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It'll Take More Than A Few Angry Villagers To Kill Off 'Frankenstein'

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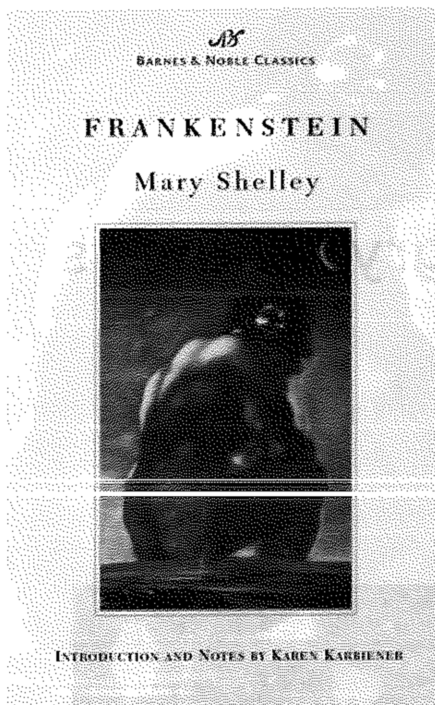
GENEVIEVE VALENTINE

Angry villagers — like these, from James Whale's classic 1931 film version of *Frankenstein*.
Getty Images/Getty Images

In 1841, small-town parish clerk William Hinton got his first look at an English locomotive in action. Writer Julian Young recorded Hinton's breathless reaction: "Well Sir, that was a sight to have seen; but one I never care to see again! How awful! I tremble to think of it! I don't know what to compare it to, unless it be to a messenger ... with a commission to spread desolation and destruction over this fair land! How much longer shall knowledge be allowed to go on increasing?"



Frankenstein

by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Paperback, 288 pages

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It's a sketch of parochial panic; by 1871 when Young's journal was published, trains were indispensable to Britain, and Hinton's dismay was useless terror in the face of a foregone future. But Hinton was asking a question that preoccupied the 19th century, not to mention the centuries since. And should he have dared to read *Frankenstein*, maybe he'd have been comforted to know that his worries were shared by one of the most influential works of speculative fiction ever written.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of Mary Shelley's novel — originally published in 1818 and significantly revised in 1831 — which is timeless in a way that's equally impressive and depressing, for very Hinton reasons. Victor Frankenstein's ambition to conquer death has become a modern folktale because of the visceral terror that comes from confronting the consequences whenever knowledge has outpaced responsibility. (It's not a struggle that was widely appreciated when Shelley published it anonymously in 1818. Reviews condemned the author's "diseased and wandering imagination," and fretted that the book "inculcates no lesson of conduct, manners, or morality" in describing its supernatural stand-off.)

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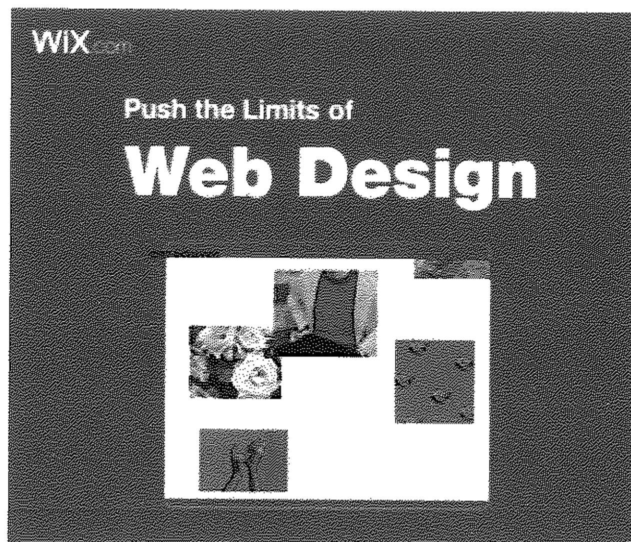

Despite lacking any lessons in manners, *Frankenstein* caught the public imagination. (Its best ambassador was actually the stage; *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* opened in 1823, and others followed in short order. From these came the silent, physically startling monster — something film would wholeheartedly adopt.) It's no wonder the story has been interpreted so often; the endless waves of scientific sea changes since its publication mean that questioning humanity in the face of technological progress is a going concern.

Merely tracing *Frankenstein*'s science-fictional concepts, or the medium of its adaptations, tells a tale. England's first electric-lightbulb factory opened in 1881, less than a century after Luigi Galvani's "wonderful phenomenon" jolted a frog. The first *Frankenstein* film came out in 1910, only 92 years after the novel. And poor Hinton would've fainted to know how much biodiversity has been threatened by industrial developments to his fair land.

The scope of the story has spawned a staggering number of adaptations: novels, comics, video games, television, film. But perhaps the most fascinating adaptation of *Frankenstein* is the 1831 edition — likely the one you've read — so different from the 1818 text it's clear the story haunted the author as much as it did her readers. In 1818, nature is nurturing, Frankenstein repeatedly rejects chances to take responsibility for

his actions, and the Creature is driven to violent revenge by hatred of his fickle maker.

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By 1831, Shelley was so transformed by grief (and perhaps by pious pressure) that that year's edition reflects a fundamentally shifted worldview: Nature's brutally indifferent, Frankenstein's a pawn of God helpless against the tragedies he sets in motion, and the Creature's trapped in violent loneliness. It's a revision that colors even small changes. In 1818, a letter from sea captain Walton ends with a promise to be "cool, persevering, and prudent." 1831 Walton adds a rumination on glory meant to be rhetorical but which, through this lens, feels like anguish grasping for an answer: "What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man?" (How much longer shall knowledge be allowed to go on increasing?)

This year, naturally, is a timely one for adaptations. It marks the English-language publication of Ahmed Saadawis' *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, which moves the story to a war-torn Iraq, with a monster made of body parts from bomb casualties who finds that his quest for revenge might be perpetual. And the National Theatre's 2011 stage adaptation is being re-released in movie theaters. Its defining angle: Frankenstein and the Creature are shared between the lead actors, and so the man and what he made are interchangeable.

This is the fear that lurks in *Frankenstein's* great question — that we're somehow so complicit in things we refuse to think about that we, too, have made monsters by mistake. In 1818, Frankenstein trembled to have created a being that could think for itself. In 1841, William Hinton trembled at a machine that cleaved the countryside and signaled unimaginable change. Now, when your vacuum is mapping your house for data the company can sell and the Antarctic is melting at three times the rate it was a decade ago, Dr. Frankenstein's ambition hits home, and it's easier to imagine Hinton's terror — someone who saw something barreling at him that was impossible to stop.

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It's a signal of the story's cultural ubiquity and staying power that "Frankenstein" has become shorthand when trying to understand anyone who's created something that then gets out of control. Facebook has repeatedly been labeled a Frankenstein amid advertising and privacy concerns, and Tesla CEO Elon Musk — who's in a Space Race with Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, and recently launched one of his cars into the great beyond and delivered statements on the dangers of AI — recently tweeted a quote from the novel ("You are my creator, but I am your master") that's fascinating in its implications.

Like any evergreen story, *Frankenstein* has remained in our cultural memory because it offers something back, no matter what you bring to it — and there are plenty of things to take. What it offers is, by and large, not hopeful. The story in which Frankenstein is powerless against the will of a cruel God that helps him manifest a monster doomed to rob him of his family is, if anything, more terrifying than the one in which Frankenstein is a feckless jerk who orchestrates his own misery despite

multiple opportunities to make good. Walton gets to sail home; otherwise, good luck finding a silver lining.

But it's no surprise that a story about taking responsibility for the wreckage of great ambitions is often rough going. *Frankenstein* has been popular for two centuries because every era since has felt like the end times to those in it, so every era needs a story unafraid to discuss annihilation. (For as long as there are enough icy wastes left for the Creature to vanish into, anyway.) Though pop culture has occasionally softened its edges, rendered it laughable, or missed the point, the novel remains as pointed as ever. For two centuries, we've been William Hintons, staring at the future and wondering if it's too late. *Frankenstein* knows why we're asking; it's here, when we're ready.

Genevieve Valentine's latest novel is Icon.

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