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**BOOKS**

## In the Lab Late One Night

By ALEXANDRA MULLEN

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If you attended college from the mid-1980s on, chances are that you've read Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" at least once. Her 1818 novel gets taught in surveys of Romanticism and the Rise of the Novel, in Women's Studies courses, and even in classes on science and medical ethics. It has also, of course, spawned movies both serious and spoofing, comic books, and cultural detritus of all kinds. According to Susan Tyler Hitchcock, the author of "**Frankenstein: A Cultural History**" -- an entertainingly informative book that mixes academic talk and popular culture -- there are more than 1,500 Frankenstein-related items on eBay at any one time, ranging from bobbleheads to rare manuscripts. Now *that's* scary.

Even people who predate the academic resurrection of "Frankenstein" will know something about the novel's plot. Mary Shelley created a cosseted scholar, Victor Frankenstein, who constructs a giant creature out of body parts raided from graveyards. At the very moment that he brings the creature to life (exactly how he does so is vague), however, the purely intellectual ardor that impelled him to such an act is snuffed out. "Unable to endure the aspect of the being [he] had created," he abandons it. Parentless, the creature sets out in the world, receives an education (reading Plutarch and Milton and becoming fluent in French) and turns vengeful only when spurned by those he hoped to love.



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A classic vintage poster of the 1931 Frankenstein movie starring Boris Karloff.

At this point it is probably not giving too much away to say that, ultimately, the creature kills his creator and plans to kill himself, too. Or, as the journalist Samuel Rosenberg once described the story's ending: "The poor nameless son-of-a-botch leaps out of a cabin window onto an ice floe and drifts off." Shelley's novel is an elaborate matryoshka doll: Nesting deep inside is an antihero who is eloquent and nimble and seemingly human, down to his loves, hatreds and twinges of conscience.

When Mary Shelley revised her novel more than 10 years after its publication, she talked about it in terms reminiscent of her monster, but her feelings were warmer than Victor's

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**DETAILS**
**FRANKENSTEIN: A CULTURAL HISTORY**

By Susan Tyler Hitchcock  
 (Norton, 392 pages,  
 \$25.95)



toward his creation: "I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days." But "Frankenstein" didn't really need her wishes to prosper. Already by 1823, Ms. Hitchcock tells us, it had inspired a knock-off play, titled "Presumption," that helped to shape so many popular reimaginings. It featured a speechless monster and gave Victor a sidekick (once Fritz, then Franz, now Igor).

The monster of "Presumption" was painted gray-blue and wore a toga. The many illustrations that Ms. Hitchcock includes show a wide variety of imagined creatures, including a slender Beardsley-esque one from the late 19th century and Edison's hairy 1910 film ghoul. It wasn't until James Whale's 1931 movie starring Boris Karloff that Frankenstein's monster -- bolts in the neck, squared-off head with transplant scar, lumbering gait -- took iconic form. Later movies, such as Britain's Hammer Horror films, "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" and "Frankenweenie," have performed burlesques on the Karloff image but never displaced it.

Some of the most fascinating sections of Ms. Hitchcock's book describe the causes to which the Frankenstein myth has been attached. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Charles Sumner said that "the Southern Confederacy will be the soulless monster of Frankenstein." In the 1880s, political cartoonists showed Britain faced by the Frankenstein of Irish nationalism. World War II brought Hitler as the monster; cartoonists now give it the label al Qaeda, Iran or Iraq. The image both conveys the threat facing innocent good guys and hints at a lethal force that will one day turn back on its creator and destroy it.



It is not surprising that Victor Frankenstein, in his quest for the secrets of life, should also come to mind as scientific advances move ever closer to those "sweet mysteries of life" that Madeline Kahn sang about in "Young Frankenstein." (By the way, the theatrical version of Mel Brooks's 1974 movie is opening on Broadway in about 10 days.) The first heart transplants and test-tube babies, and the cloning of Dolly the sheep, brought Frankenstein into the headlines as a shorthand for our fears of medical technology run amok. The Washington Post identified Frankenstein Syndrome only half-facetiously: "In this recurring epidemic, many people from all walks of life are seized with grandiose fantasies that a supernatural force of evil is about to be unleashed on an unsuspecting world." And let's not forget Frankenfoods.

From adaptation to parody to symbol, the monster has taken on a life of his own. Ms. Hitchcock surveys television shows like "The Munsters" and "Shock Theater" and Frankenstein-themed movies in France, Italy, Mexico, West Germany and even Egypt. When academics get into the act, they pay homage to Shelley's novel and its progeny in everything from the Norton Anthology of English Literature to "Frankenstein Meets the Space Monster" (a cheesy 1965 movie whose scriptwriters, including a professor and some graduate students, created an extended in-joke about the University of Virginia English Department).

"Frankenstein" seems unique in being a literary work that has turned into a kind of folk myth, or at least a myth that all kinds of folk respond to. The biggest shift in the almost 200 years since the novel's publication lies in our attitudes toward Victor and his creation. Most of us are far more sympathetic to the monster than 19th-century readers were, and we have much less patience for Victor, who seems whiny and spoiled. In the Beatles' animated movie "Yellow Submarine" (1968), the monster morphs into John

Lennon. "All he needs," notes Ms. Hitchcock wryly, "is love."

*Ms. Mullen writes for The New Criterion, The Hudson Review and other publications.*

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