagined Violet, Klaus and Sunny. He could not have anticipated Netflix, international publishing franchises or generations of children encountering his surname through stories about an incompetent banker and a villain named Count Olaf.

Yet something of his intellectual and imaginative presence travelled there.

That is what ideas do when they remain alive.

The world behind your book

This is why the question you encountered at the beginning of *Author in Command* matters:

What world does your book open up?

At first, it can sound almost abstract. Authors are accustomed to describing subjects, arguments, chapters and audiences. We know what our books are *about*.

A book world asks something different. It asks what becomes possible once the ideas in the book begin moving beyond its covers.

What language have you introduced that another person might carry elsewhere? What questions have you made harder to ignore? What distinctions might change the way somebody sees their profession, their community or their own life? What might a reader create because your thinking became part of theirs?

And perhaps most intriguingly:

Where might your ideas travel that you cannot presently imagine?

The answer does not need to be another book.

It might be a conversation. A teaching programme. A professional practice. A documentary. A policy discussion. A community. A piece of research. A new vocabulary. Another person's work.

The important shift is from thinking only about the circulation of the **book** to thinking about the circulation of the **world the book contains**.

The name that waits

There is something wonderfully patient about Handler's Baudelaire reference. It does not demand attention. It does not announce its importance. It trusts that curiosity may eventually do the work. A name encountered at ten can become a discovery at twenty. And perhaps that is one of the most generous ambitions we can have for serious books.

Not that everyone remembers every argument. Not that every reader remains permanently engaged with the author. Not even that the book itself stays continuously visible. But that something survives the encounter. A question. A phrase. A way of seeing. A curiosity that was not there before. Something that waits.

Then, perhaps years later, another experience touches it and the connection comes alive again.

That is a very different conception of the long life of a book. It asks us to look beyond sales curves, launch periods and the immediate circle of readers and consider the much larger journey an idea might make.

Charles Baudelaire died in 1867.

More than a century later, a young writer spent time among the books of the San Francisco Public Library. Something he encountered there stayed with him. Eventually he created a fictional family and gave three children a particular surname.

Millions of readers followed them into the world. And Baudelaire travelled with them.

A thought to carry forward

As you continue through *Author in Command*, return occasionally to the Book World you began defining in Exercise 1.

Then ask yourself one further question:

If the deepest ideas in my book were still travelling twenty years from now, where might I be astonished to find them?