JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 2, Issue 3, July 2018
ISSN 2472-0837

Letter from the Editor

Hello, readers!

In the past year, the JOSF has grown by many different measures: we've been added to EBSCO's Humanities Search Complete database, and we're receiving many more great submissions. Our first themed issue—issue 2.2, on Afrofuturism—was a definite success, and we have plans in the works for next year's special issue, which will focus on disability in science fiction. (A call for papers for that special issue will be forthcoming soon!) And the JOSF, particularly our assistant managing editor, Aisha Matthews, participated in this year's Escape Velocity convention; Aisha, who also serves as the director of programming for the literary track at Escape Velocity, put together an exciting slate of discussions and panels.

Overall, in fact, we've grown so much that we need to expand our staff. If you're interested in being part of the JOSF, please check out the Call for Volunteers included in this issue. If you want to contribute to the scholarly discourse about science fiction, we'd love to hear from you!

I have been thinking a great deal about the purpose of the JOSF and of science fiction more generally, partly because I was musing about one of the genre's foundational texts: Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. 2018 marks the 200th anniversary of the initial publication of *Frankenstein,* one of the most influential novels in the English language (and not just for sci-fi). Shelley's tale has been adapted into countless other forms, and it's still widely read today--a rare feat for a book of its vintage. What's the secret of its longevity? The always-relevant warning about hubris and lack of perspective? Successful horror? The bizarre narrative that mixes a bunch of different voices? Its sympathetic portrait of an alienated monster?

Predictably, it's all of those things.

The most obvious significance of the novel is its philosophical content. *Frankenstein* has a perpetual life as a meditation on the dangers of reckless science. Whether you've read it or not, you know the story: scientist creates something without sufficient thought, scientist realizes (usually only after catastrophe strikes) that it's a mistake, scientist discovers that it's too late to remedy. It's the foundation of countless other stories. That cautionary tale, retold over and over again, never loses its relevance, because our ability to discover things always outstrips our ability to fully understand them. *Frankenstein* spawned all kinds of other texts, from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to *Jurassic Park* and *Westworld*.

At the same time, the novel owes some of its eternal popularity to its ability to scare--or at least gross out--even today's comparatively jaded readers. I'm a college teacher, and my students read *Frankenstein* last year. One of them came to class and said, "This is the ickiest thing I've ever read." She added, "I couldn't stop reading it."

She has a point. Despite a certain vagueness in the scientific explanation of how Frankenstein brings the creature to life, Shelley spares no grotesque details about his composition. Victor Frankenstein assembles his creature from bits and pieces of corpses snatched from "the dissecting room and the slaughter-house."

The scientist reflects, "Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay?...I collected bones from charnel-houses and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame."

The body horror isn't just window dressing. The visceral disgust reinforces the novel's sense of scope, making the reader feel the significance of those "tremendous secrets." The monster is born out of death, decay, and violation. It's hardly surprising that he's condemned to live apart from people, unable to reach them and build relationships. For a world of readers whose religious and moral sense was heavily rooted in the integrity of the body, it's difficult to imagine how deeply those details would resonate.

In my view, though, Mary Shelley's most important achievement in this novel is neither the horror nor the cautionary tale. The real genius of the book—the reason it still lives after two hundred years—comeas in the middle, in the poignant narrative written by the monster himself. This "fiend" is an abandoned child, created by an irresponsible parent who then refuses to grant him the rights of a person. There's no concrete reason that the nameless wretch can't become part of human society. He's both intelligent and social—after all, he learns to speak solely by observing the people around him—and his inability to become part of a group causes him enormous grief. He eventually pours out that grief to his creator, but to no avail; the natural xenophobia of humans makes it impossible for him to find a place in the world.

As countless readers over the decades have observed, the real monster is Frankenstein himself, a sociopath who lacks even the most basic understanding of how other people think and feel. He creates his "demon" because he is seized by the "passion" of scientific discovery and cannot stop to consider the consequences. His short-sightedness is compounded by his refusal to face his creation. Once the fiend has been brought to life, Frankenstein flees *without saying a single word*. When the monster calls Frankenstein to account for his neglect, he accuses, "You had endowed me with perceptions and passions and then cast me abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind." His complaint is just, and the reader's sympathy is entirely with the monster.

It's not difficult to understand why Frankenstein assumes that his creation is less important than a human being—he thinks that his ability to endow the creature with life means that his creation holds no mysteries, can do nothing without his intervention. Events prove this to be untrue; given the right capacities and tools, the "monster" can learn social rules, language, writing, self-awareness, and emotion. Frankenstein, however, cannot see those qualities. He's blind to the nature of his own creation.

This portrait has topical significance today, as science makes advances in artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. Thoughtful reflection on Shelley's narrative raises all kinds of questions about the way we live now. If we could create "strong AI," when—and how—would we have to acknowledge that our creations had rights, just as we do? When does a creation stop being our property and start to be its own self? And how do we know whether we'd be able to identify that when it happens?

Even closer to home: how does the plight of this creature speak about the ways that we treat other human beings? Reading about Frankenstein's monster can help readers grapple with ideas about alienation and

marginalization—ideas that have central importance in our current political landscape. What does it mean to deny a living, thinking creature the rights of a person, just because he looks different from us or was born under different circumstances from our own? What does it mean to turn our backs on a sensitive, intelligent being and to allow the other members of our society to be affected by the eventual consequences of that neglect?

Here at the MOSF, we believe that science fiction plays an essential role in thinking through our own presence in the world. The best sci-fi forces us to confront our ugly facets as well as the noble ones, in the hope that when the reality catches up to the fiction, we'll do better because we've had the chance to think about it.

Frankenstein has been prompting us to think about it for two hundred years. Thanks, Mary Shelley.

--Heather McHale, Ph.D.
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