

ARTS & LETTERS

How Frankenstein Came to Life

THE SOURCE: "Who Wrote Frankenstein?" by Jonathan Gross, in *The Common Review*, Fall 2007.

YOU'VE HEARD THE ARGUMENT before: How could a Stratford grain hoarder and a rube who didn't own books possibly be the real Shakespeare? The answer, according to some, is that Shakespeare is merely the nom de plume of a writer with a proper pedigree: Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, schooled at Cambridge at age eight. Most scholars disagree.

Now the authorship question is being applied with a misogynistic twist to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797–1851). How could an 18-year-old girl possibly have written the soaring prose of *Frankenstein*? How could she have conceived its homoerotic themes? How could she have conjured a plot so deep and enduring? How could she have recognized the danger inherent in creating life, of usurping both God's and women's role? The answer, coming from a new klatch of critics, is that she didn't. They say the author of the most

famous horror story of all time was a man, her husband: Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The dispute over the authorship of *Frankenstein* might never have emerged were it not for the extraordinary revival of interest in the novel in academic and popular circles that has resulted from the sometimes-frightening advances in genetic engineering and other fields. Though "rarely considered literature for a century and a half,"

writes Jonathan Gross, an English professor at DePaul University, *Frankenstein* has become the subject matter of entire college courses. The book is available in no fewer than 53 editions.

The story goes that Frankenstein appeared to Mary Shelley in a nightmare after Lord Byron issued a challenge to write a horror story during a summer holiday in Switzerland. When the book was published anonymously in 1818, Sir Walter Scott gave it a favorable review and treated it as the work of Percy Shelley. Mary Shelley wrote to disabuse him of "continuing in the mistake of supposing Mr. Shelley guilty of a juvenile attempt of mine."

The "Percy-as-author" school

says that Mary could not be the creator because her subsequent books, several of them written after her husband drowned, are not as well written. She brought on suspicion by destroying some documents from the period during which *Frankenstein* was written. But the principal charge against her is that no teenage girl could possibly have written such a masterpiece.

Mary Shelley, however, was no ordinary 18-year-old. Daughter of anarchist philosopher William Godwin and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (who died from complications of childbirth after her daughter was born), Mary



The 18-year-old author of *Frankenstein*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, had the help of a good editor, her poet husband Percy.

Shelley read Latin, French, and Italian and was tutored in science, history, and literature. Those destroyed documents? They were writings that she feared might anger her hostile father-in-law and damage her son's chances of inheriting his estate.

Shelley specialists have examined the penmanship of *Frankenstein*, letter by letter, concluding that Percy Shelley wrote at least 1,000 and possibly more than 4,000 words of the finished volume of roughly 270 pages. They say that Percy Shelley changed spelling, grammar, and awkward phrases, but the book remains Mary Shelley's creation. Her husband's work was little more than the contributions of an editor. "Perhaps those of a *very* good editor," Gross says.

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Brooklyn Dodgers

THE SOURCE: "Wonder Bread" by Melvin Jules Bukiet, in *The American Scholar*, Autumn 2007.

A WARM-AND-FUZZY POX HAS infected Brooklyn, New York's newly hip borough. There, a clique of extremely successful young writers has taken up residence and begun producing Brooklyn Books of Wonder (BBoWs). BBoWs, says novelist and Sarah Lawrence College writing teacher Melvin Jules Bukiet, are produced according to a sure-fire recipe: "Take mawkish self-indulgence, add a heavy dollop of creamy nostalgia, season with magic realism, stir in complacency of faith, and you've got wondrousness."

Among those infected with wonder are Jonathan Safran Foer, Dave Eggers, Myla Goldberg, and Nicole Krauss, all of whom have written briskly selling novels (in Eggers's case, a novelistic memoir, *A Heart-breaking Work of Staggering Genius*) in recent years. Others belong to this writing school in spirit. Pulitzer winner Michael Chabon, for example, is a wonder boy, though he lives in the San Francisco Bay area and is slightly older; Alice Sebold is an out-of-state lady of the club. It's time, Bukiet suggests, that these books come in for the shaming they deserve.

Most BBoWs display several of the following symptoms: child protagonists (often orphans); triumphs over great adversity; epiphanies and lessons learned; "mothy, softcore sex" and "pallid, softcore religion"; wisdom doled out by sage elders; and escapist fantasies "garnished with intellectual flourishes."

Take Sebold's 2002 novel *The Lovely Bones*, which is narrated by Susie, a 14-year-old who has been raped and murdered and looks down on her family and friends from heaven. The real crime in *The Lovely Bones*, according to Bukiet, is the healing handed out to everybody. Even the heaven-bound Susie eventually gets to experience beautiful sex vicariously by occupying a young friend's body during the act.

Ditto for Foer's treatment of the Holocaust and the 9/11 attacks, the subjects, respectively, of *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). In both books, wonder is history's antidote. The young protagonists' quests for personal

answers to grand tragedies evoke "deep nostalgia" for the past and an inability to confront the "grotesque reality" of the present.

Yet people buy BBoWs "by the truckload" because they "instantly trigger the 'Awww' reflex of narcissistic empathy," Bukiet sniffs. To make matters worse, some BBoWs are actually well written, rendering them even more "insidious."

Serious fiction sharpens reality, Bukiet says, while BBoWs rescue us from it. "Your father is dead, or your mother, and so are most of the Jews of Europe, and the World Trade Center's gone, and racism prevails, and sex murders occur. What is, is. The real is the true, and anything that suggests otherwise, no matter how artfully constructed, is a violation of human experience."

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At Odds Over Architecture

THE SOURCE: "America's Favorite Buildings" by Witold Rybczynski, in *Wharton Real Estate Review*, Fall 2007.

WHEN IT COMES TO GOOD architecture, the public and the professionals don't always see eye to eye, but just how rarely they agree is disquieting. Almost three-quarters of the "most important buildings" selected by architects in a recent survey didn't show up at all on a new list of the American public's favorite buildings.

The three best-loved structures on the people's list are the Empire State Building, the White House, and the Washington National Cathedral, designed by men most