Susan Tyler Hitchcock. ***Frankenstein, A Cultural History.*** New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007. 392p.

**Jacob Hughes**
Washington State University

In *Frankenstein, A Cultural History*, author Susan Tyler Hitchcock explores how Mary Shelley's creator/creation combination has both shaped and been shaped by the rules, standards, and norms of western culture throughout the story's relatively young existence. Hitchcock describes the monster as the "first myth of modern times," both an "other" and a "reflection of ourselves," manifested in a tale that undergoes an exegesis of meaning throughout temporal, political, and ideological contexts (6-11). Essentially, the premise of this text can be summed in Hitchcock's own introductory words: "This is our monster.…To know him is to know ourselves" (12).

The text itself is divided into three sections, which are both topically and chronologically arranged: Birth, Coming of Age, and Our Monster. As one might surmise, the book begins by historicizing the creation of the Frankenstein source text, chronicling those events and establishing the contexts in which Shelley unleashed her horror. However, Hitchcock goes beyond simply recounting Lord Byron's now legendary challenge amongst the group of literary friends during the summer of 1816 in Geneva, but also provides a deep analysis of other contemporary influences on Shelley's writing, including social attitudes towards new medical science developments like "galvanism," her readings of Locke and Milton among others, and the author's own personal tragedies and feelings of ambivalence towards birth and rearing (36-60). This initial biography is essential in establishing the climate in which the novel is eventually received, as well as explaining the peculiar circumstances that led to the story's development as a myth that branches out to virtually every form of media.

The most valuable aspect of Hitchcock's research concerns how *Frankenstein* embeds itself into popular western consciousness. The author explains that this is done due in no small part to the grounds under which the novel was interpreted as a "myth of modern science and technology" (101). After numerous stage adaptations and published editions of the novel itself, *Frankenstein* had gained considerable name recognition and in the popular imagination was being envisioned and appropriated in ethical and political terms. Hitchcock employs numerous political cartoons of the mid-19th century, both from Britain and the U.S., in order to illustrate this point. References to both Frankenstein and his monster are used in abundance; and due to Shelley's open-ended description of the monster and the process involved in his creation, "Frankenstein" proved to be a "malleable metaphor" (110). This pattern of affect continues throughout the span of *Frankenstein*'s existence; the tale

is interpreted through various cultural lenses, inspired by Shelley's original idea but also transformed into whatever form is most meaningful to its current appropriator and audience.

The following section, Our Monster, essentially expands on this idea, focusing on the various 20th-century adaptations of the monster, with special focus on Boris Karloff's 1931 performance in the Universal Studios production of *Frankenstein*, and its numerous spin-offs. Hitchcock continues to interpolate popular entertainment media with political allegories being drawn at the time, describing the 20th century as a time when people needed monsters in order to cope more effectively with the very real horrors of war and economic depression (203). Moreover, Hitchcock describes the monster as a doppelganger of sorts, who has moved beyond his depiction as a villain and into the role of a misunderstood anti-hero. She uses examples from comic books quite effectively in illustrating this point, citing such adaptations as Marvel's Mike Ploog and Dick Briefer (207, 225). Hitchcock also explores the significance of the appropriation of the monster in his more lovable incarnations, such as Herman Munster from '60s television's *The Munsters*, and Milton the Monster (245, 257). Thus, by the late 20th century, the monster had gained recognition well beyond that of the novel's interpretation, and Hitchcock points out that the vast majority of people recognized "Frankenstein" with no foreknowledge of the novel itself. "Frankenstein" had established itself as a complex and malleable contemporary myth.

The book concludes handling the issue of Our Monster, which outlines the creature and its creator's influence on biomedical ethics, commercialism, the acceptance of Shelley's novel as worthy of academic exploration, and the importance of literature on the formation and expression of ethical ideas. Hitchcock effectively manages to bridge the gap between Frankenberry cereal, children's toys, political and ideological concerns, and the original source text itself. The author presents this exegesis in a very logical manner, making it far easier to understand how Shelley's original nightmare developed into a far more complex monstrosity than she could have imagined. ❊