

January 2022



Dear Club Members,

In January 1818 a book called *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* was published. It was written by Mary Shelley, and was initially published anonymously, but her name did appear in the second edition published in 1821. Shelley started writing the story when she was just 18. It's generally considered to be the first science fiction book. To put the publication date in context, *Emma* by Jane Austen was published in 1816.

The story has its origins in a Genevan Villa. Shelley was travelling in 1816 with her future husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley (the poet), and they were visiting Lord Byron. The year had been exceptionally wet, a volcanic eruption disrupted global weather patterns, resulting in a volcanic winter instead of summer sunshine. Sitting around the fire Byron proposed that they tell each other ghost stories, and Shelley developed a tale focusing on a re-animated corpse.

She was born Mary Woollstonecraft Godwin in 1797, daughter of feminist philosopher, educator, and writer Mary Wollstonecraft philosopher, and novelist, and journalist William Godwin. Her mother died shortly after she was born, and she was raised by her father. Whilst she didn't have a formal education her father tutored her in a wide range of subjects. It's not clear when she first met the poet-philosopher Percy Bysshe Shelley for the first time, but by 1814 they were meeting in secret, she was 16, and he was 21. He was already estranged from his first wife.

On the 26th June, after their relationship became public, and following the disapproval of her father the couple eloped, taking with them Mary's stepsister Claire Clairmont. They travelled to France and spent the summer on the continent. When they reached Lucerne they had run out of money, and in September returned to England. By this time Mary was pregnant, and her father had cut off all support. They moved in to lodgings, dodging creditors. It's almost certain that at this time Percy was also having a relationship with Claire. In February 1815 she gave birth to a daughter, 2 months prematurely, who died. Little is known about Mary's life for the next year. Percy's finances improved upon the death of his grandfather, but her diary is lost. In January 1816 she gave birth to a son who survived. Later that year in May the group traveled to Geneva, Claire was pregnant after an affair with Lord Byron. By September they were back in England, and in October Percy's wife was found drowned. This allowed the couple to marry, which healed the rift with Mary's family. Mary was pregnant again at this point. By the summer of 1817 the work on *Frankenstein* was finished, and it was published in the following January.

Later that spring they left again for Italy, with no intentions of returning to England. They acquired a circle of friends and acquaintances who often travelled with them. During this time Mary continued to write, but her life wasn't always easy. The couple had a non-exclusive marriage, but Percy spent much of his time engaged in relationships with other women. Both of her children died from illness, and she became seriously unwell as a result of further pregnancies and miscarriages. In 1822 Percy Shelley died in a sailing accident. This left Mary in serious financial difficulty, as she was reliant on an allowance from Percy's father as her surviving son was the heir to the Shelley estate. She continued writing and also edited her husband's poems to supplement her income. By 1839

Mary was becoming unwell, suffering from headaches and paralysis, she died in 1851 from a suspected brain tumour.

Her literary work is enormously extensive, but she remains most famous for the story she developed in that Geneva Villa as a teenager. For many Frankenstein is the archetypal monster, even though Frankenstein is actually the name of the creator of The Creature. The story was first released as a black and white horror film in 1931, and it is this image of the monster that has captured public imagination. Universal studios changed and developed many aspects of its appearance. In Mary's original version The Creature is intelligent and capable of speech, he's also not described as being made with sewn together body parts. Perhaps most crucially in the novel his skin is described as being yellow. So why do we now have a vision of the creature as being green? It's all due to the limitations of the black and white film. The original Frankenstein movie is a high contrast, black and white affair, and yellow face paint just didn't create a strong enough visual. The film was an unexpected success, spawning a number of sequels. The book itself is now out of copyright, but Universal owns the trademark for the particular design of The Creature used in the original films. This meant that any other film maker had to develop a dramatically different design. However the green skinned, flat headed and neck bolts are the visual that stuck in people's minds.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Further Reading/ Watching-

Mary Shelley's life-

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/frankenstein-published>

<https://www.b1.uk/people/mary-shelley>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/13/frankenstein-at-200-why-hasnt-mary-shelley-been-given-the-respect-she-deserves->

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/12/the-strange-and-twisted-life-of-frankenstein>

<https://lithub.com/the-treacherous-start-to-mary-and-percy-shelleys-marriage/>

Why did the creature develop Green Skin?

<https://screenrant.com/frankenstein-monster-skin-color-change-movies-why/>

Creating Universal Films Creature

<https://www.monstersofmakeup.com/2020/11/12/making-up-universals-frankenstein/>

Docu-Film from the National Theatre about Mary Shelley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4p96vql3zA>

Theatre performances at The National Theatre (also on Amazon Prime in the UK)-

<https://www.ntathome.com/products/frankenstein-benedict-cumberbatch-as-creature>

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