1818. The cover of the first edition of Frankenstein, published when Mary Shelley was 20 years old.

1827. In Fritz Lang’s Metropolis, a scientist produces a female robot; unlike Frankenstein, he loves his creation.

1831. Theodor von Holst’s illustration for the inside cover of the third, heavily revised edition.

1910. The monster in the first movie adaptation, a 16-minute silent film directed by J. Searle Dawley.

1931. Boris Karloff as the creature in the box office hit Frankenstein, directed by James Whale.

1935. Elsa Lanchester played both Mary Shelley and the monster’s mate in the sequel Bride of Frankenstein.


1974. Andy Warhol co-produced the movie Flesh for Frankenstein, also named Andy Warhol’s Frankenstein.

1974. The U.S. grandson of the notorious scientist creates his own monster in Mel Brooks’s Young Frankenstein.
In January 1818, a woman barely out of her teens unleashed a terrifying tale on the world: the story of a doctor who builds a creature from scavenged body parts, then recoils in horror, spurns it, and sees his friends and family destroyed by the monster. Two hundred years later, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is still essential reading for anyone working in science. The ill-fated creator she portrays has influenced public perception of the scientific enterprise unlike any other character, forever haunting the borderland between what science can do and what it should do.

The story has mutated and it has frequently been mangled. It has spawned countless books, plays, and movies—some pictured on these pages—and even a superhero comic. It has inspired technophobes and scientists alike. “Franken-” has become a passe-partout prefix for anything deemed unnatural or monstrous.

Interpretations of the tale have also multiplied. A story of scientific hubris, a creator consumed by his creation, a male scientist trying to eliminate women’s role in reproduction, an attempt by Shelley to deal with the trauma of losing a baby. To the growing group of scientists pondering the ways in which science might eventually destroy humanity, it is the earliest warning of such risks.

None of this quite captures the secret of the story’s longevity. To borrow the monster’s own description of indelible knowledge, Shelley’s tale “clings to the mind ... like a lichen on the rock.” In the preface to the 1831 edition, Shelley wrote: “Now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper.” It did. And it still does.
The long shadow of Frankenstein
Kai Kupferschmidt

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