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MARY SHELLEY





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FRANKENSTEIN

INTRODUCTION

BY JEFFERY DEAVER

What strikes me right away about Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is that the novel is in many ways much like the scientist's creature itself; once animated, the story has taken off on its own and has wandered into markets and media vastly different from those that existed when it was written.

Moreover, the story has attained the same immortality that Victor Frankenstein implicitly sought in creating his Being (the word used by Percy Shelley to describe the creature in his wife's novel and a term that I'll use here, preferring it to "monster," which carries with it some loaded connotations about the character).

The pervasiveness and persistence of the novel are remarkable—nearly two hundred years old, it's never been out of print and is known throughout the world—and I'd like to explore this endurance in these introductory comments, in addition to orienting you to the book and how it came to be written.

First, though, I'd like to dispose of a few common misunderstandings surrounding the story. "Frankenstein" is the name of scientist (first name Victor), not the Being he animates, which remains nameless throughout the story. Contrary to another misconception, Victor Frankenstein wasn't a "mad scientist" at all; his efforts to create life and the consequences of his actions deplete him emotionally and make him physically ill, but throughout the story he remains far from psychotic; he's an aware, rational adult.

Perhaps the most prominent misunderstanding is about the Being himself. Yes, he's physically repulsive ("... watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips.") He doesn't, however, lurch around awk-

^{1.} All passages from the novel I quote here are from 1831 edition of Frankenstein.

wardly, mindless and animal-like. He moves at "superhuman" speed. He's wily, observant, intellectually developed (how many of us count reading Milton as a high point of our lives?). No Boris Karloff grunts from this fellow. He's heart-breakingly articulate. He says this about his growing awareness not long after he was first animated:

Soon a gentle light stole over the heavens, and gave me a sensation of pleasure. I started up, and beheld a radiant form rise from among the trees [the moon]. I gazed with a kind of wonder.... I felt light, and hunger, and thirst, and darkness; innumerable sounds ran in my ears, and on all sides various scents saluted me....

While he's often considered evil, and certainly is responsible for a great deal of carnage, the Being is far more morally complicated, and realistic, than many villains in fiction. When first animated, he's essentially innocent and good; it's his creator's abandonment of him—and society's rejection of him—that turn him to violence. Though the innocent die at his hand, the Being's motivation for killing is revenge and there are moments when he might be expected to kill yet he chooses not to.

If you haven't yet read *Frankenstein* and are familiar with the tale from movies or, as many people are, from hearsay, you might be surprised that it contains far more story than you'd expect.

The account opens with Robert Walton, a character who has no connection with the central action of *Frankenstein*. He's an explorer, leading an expedition to the Arctic. In the northern wastes, where the ship has become icebound, he catches a glimpse of a huge, manlike creature in a dogsled. Soon afterward a second, sickly man is found adrift nearby and taken on board Walton's vessel.

This man, Victor Frankenstein, is nursed back to health by Walton, to whom Victor recounts the story that is the core of the book.

Frankenstein is, like those lacquered Russian dolls, a story within a story within a story. We have the initial adventure

tale—Robert Walton's struggle as an explorer to survive against nature, in the best tradition of dramatic Romantic literature. The middle story is Victor Frankenstein's narration of his own history, his family life, his creation of the Being, his abandonment of it and the consequences of his doing so. As part of this story, told to Walton, Frankenstein describes his first contact with the Being, several years after he'd abandoned it. In the third, or central, portion of the novel, the scientist recounts the creature's story, in his own words, of his awakening, his struggle to survive after the abandonment, his longing to become a part of society, which nonetheless is repulsed by and rejects him, and his search for his creator.

After the Being finishes his personal history, the story shifts back to the middle frame again: Still narrating to Walton, Frankenstein describes the Being's desperate request that the scientist create a companion for him. Frankenstein at first agrees but then destroys this second creature, which results in tragic consequences. This portion of the story ends with an account of the scientist's pursuing the Being to the Arctic.

We're now back in the initial story: on board Walton's ship, where the tale will conclude. The suspense novelist within me won't let me jeopardize the impact of the book by giving away any twists of the plot, much less how the novel ends. Let me just say that, as in any good suspense novel, the various highways of plot intersect and are resolved in the final scenes. (I'd suggest, though, that you ignore the comments both of the characters in the book and of critics and draw your own conclusions about what will happen following the chilling final lines of the book, which are masterful and echo in many later works, from modern B horror movies to fine literature, such as the final stanza of Wallace Steven's poem, "Sunday Morning.")

The woman who created this timeless story lived a remarkable and difficult life.

Mary Shelley was born in London in 1797 to William

Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, both well-known writers and social and political philosophers.

William Godwin was both a novelist and a social radical best known for his work An Enquiry into Political Justice. Mary Wollstonecraft was an early feminist (her most famous work was A Vindication of the Rights of Woman). Shelley was raised largely by her father and stepmother; Mary Wollstonecraft died, a few weeks after her daughter was born, from complications during childbirth.

Godwin's reputation spurred a young poet, twenty-year-old Percy Bysshe Shelley, to begin corresponding with the older writer and eventually to meet with him in person. Through his acquaintance with Godwin, Percy struck up a friendship with Shelley, then fifteen. Several years later the friendship grew into an affair and, although Percy was married, he and Shelley ran off to Europe together, leaving a major scandal behind them. In 1814 they returned to England, where Shelley bore a daughter, who died a few days after birth. She soon became pregnant again and a boy, William, was born in 1816.

Later that year the family traveled to Geneva, Switzerland, to visit fellow poet George Gordon, Lord Byron, and it was on this trip that she began the story that would eventually become the novel *Frankenstein*.

Mary Shelley's life was filled with artistic success but personal difficulty, including the suicides of close family members, the failure to win of custody of Percy's two children by his wife (who herself committed suicide), the deaths of Shelley's next two children and a miscarriage, the death of her husband just shy of his thirtieth birthday (she and Percy had married in 1816) and financial troubles, including her father's continual dependency on her for money. She died in 1851.

Looking beyond the personal tragedies, though, one can't help but be impressed at the astonishingly fertile creative climate in which Mary Shelley was raised and lived. Thanks to her parents' beliefs, she largely escaped the traditional lifestyle expected from women at that time and was encouraged to pursue reading, to continue her education and to spend time among thinkers and artists. Shelley could read five languages, including Latin and Greek, and devoured as many as a hundred books a year, among them her parents' works, poetry and literary fiction, treatises on chemistry and biology and, presumably, the Gothic novels that were extremely popular at the beginning of the nineteenth century (one such writer, Ann Radcliffe, a contemporary of Shelley's, was for a time the most successful novelist in England).

Given her rearing and her apparent love of the written word, it's not surprising that such a woman would even as a

Given her rearing and her apparent love of the written word, it's not surprising that such a woman would, even as a teenager, begin writing fiction. What is surprising, however, is the way in which she came to create *Frankenstein*.

The novel grew out of a contest.

Renaissance-dog Snoopy, from the *Peanuts* comic strip, begins his self-proclaimed Great American Novel with the line, "It was a dark and stormy night." Not only do these words echo the original opening sentence of *Frankenstein*—"It was on a dreary night in November...." (now in Chapter Five)—but it describes perfectly the circumstances of the novel's genesis.

In 1816 Shelley, Percy and their infant son, William, along with Shelley's stepsister, traveled to Switzerland to visit Byron, who was living near the Alps with twenty-year-old John William Polidori, his doctor and traveling companion.

"But it proved a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house," Shelley writes in her preface to the 1831 edition of her novel, and, housebound because of the weather, the friends would spend hours talking, presumably—considering these particular individuals—about art, literature and philosophy. Metaphysics too was a topic of discussion:

Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and [Percy] Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated.

Byron then came up with the idea of passing time with a contest: each of them would write a ghost story (they'd been reading some of the supernatural novels they'd found in Byron's villa). Everyone, with the apparent exception of Shelley's stepsister, agreed to participate.

The game seems to have lost energy pretty quickly. Percy gave up completely, as did Byron (though a portion of what he wrote later appeared in one of his poems). John Polidori's story ended up as an undistinguished vampire tale, originally published under Byron's name.

Mary Shelley, on the other hand, took the challenge seriously but she immediately ran into the brick wall of writer's block: "I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations." Finally, she tells us, lying awake in the villa, she had a "waking dream," an image of someone animating a "horrid" creature. From that image the story was born.

Where exactly did this idea spring from? This question has kept critics busy for years. Some have speculated that the central idea in Frankenstein derives from from the writer's own motherless childhood, her difficulties being a young mother herself and philosophic differences with her parents' social radicalism. The motives for picking themes that intrigue authors enough to spend the time and energy to turn them into stories or books are complex and plentiful. This is surely true in the case of Frankenstein as well, though I'm not sure we need to look much further to see why the idea of reanimation resonated within Mary Shelley than a heartbreaking journal entry written just after her first baby died and about a year before she began working on Frankenstein: "Dream that my little baby came to life again; that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived."

Originally Shelley intended to do what Byron had proposed: write a short story. But, at Percy's urging, she began to expand the tale into a novel. She worked on the book, as time allowed, for the next year.

With his wife's blessing, Percy Shelley reviewed and edited the manuscript. His changes, though numerous, tended to be stylistic, grammatical and typographic, rather than thematic or structural. Perhaps his most significant change is tonal: he replaced much of Shelley's comfortable, colloquial diction and vocabulary with more ornate phrases and words. For instance in her original manuscript Shelley used the phrase "we were all equal," which Percy replaced with "neither of us possessed the slightest pre-eminence over the other."²

In the summer of 1817 the manuscript was submitted for publication. Two companies rejected it before a third agreed to publish it and in March of 1818 Frankenstein hit the bookshops, published anonymously. Perhaps because of Percy Shelley's connection with the dedicatee, William Godwin, many believed the poet had written the novel. (Percy also wrote the preface to this edition though it was unattributed.) Others believed Lord Byron was behind the novel. Eventually Mary Shelley's authorship was revealed.

The reaction to the book was widely diverse.

One reviewer wrote in 1818:

It cannot be denied that this is nonsense—but it is nonsense decked out with circumstances and clothed in language highly terrific....
[T]here is something tremendous in the unmeaning hollowness of its sound, and the vague obscurity of its images.³

The comment reminds me of many present-day reviews of commercial thrillers: the critic energetically disapproves of either the subject or the execution (often both) but you can see the kernel of reluctant admission: that the book was a fun read.

^{2.} See Anne K. Mellor, "Choosing a Text of Frankenstein to Teach." In Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, the 1818 Text, J. Paul Hunter, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996. P. 160–66.

^{3.} John Croker, "The Quarterly Review," January 1818. In Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, the 1818 Text, J. Paul Hunter, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996. P. 190.

Still, others praised the book, as we see in this comment about *Frankenstein* from a critic anonymously reviewing one of Mary Shelley's subsequent novels in 1824.

Frankenstein is, I think, the best instance of natural passions applied to supernatural events that I ever met with... I do not allude to the incidents, for they are thrown together with a haste and carelessness so apparent as to be almost confessed; but the sentiments — both of thought and passion — are given with a truth which is equal to their extraordinary vigour.

A second, unrevised version of the novel was published in 1823. For the third edition, in 1831, Mary Shelley revised the novel significantly, despite her claim in the preface that she "changed no portion of the story, nor introduced any new ideas or circumstances." The later edition is more pessimistic than the first version, in which the author held that nature is innately benevolent and that Victor Frankenstein is in control of, and responsible for, his actions. In the 1831 edition, immutable forces of dark nature drive the story. One critic has suggested that the revisions reflect a reaction to the many tragedies that had befallen Shelley since the original publication.⁵

Even those who haven't read Frankenstein are probably familiar with one of the many filmed adaptations. The first play based on the story appeared merely a few years after the book was published. Presumption; or The Fate of Frankenstein, by Richard Brinsley Peake, was first staged in 1823 and was immediately successful. As anyone who's ever "read the book then seen the movie" knows, what works on the page doesn't necessarily work for an audience; in Presumption and many of the other early adaptations the edgier aspects of the novel

^{4.} Anonymous, "Knight's Quarterly," August-November, 1824. In Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, the 1818 Text, J. Paul Hunter, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996. P. 198.

^{5.} Anne K. Mellor, "Choosing a Text of Frankenstein to Teach." In Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, the 1818 Text, J. Paul Hunter, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996. P. 164-65.

were toned down and the story line altered to minimize the flashbacks and keep the story moving in real time.

Over the years the book has been a constant wellspring for theatrical and film adaptors, whose work has ranged from the literal to melodramatic to comedic (one early play was titled Frankenstitch, featuring Victor as a macabre tailor) and even to high camp. I don't know of any other nineteenth-century novels whose adaptations have been tackled by as diverse a crew as Shakespearian actor Kenneth Branagh, Mel Brooks and Andy Warhol.

Apart from adaptations of the novel itself, its influences, themes and imagery have worked their way into many other artistic works. Consider, for instance, the 1998 film Gods and Monsters, a fictionalized account of the final days of James Whale, the director of the 1931 Frankenstein film (the one starring Boris Karloff as the Being). Gods and Monsters is, like Frankenstein, the story of an isolated outcast struggling for a connection with another human being (the gay, aging film maker becomes obsessed with a straight young man).

TV sitcoms, advertising, toys.... The name and image of the Being is firmly entrenched in popular culture. At a suburban mall near where I live is a beer and hotdog joint named "Frank 'N' Stein."

The continual popularity of the novel shouldn't suggest that it's flawless by any means.

Parts of the story are implausible. I don't mean that the premise of assembling and animating a creature is outlandish (it's science fiction, after all, and we come to such tales prepared to accept the incredible) but rather that conventional portions of the story require us to suspend disbelief when doing so shouldn't be necessary. The behavior of the characters, for instance, isn't always a result of the natural consequences of who they are and what they desire and do but are often motivated simply by the dictates of the author. In a subplot in which a young servant girl is unjustly accused of murder, Victor Frankenstein discerns immediately, though for no reason we can see, who the real killer is. But, even

knowing this, he does very little to save the innocent girl from the gallows. Later, Victor ignores certain threats made by the Being and behaves in a way that reminds us of bad slasher films—the scenes in which the co-ed runs back into the house where she knows the killer's waiting.

Too much of the story relies on coincidence. The Being, for example, just happens to find shelter in a hut connected to the house of a family whose conversations he can easily overhear. He learns language and basically all he needs to know about art, philosophy, culture and domestic life in this way. By fluke, he manages to find a portfolio of books, including Paradise Lost (a quote from Milton's epic serves as Frankenstein's epigram), whose themes echo throughout the novel. Far too conveniently the Being also finds Victor Frankenstein's own journal, in which the scientist describes the Being's reanimation and which lets the Being track Frankenstein down.

Though Frankenstein is on its basic level a genre thriller, Mary Shelley occasionally undermines the suspense. Much of the story is told in flashbacks—even flashbacks within flashbacks (as when Frankenstein tells Walton what the Being told him). There is, in fact, very little real-time action.

Melodrama abounds. The characters' emotional experiences are often relayed in such breathless hyperbole that they don't much affect us. Sometimes the author simply gives up and doesn't try to describe scenes—as when the Being says, "No one can conceive the anguish I suffered during the remainder of the night...." Yes, we probably could, and it might be a truly stirring depiction, but the author has to write the passage before we can be moved.

The book is so filled with brain fevers, hysteria, trances, swooning and characters' being overcome by shock and horror that readers get a bit irritated at their delicacy. I suspect that nineteenth-century European *hommes du monde*—even those with a passion for assembling creatures from body parts—would have more grit than Victor often displays.

Still, the novel manages to rise above these faults.

... Frankenstein is a "minor" novel, radically flawed by its sensationalism, by the inflexibly public and oratorical nature of even its most intimate passages. But it is, arguably, the most important minor novel in English.... [I]nvariably we find that the book is larger and richer than any of its progeny and too complex to serve as mere background.⁶

What makes the work so important? Why has it remained popular for so many years?

I think the key is this: Mary Shelley set a very specific goal for herself, one which she never lost sight of in writing the

book: telling a rip-roaring story.

This isn't quite the truism it seems because I mean "story" in a very specific way. My definition is this: a story is the account of conflicts among clearly drawn characters, both good and evil, who deeply engage us, which conflicts are resolved in ways that elicit the most intense emotional reaction possible on the part of the reader. A story, by my definition, is not a character study, a rant, a scolding, a forum for authorial payback, a travelogue, a political, social or philosophical essay, a textbook, least of all an airing of one's own dirty laundry, nor is it solely a showcase for a clever writing style.

Our obligation as suspense writers is to grab the reader by the collar and drag them, sweating, through the tale. I define story in this way because I believe that readers crave this

emotional engagement.

Mary Shelley, perhaps subconsciously, knew this too. In the 1831 edition she states that her goal was "to think of a story,... One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart." (Italics are hers.)

^{6.} George Levine, "The Ambiguous Heritage of Frankenstein." In *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, George Levine and U.C. Knoepflmacher, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. P. 3.

I can't think of a better description of a suspense writer's goal than that, and despite the shortcomings of an apprentice novelist, Shelley succeeded: Frankenstein is a page-turning thriller, blending an expedition adventure, a murder mystery, a horror and sci-fi tale, a romance and a family saga.

She layers conflict upon conflict and we read along eagerly to find out how they're resolved. The book has broader social and psychological issues, which I'll get to in a moment, but what keeps us on the edge of our seats is the question of what's going to happen next: Will the Being get a mate and settle down? Will Justine hang for the murder of Victor's brother? Will Victor be tried for murder in Ireland? Will Victor and his fiancée Elizabeth live happily ever after? Will the explorer Robert Walton and his crew escape from the arctic ice and return safely to England?

One of Mary Shelley's particular achievements in assuring Frankenstein's longevity has been to create a unique and compelling villain. In thriller fiction, perhaps no character is more important than the bad guy. If the author creates a superficial caricature of evil, readers feel no compelling threat, nor does the hero's defeat of that evil (or vice versa) have any emotional impact on us. Putting aside the Being's moral complexity and motives for the carnage he's responsible for, we see him as a truly terrifying force. We may sympathize with the poor creature's sorrow but he's the last thing we want to imagine creeping up our stairs late at night.

The Monster, we are startled to discover, is more frightening than we had imagined, precisely because he does not stumble or speak in monosyllables, because he can speak more rationally and more feelingly than we and his creator do, because his destructiveness is not separate from us but an aspect of ourselves, our responsibility.⁷

^{7.} George Levine and U.C. Knoepflmacher, Preface. In *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, George Levine and U.C. Knoepflmacher, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. P. xiii.

From what she tells us in her 1831 preface, Shelley hit early on one of the most important keys to successful storytelling: empathy with readers. To be successful an author must pick through an abundant storehouse of experiences, emotions and thought and choose those that will achieve the desired effect within the reader. Shelley writes about the sudden insight that decided the subject matter for the book: "What terrified me will terrify others."

Mary Shelley has also given her story a timelessness; it has an immediacy for modern readers and doesn't seem like an artifact, a curiosity from the past. The tone is eerie and otherworldly, but the story doesn't feel rooted in the mores and manners of Europe two hundred years ago. Since Victor's process is described very sketchily, the central action of the book, the reanimation, hasn't grown outmoded; it's remained compelling throughout the years since the novel was written, unlike, say some techno-thrillers of our era, in which the suspense depends so heavily on detailed description of chemistry or biology or weaponry that they're out-dated almost by their publication date.

Finally, as befits a story of this sort, Shelley has decked out her novel with just the right couture of her genre. Her imagery—such as the stark description of the Being—is concrete and memorable and she masterfully imbues the story with classic gothic atmosphere and setting. (We only wish that her husband hadn't muted her bare-knuckle prose as much as he did.)

So, yes, Mary Shelley was a talented storyteller and she succeeded in engaging us with her tale. Frankenstein's endurance, however, must be attributed to something in addition to its being a good yarn. For a horror or suspense tale to transcend the genre and be considered a great book it must incorporate big ideas. It must do so, however, in a very particular way: the ideas must be worked so seamlessly into the plots that they virtually disappear as abstract concepts and deepen the characters and conflicts of the story.

Mary Shelley—daughter of thinkers, friend and lover of thinkers, a thinker herself—incorporated a number of these