

*The Fountains of Paradise* is full of speculation about the existence and nature of God. Traditional religion has been swept away in this vision of the future. Superintelligent, but not omniscient, aliens have arrived in the solar system and have taken the place of the deity. By gaining easy access to space via the Orbital Tower, humanity will find something there to make all the effort

worthwhile. For a nonbeliever, Clarke spends a significant amount of time investigating this ultimate question in his writing. *The Fountains of Paradise* may be the most interesting of his theological flirtations. It brings to mind William Blake's definition of God as nothing other than the intellectual fountain of humanity.

—Steven Lehman

## FRANKENSTEIN

*Victor Frankenstein discovers the secret of life and creates a monster whose despair and anger ruin the lives of Frankenstein and his family*

**Author:** Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797–1851)

**Genre:** Science fiction—cautionary

**Type of work:** Novel

**Time of work:** The late eighteenth century

**Location:** Europe and the great northern polar seas

**First published:** 1818

### THE STORY

*Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* is framed as a series of letters written by polar explorer Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret Saville, who is home in England. He relates to her his adventures, including a story told to him by a young man, Victor Frankenstein, whom his ship has rescued from the polar ice.

As a young university student at Ingolstadt, in Bavaria, Frankenstein is determined to find the secret of life. He studies constantly, ignoring his family back in Geneva, Switzerland. He steals body parts from charnel houses and medical laboratories, then uses the power of electricity to create a living being. He immediately knows he has erred: His creature is ghastly. It leaves Frankenstein's quarters but remains in his life.

Frankenstein next sees the creature back in Geneva, where he has returned following the death of his young brother William. Although a servant girl, Justine, is accused of causing William's death, Frankenstein sees the creature lurking near the place of the murder and knows he is the killer. Frankenstein's anguish is intensified when innocent Justine is executed for the murder.

In his agony, Frankenstein leaves home to wander in the mountains. The creature confronts him and tells him his own story.

After leaving Ingolstadt, the creature wanders throughout the countryside.

He discovers quickly that he is frightening and repugnant to humans and takes to traveling at night and hiding during the day. The creature learns to speak and to read during a long stay in a hovel attached to a poor farm family's hut. During his stay, he performs many kindnesses for the family and feels sympathy for their poverty. He befriends the old father, who is blind.

As soon as other family members return and see him, they flee. In anger, the creature sets their farm on fire.

He makes his way to Geneva, saving a small child from drowning along the way. Every time he tries to perform an act of kindness, however, he causes a reaction of horror. On the mountain-top, the creature begs Frankenstein to make him a mate so he need not be lonely. Then, he says, he will leave humankind alone and live with his mate in seclusion. If not, he says, he will be with Frankenstein on his wedding night.

Frankenstein promises to make him a mate but questions his wisdom. He travels to England with his friend William Clerval, then goes alone to an isolated spot in Scotland to carry out his promise. He cannot finish the job. He abandons it and prepares to return home. The creature, infuriated by Frankenstein's unwillingness to keep a promise, kills Clerval, then returns to Geneva to kill Frankenstein's bride, his adopted sister Elizabeth, on their wedding night.

The tragedy and the guilt are too much to bear. Frankenstein resolves to pursue the monster until

one of them is dead. He travels by dogsled across the snowy expanses of Russia toward the North Pole. He is picked up by Robert Walton's ship during his pursuit and dies on the ship after telling Walton his story. The creature appears and tells Walton of his remorse for his deeds, then sets off into the cold to build his own funeral pyre.

#### ANALYSIS

Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* as part of a friendly ghost-story writing competition with her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and friend Lord Byron when she was eighteen years old. The novel has prompted many melodramatic takeoffs in film and much critical interest. It is one of the earliest works of science fiction, and the scientific techniques described in it are shadowy at best, yet they represent adequately the scientific knowledge of the time.

The book's subtitle links it to the Prometheus myth, popular in the Romantic era. Both Percy Shelley and Lord Byron wrote Promethean poems. Prometheus, a Titan, stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans, allowing them to thrive and create. Frankenstein's creature was brought to life through the "fire" of lightning. In both cases, the reader must wonder whether the powers given to humankind are blessings or curses. The novel questions what responsibility humankind has in the face of achievements that can have both good and bad results. Frankenstein's suffering clearly shows that he realizes too

late that he miscalculated the destructive potential of his discovery.

The novel is filled with imagery of light and dark. The creature, brought to life through the power of lightning, is always in the shadows of darkness, and he commits dark deeds.

The Romantic writers with whom Shelley can be connected wrote in part as a revolt against the Enlightenment assumption that scientific advances and education represent the highest possibilities of humankind.

If scientific achievement is paramount to Frankenstein, it comes at the expense of humanity, including the lives of everyone whom Frankenstein loves. *Frankenstein* offers interesting views of the psyche of man in both Frankenstein and his creature, and of the social damage that can result when love is denied, as it was to the creature, or relegated to low status, as it was by Frankenstein. Apsychological inquiry also suggests the idea of the creature being the double, or dark side, of Frankenstein.

One interesting stylistic device in the novel is the lack of a constant or reliable narrator: Robert Walton, Frankenstein, and the creature all tell their own stories. The reader thus is given different points of view from which to judge the story. Another point of interest is the consideration of gender: The novel has a female author, employs stereotyped female characters, and shows contrasts between the typically male and female motives of ambition and love.

—Janine Rider

## FRANKENSTEIN UNBOUND

*Joe Bodenland is caught in a "Timeslip" that takes him to nineteenth century Switzerland, where he meets Mary Shelley and the characters in her novel Frankenstein*

**Author:** Brian W. Aldiss (1925– )

**Genre:** Science fiction—cautionary

**Type of work:** Novel

**Time of work:** 2020 and 1816

**Locale:** New Houston, Texas, and nineteenth century Geneva, Switzerland

**First published:** 1973

#### THE STORY

In the year 2020, worldwide racial war has broken out. Retired diplomat Joseph Bodenland writes to his wife, Mina, asking her to return and describing an odd ceremony performed by their grandchildren. The children buried a motor scooter, adorned the "grave" with flowers, and danced around it, asking for a "good Feast." Bodenland observes that "children live in myth." He refers to this enigmatic incident several times during the course of the novel.

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