

# Studies in Global Science Fiction

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# Global Frankenstein

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*For Kestrel Zandra Davison, Charlotte and Emma Evans,  
and girls and young women everywhere  
and their waking dreams, wild and visionary.*

## FOREWORD

Many people have a story of how they first came across *Frankenstein*. Here's mine. I was about ten, and the books for adults in my parents' modest-sized living-room bookcase were beginning to interest me more than Enid Blyton's weekly magazine *Sunny Stories*. The bookcase contained a stout Casket-of-Literature kind of production called *The World's Best Books*, compiled in about 1934 by a literary man, Wilfred Whitten, who called himself John O'London. I have it still, its binding cracked by the tropic sun, its hinges loose. *The World's Best Books* went from Plato on the Death of Socrates to James Barrie's *The Little Minister*, taking in *Macbeth* and *Adam Bede* on the way—and *Frankenstein*. Of course, it did not contain the whole of the World's Best Books, only thrilling highlights from some of them, strung together with plot summaries and many, many fuzzy pictures, some taken from old British silent movies. This abridged *Frankenstein* was embellished with a portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, her piercing, lashless eyes staring from the page. Her middle name was sinister to my ears, suggesting the craftiness of a wolf and a heart of stone. The James Whale film was not mentioned, but an illustration by an unknown artist showed the Creature, gaunt and bony, cackling with glee, bounding downhill with barefoot leaps, his black hair and tattered tunic streaming in the wind, casting a huge shadow on the opposite mountain slope. As a result, the lumbering fellow with the bolt through his neck has always struck me, I regret to say, as a bit of an imposter.

*Frankenstein* did not scare me out of my wits, but it did leave me with a recurrent waking dream in which a bony phantom hand would grab me by the throat and strangle me without leaving a mark. Retrospectively, I

realised it also left me bothered by the sense of a world gone wrong for which there was no redress. Life was not fair, I knew, but books should be. The fairy tales that I had recently left behind me were full of outrageous creations and transformations, people being turned into asses, statues coming alive, and so on. But they usually ended in some kind of restorative justice. The good might not always prosper, but they would be vindicated in some way. The wise Socrates in *The World's Best Books* was made to drink hemlock, but the record of his calmness in death lived on to show that the good die bravely.

The Creature, however, had murdered innocent people, including a child. Having cheerfully led Frankenstein on to his death, he now declared that he was going to exult as he died in agony on his self-built funeral pyre, so ending up being even braver than Socrates. But as the story finished there, perhaps he was just boasting and had no intention of carrying out his promise. It was very perplexing. But if my moral world was rattled, John O'London's headnote was clear on a crucial point. It warned readers in no uncertain terms against the popular error that Frankenstein is the name of a monster. This was NOT TRUE, for "the only person who ever created a Frankenstein was Mary Shelley, the second wife of the poet." That, at least, was straightforward. A selection of famous poems by the poet in question was also included in *The World's Best Books*. So there they both were, Mary Wollstonecraft and Percy Bysshe, equals in John O'London's eyes.

As Mary Shelley would have said, it was that day that decided my destiny, or a good part of it. Which is how, in 1997, I found myself co-convening "Mary Shelley: Parents, Peers, and Progeny", a conference celebrating the bicentenary of Mary Shelley's birth, at the present Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. By this time, the perplexities that bothered my ten-year-old self had been reconfigured. Recuperating Mary Shelley's reputation as an author of many different kinds of writing, and situating her in the literary world of pre-Victorian Britain, was the work that (it seemed to me and others) most needed to be done at the time. It still continues. Twenty years ago, the emphasis was very much on "The Other Mary Shelley," "Mary Shelley in Her Times," and "Mary Shelley Beyond *Frankenstein*." It is a sign of those times that Marie Mulvey-Roberts, then best known for her groundbreaking study of Rosicrucian fiction, *Gothic Immortals*, contributed one of the only papers on *Frankenstein*, "The Corpse in the Corpus: *Frankenstein*, Rewriting Wollstonecraft and the Object," splendid in title, original in content.

(Many of the conference papers, including Marie's, were later collected by Michael Eberle-Sinatra and published by Macmillan, just before it became Palgrave, in 2000 as *Mary Shelley's Fictions: From Frankenstein to Falkner*.)

That was 20 years ago. But now, in 2018, the bicentenary of *Frankenstein* refocuses attention on Mary Shelley's first and best book. In his day, John O'London was unusual in valuing Mary Shelley's horror novel as a classic of literature, but he could not have predicted that it would become the most taught of all novels in the world. During the 1970s and 1980s, *Frankenstein* was revalorised as a feminist psychobiography, the first true science-fiction novel, a *chef-d'oeuvre* of female gothic, and a political allegory about the origins of the French Revolution. Attention was paid to close reading of *Frankenstein* as text; the first edition, out of print since 1818, was reprinted several times, and a debate ensued as to the degree to which Percy Shelley's interventions in the text had improved the writing or perverted Mary Shelley's intentions. Later, it turned out that Mary Shelley was not the first person to make a Frankenstein. In 2009, Julia Douthwaite discovered a precursor, Félix Nogaret's political allegory, *Le Miroir des événements actuels* (1790), in which a scientist called Frankenstein makes a full-sized mechanical man who plays the flute. In the third millennium, it has become a commonplace to say that *Frankenstein* continues undiminished as a modern myth, speaking to many fears and burning issues of the twenty-first century. Elements within *Frankenstein* are found to anticipate modern ecocriticism, disability studies, transgender concerns, posthumanism, and anxieties about robotics. There has been a notable shift of scholarly interest towards the afterlives of *Frankenstein*. *Frankenstein* studies have fractured into disparate areas of expertise. The extraordinary proliferation of texts, contexts, and adaptations has surpassed the capacity of any single person to encompass them all. All the more reason to take the opportunity to mark *Frankenstein's* bicentenary by opening up spaces where specialism can converse with specialism, as Marie Mulvey-Roberts and Carol Margaret Davison, globally known for their work on the Gothic, have done in assembling this collection. The contributors, established names and new ones, bring fresh insights to traditional areas such as Frankensteinian science, medicine, and monstrosity, or uncover fresh evidence of *Frankenstein's* influence. It is hard to imagine a *Frankenstein* buff who will not learn something new—the sizable corpus of *Frankenstein* adaptations for children, for instance, or what happens to *Frankenstein* when it becomes a digital game. It is both a celebration and a guide to the cutting-edge areas in *Frankenstein* studies today.

Running through the collection is a thread of thought-provoking enquiry: are we approaching the limits to which *Frankenstein* can be adapted and still retain any meaningful relation to the original? The question is both pertinent and ironic: *Frankenstein* is itself a patchwork of other writings, an adaptation of (among other things) Greek myth, Shakespearean drama, the Godwinian novel, and perhaps even *Harlequin and Asmodeus*, the Covent Garden Christmas pantomime for 1810. William Godwin went to the Christmas show at Covent Garden theatre annually. It was his wont to take his family with him, including his daughter, Mary. In the 1810 season, they would have seen the master-clown Joseph Grimaldi beaten and chased off the stage by a pumpkin-headed man that he had created out of Covent Garden vegetables. It was a famous turn of Grimaldi; after *Frankenstein* was published, he began to be called Joe Frankenstein. Years later, people still remembered his fight with the Vegetable Man as one of the funniest things that they had ever seen. But if *Frankenstein* began with a pumpkin, the whirligig of Time has brought the pumpkin round again. Today, farmers looking for a seasonal novelty crop produce Pumpkinsteins for the Halloween trade, squashes grown in moulds in the shape of the head of Karloff's monster.

I am interrupted in these reveries. What do these sounds portend? I must arise and examine. What is this? It is an email about Frankenreads, a worldwide planned celebration of *Frankenstein*, sponsored by the Keats-Shelley Association of America, involving readings of the novel and other events worldwide on the model of the Joycean Bloomsday, to take place during Halloween 2018. Readers, teachers, and devotees of *Frankenstein* will be able to do more than put a scary Pumpkinstein in the window. As I write, 140 participant institutions in 30 countries are signed up to the project. A literalisation of the title of Mulvey-Roberts' and Davison's scintillating and timely collection—*Global Frankenstein* indeed!

Anglia Ruskin University  
Cambridge, UK  
January, 2018

Nora Crook

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*Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit* (2012) celebrates play, plasmatic possibility, and the life of images in cartoons, comics, and cinema. *Hellboy's World: Comics and Monsters on the Margins* (2016) investigates the "adventure of reading" that comics offer. Bukatman has been published in abundant journals and anthologies, including *October*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Camera Obscura*, and *Science Fiction Studies*.

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