

Alfred Hitchcock, Umberto Eco, and the Macguffin

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How Hitchcock's Favorite Storytelling Device Reached Its Zenith in *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco



A “Macguffin” is a storytelling device that allows an important character, often the villain, to have some overarching goal, one that can have a compelling narrative explanation, but doesn’t require one.

Alfred Hitchcock popularized the term “Macguffin” in lectures in which he explained that great storytelling is about character motivation.

We don’t need to fully understand all the details of a character’s motivation, Hitchcock said. Rather, we just need to believe he’s motivated.

The actual term Macguffin comes from a particular anecdote Hitchcock liked to tell, one I will share at the end of this essay.

The Maltese Falcon is a famous Macguffin. This priceless object that drives people to murder — we don't really understand why this object is so valuable. We just believe that it is.



The Maltese Falcon is a classic Macguffin.

George Lucas has said that he consciously thought of the idea of a Macguffin when he put valuable secret plans in R2D2 and then sent the droid away on an escape pod, motivating Darth Vader to go and find him.

Macguffins don't have to be lost or missing objects

(conceptual goals, like revenge, can also suffice) but frequently when writers speak of Macguffins they are talking about lost objects. The Holy Grail of Arthurian legend is the most famous of all Macguffins, one so familiar as a storytelling device that we often speak of “Holy Grails” when talking about ultimate goals we dream of achieving.

The lost ark sought by the Nazis in the first Indiana Jones movie, the seven Infinity stones sought by Thanos, the one ring to rule them all...Macguffin, Macguffin, Macguffin.



Image for post

The Macguffin is found.

My favorite Macguffin isn't as well known as the One Ring or the Lost Ark, at least not anymore.

In the early 1980s, however, the novel that introduced my favorite Macguffin flew off the shelves like few novels before or since.

First trade paperback of English publication of *The Name of the Rose*.

If we exclude the most significant religious texts, the list of bestselling books of all-time begins with *Don Quixote*, which has approximate sales of 500 million.

Next on the list is *Tale of Two Cities*, with sales of 200 million.

Then comes *Lord of the Rings*, *The Little Prince*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Hobbit*.

All those books sold more than a hundred million copies.

In the next category down, books that sold 50 million or more, we find all the *Harry Potter* sequels, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Lion The Witch and The Wardrobe*, *The Catcher in the Rye*...

...and *The Name of the Rose*.

50 million copies sold worldwide.

Did you have any idea that *The Name of the Rose* was such a megaselling book? One of the best sellers of all time?

It's really kind of an outlier on the list of bestselling books.

The Name of the Rose was a red hot international sensation in the early 1980s, but it never penetrated the popular imagination like its peers on the same list.

Why not?

Because, even though it is a marvel, an amazing book with (as I'll argue) the best use of a Macguffin I've ever seen, it's also hard.

The Name of the Rose is a challenging book in a way that most popular fiction isn't.

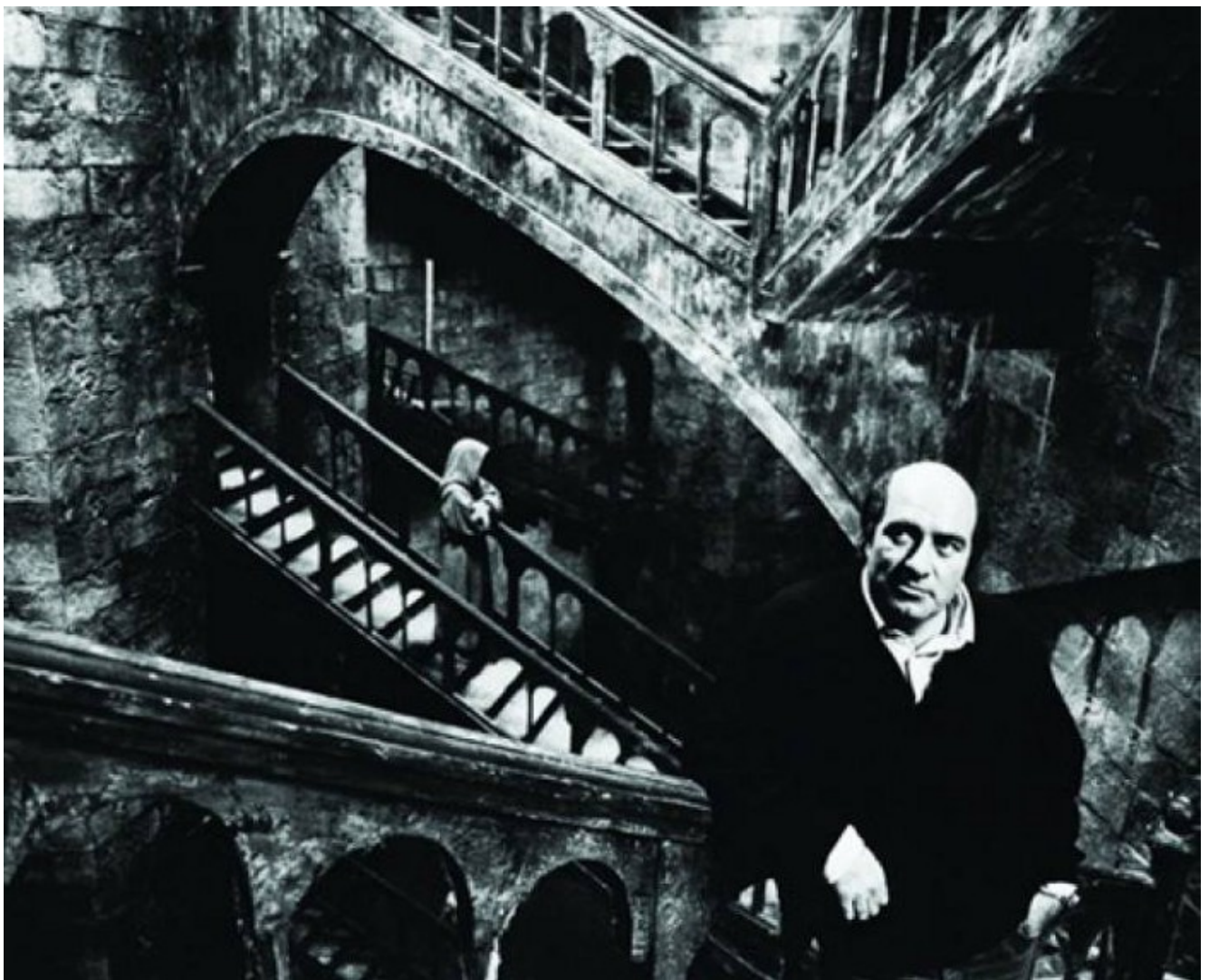


Umberto Eco, author of *The Name of the Rose*

On its surface, Eco's masterpiece is a murder mystery set in medieval Italy.

But there's so much more to this novel than what's on the surface. Dense with philosophy, theology, history, cryptography, and more, *The Name of the Rose* is a series of puzzles, all of them nestled inside a weighty historical analysis about changing power structures in medieval Europe.

And at the center of the novel, serving as both setting for the story and metaphor for the book's meta-structure, is an enormous, labyrinthine library.



The library in the movie adaptation of *The Name of the Rose*.

The library in *The Name of the Rose* is a maze that has been purposely designed to disorient its patrons. The library's secrets are considered so explosive and dangerous that they are hidden throughout this labyrinth and the knowledge of their whereabouts are kept with the librarian and his assistant only, to be passed down through the generations.

Why make such an impenetrable library? What kinds of secrets could be in there?

Hidden, impenetrable secrets that both our protagonist and we, the reader, want to know.

Yes, there is something special, some object or idea or motivation, hidden in this library. What it is exactly we don't know (and fear not, I'm not going to spoil it in this essay).

What we do know is that, as a storytelling device, whatever is in this library is a Macguffin.

The most elegantly constructed and presented Macguffin I've ever encountered.

I was utterly delighted when all the questions were answered and the mysterious *something* that lay at the heart of this story was revealed, because what Eco created was no ordinary Macguffin. This was no bird statue that people desired for some nebulous reason. The Macguffin at the heart of *The Name of the Rose* is a

something of immense significance both to the story and to the reader. The Macguffin ties in brilliantly to all the history, all the debate about the role of the Church in medieval society, all the philosophical musings on the nature of knowledge, on the role of a library...

And I can't help but notice that the novel, this dense, challenging, gnarled knot of a novel, is a lot like the labyrinth at the center of its plot. *The Name of the Rose* is an unusual novel in that its author doesn't make it easy for the pages to turn. Rather, he taxes the reader with so many challenges that many, probably most of those 50 million who bought a copy, drop out before the end.

Just as the library in the story hides its secrets by being unfriendly to interlopers who don't belong there, so does this novel hide its secrets from all but the most dedicated and interested in the game Eco is playing. If you make it to the end, and find out what the Macguffin is, you're very likely to be the kind of person who will be thrilled at the Macguffin Eco chose.

Now, as promised earlier in this essay, we need to talk about the anecdote Hitchcock used to tell about the origin of the term "Macguffin." As you'll see in the anecdote, Hitchcock was really tied to the idea of the Macguffin being largely meaningless other than the fact that somebody wants it (like the Maltese Falcon). If you take a storytelling class or read one of the popular scriptwriting books, you're likely to get a more expansive

definition of Macguffin than the one Hitchcock favored. Hitchcock liked stories where the villain wanted something and the audience didn't really care what it was, but today we often build stories where the desired 'something' is quite meaningful indeed, like the Infinity Stones in the recent Avengers movie, or the Macguffin in *The Name of the Rose*.

Here is the anecdote as delivered in a 1939 lecture Hitchcock gave at Columbia University:

"It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men on a train. One man says, 'What's that package up there in the baggage rack?' And the other answers, 'Oh, that's a MacGuffin'. The first one asks, 'What's a MacGuffin?' 'Well,' the other man says, 'it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.' The first man says, 'But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,' and the other one answers, 'Well then, that's no MacGuffin!' So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all."



Umberto Eco on the set of *The Name of the Rose* movie.