6.08 Classic Short Cuts: Frankenstein

Angourie [host]
Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I offer my respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

[upbeat, twinkly piano music fades in]

Angourie [host]
Hello and welcome back to The Community Library, a podcast all about stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[theme music fades out]

Angourie [host]
Have you ever read a classic? Have you ever wanted to read a classic, but not known where to begin? Have you ever started reading a classic and then given up because it was just too confusing? If you haven't visited The Community Library before, hello and welcome! My name is Angourie and I'm an actor, writer, and avid reader. And, I'm a classic literature lover. I started this podcast four years ago with an aim to share my love of storytelling, and make critical thinking accessible to all types of readers. And a genre which is typically considered inaccessible to readers is classics.

There are a few things which I think make classics feel inaccessible to readers. Reputation, surrounding academia, and outdated language. Sometimes classics require background knowledge which would have been well-known at the time it was written, but maybe not so much now. Some classics have extensive casts of characters, or different characters who go by the same name. Some classics might seem stuffy and boring in today's context, but were actually ground-breaking at the time. So today's mini episode is the first in a series of classic short cuts. These are not episodes to listen to instead of reading the book, but rather some helpful tips and things to know before you go into it, which will hopefully make your reading experience easier and more enjoyable. Our first classic we're tackling: *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, published in 1818.

Mary Shelley

Let's begin with Mary Shelley herself. She was born in 1797 in London to her parents Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Her mother was a philosopher and famous women's rights activist, known for her long essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, one of the first examples of feminist philosophy. Sadly, Mary Wollstonecraft died just eleven days after giving birth, and the young Mary was raised and educated by her political philosopher father, William Godwin. Mary enjoyed a pretty good education with access to her father's library, and in 1814, when she was just seventeen years old, she began an illicit relationship with the 22-year-old poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was already married to a woman

named Harriet Westbrook. The story of Percy and Harriet's marriage is convoluted and its end is quite awful, so now is not the time to recount it.

Lake Geneva

What is relevant to our story, however is that in 1816, Percy and Mary, an unmarried couple now with a baby, spent a summer in Switzerland with their friends Lord Byron and Mary's step-sister Claire Clairmont, with whom Lord Byron was having an affair. They were also joined by Lord Byron's personal physician, John Polidori.

So, imagine this. A young couple, aged 19 and 24, with a baby only a few months old. A famous poet, aged 28, and his personal physician, aged 21. And the famous poet's current paramour, aged 18. They all travel to a villa on Lake Geneva in Switzerland, where they spend an uncharacteristically stormy and rainy summer. It sounds like the beginning of a mystery novel, doesn't it? A group of young poets, writers, and philosophers, all under the age of thirty, away from home, free to live in sin. One night, Lord Byron says to his friends: "We will each write a ghost story." And this is when Mary Shelley writes *Frankenstein*.

The story of how *Frankenstein* came about is recounted in Mary Shelley's introduction to the 1831 edition of the novel. My edition, the 1818 edition, does not include this introduction, so I tell this story here just in case it's not included in yours, either. But I also tell this story because I think it sets the tone for what you're about to read. It's spooky, it's short, and it's a little bit genius, considering this was Mary Shelley's first novel. And though *Frankenstein* includes lofty ideas of politics, science and religion, it might be helpful to go into it knowing it was written by a nineteen-year-old as a challenge to entertain and possibly impress her friends.

A Modern Prometheus

I also want to talk about the title, because though we all know the book as *Frankenstein*, but it's actually called *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. This alternate title refers to a Greek myth, which is really helpful to know before you read, because you'll be able to recognise the story structure.

There are many versions of the myth of Prometheus, but I take mine from Stephen Fry's book *Mythos*, one of my favourite sources for Greek myth retellings. Prometheus was friends with, and distantly related to (as everyone is in Greek myth) Zeus, king of the gods. One day, Zeus asked Prometheus to create something – a human race. Zeus wanted mortals, for the gods to look down upon and play with. Prometheus set to work on sculpting people out of clay, and once he was done, the figures were breathed to life by Athena, goddess of wisdom. Zeus was delighted, but he had one rule. To keep the distinction between god and Mortal, to prevent Mortals from harming themselves and each other, they must not be given fire. But, Prometheus, who loved and felt connected to humans, they were his creation, he didn't agree. He thought they deserved fire, and so he climbed up to the tallest peak of Olympus, took a grassy stalk from a nearby plant, and lit it with the divine fire of Hephaestus's forge. When he took it back down to earth, it was not long before Zeus saw the flames from Mount Olympus, and he knew he'd been betrayed.

Zeus gave Prometheus a punishment so typically cruel of the Gods. He chained Prometheus to a rock, and conjured two circling vultures to tear out his liver every day. Since Prometheus is immortal, his liver grows back each night, and so the cycle of pain never ends.

The story is about sacrifice – one god who risked suffering the wrath of Zeus to bring fire, and thus power, technology, and knowledge to us humans. He believed he was doing the right thing, and the Greeks thought he did, too. For where would we be without fire? But fire also brings death and destruction. It is an uncontrollable force which Zeus thought humans were unable to handle. Maybe they were both right.

Frankenstein follows a very similar trajectory. Victor Frankenstein is a scientist. A mad scientist, if you will. He is on a mission to create life from death. He collects dead body parts, stitches them together, and re-animates the corpse with electricity. Victor Frankenstein is Prometheus, but he is not the hero for the people as some might argue Prometheus is in Greek myth. Instead, Victor Frankenstein is conceited and ambitious, and it all comes back to bite him when he is horrified by his creation and spends his life running away from it.

The Prometheus myth comparison is something I wish I'd known going into reading *Frankenstein*, because it raises questions about the ethics of creation. In Greek myth, the gods create man and it's wonderful, but in *Frankenstein*, man plays God, and creates man, and it ends in disaster. What is Mary Shelley saying about religion? What is she saying about science? What is she saying about life and death? And the big question: who is the real monster?

Stories Within Stories

There's one more thing I wish I'd known going into *Frankenstein*, and that is that it's a story within a story within a story. There are three stories: the captain's, Victor Frankenstein's, and the monster's. We begin with the captain, and within that Victor Frankenstein tells his story, and within *that*, the monster tells his story. Then we zoom back out again to read the rest of Victor's story, and finally we conclude with the captain again. It can be confusing, and I want you to be prepared. It's kind of like an onion. We peel back the first layer, we see what the story is, we peel back the second layer, we see what the story is, and then we cover the layers back up again. Kind of a Shrek metaphor, I guess. Ultimately, though, I think this structure achieves something very clever, in that it speaks to the idea of mythology. We're reading an account of an account of an account, and how can we know who is telling the truth, who is embellishing, who is mis-remembering? The story of the monster is diluted through two sources, and it makes us question if the story was ever real? And so we become the fourth framing of the story: the listener. And then we go out into the world and inevitably tell the story in our own way with our own modifications and misrememberings.

[upbeat, twinkly piano music fades in]

Conclusion

I hope this has quashed any intimidation you might have felt to pick up *Frankenstein*, and if you read it, I hope you enjoy it. Thank you for listening to today's very short episode. If you enjoyed it, please let me know, and I'll continue to make episodes in this series. If you like, you can even suggest classics you'd like me to create short cuts for. If you're listening on Spotify, there should be a question box attached to this episode, where you can send in your suggestions. If you want to follow what I'm reading in real time, you can of course follow me on Instagram @the_community_library. I'll chat to you soon. Bye!

[theme music fades out]