

And the Monster Is -- ?

A Monster's Notes by Laurie R. King
(Knopf, 530 pages; \$30)

review by Mary Rice

Frankenstein. Ever since Boris Karloff's memorable portrayal, the monster at the center of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* has been called that, even though he actually had no name. *A Monster's Notes* is about that monster and that author. The book's premise is that the monster was real, and has continued to exist to the present day. Yet Mary Shelley was intimately involved in his life, and he in hers.

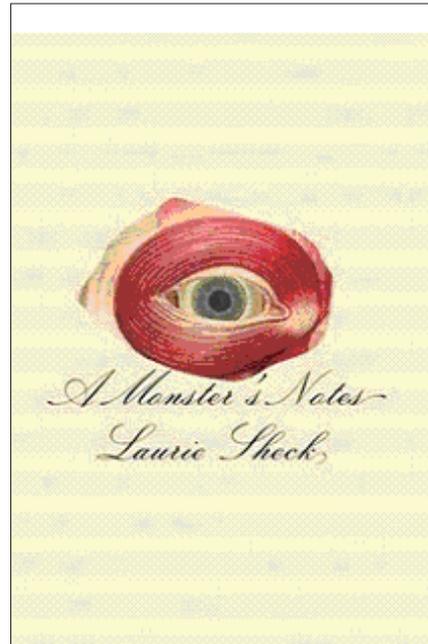
"Where do you end and I begin?" the monster asks early on. That question is never quite resolved. But here the monster is not really monstrous; he commits no violent acts. This is not a horror story, but an experimental novel. A gloss on *Frankenstein*, it re-imagines both the novel and its author's life.

The structure is enormously complex, and initially confusing, an amalgam of disparate parts much like the monster's own body. Fragments of information -- the notes of the title, even whole articles, are combined with passages of first-person narrative.

The primary "I" is the monster; his consciousness, his struggle to understand himself and human life, is the organizing principle. But there are other voices as well, in the form of letters, that staple of 19th century novels. Mary Shelley's narrative is crucial, but only appears late in the book. It is through her step-sister Claire Clairmont that we first see her.

Characters drawn from Mary Shelley's complicated family history include her mother Mary Wollstonecraft, the 18th century feminist writer, who died after giving birth to her; her father William Godwin, the philosopher, whose step-daughter from a previous marriage was Claire Clairmont; and Fanny Imlay, Wollstonecraft's daughter from a previous relationship of her own. Not to mention poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who eventually married Mary, after eloping with her -- and Claire.

Conspicuously absent from the cast of characters is Frankenstein himself, the monster's creator. Although the monster addresses him in his thoughts and, poignantly, keeps his lab notes, it's as though he can't bear to think about him too deeply. Victor Frankenstein created life to see if he could, without thinking about the consequences. When he finally succeeded, he was appalled by what he had



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done and abandoned his creation, like a profoundly rejecting parent. In this book, he is never given a chance to speak for himself.

Mary Wollstonecraft, the parent who, by her death, unintentionally abandoned Mary Shelley, does speak and speaks eloquently. "I never wanted gorgeous words. Wanted language stripped. Plain as undraped windows." In letters imagined as she lies dying, she relives her life and wonders about her newborn daughter. This is only one of the deaths in the book, where absence and loss are themes. Naming and the power of words are others.

Fiction writers often say that characters come to them, suddenly appearing in their minds, or take a story they're writing in unexpected directions. Here a character is presented as having an independent physical existence and writing a book of his own, which is partly about the author who wrote about him.

Who and what, exactly, is he? The monster's nature remains elusive. He is able to observe people in a way that transcends geography and time. "Time meant nothing to me," he says near the end. "Past, present, future, all wrapped up as one." Yet he is material. Mary Shelley finally admits to Claire that she saw him as a child, heard his "gravelly" voice, interacted with him repeatedly. Some two hundred years later, he walks around unremarked in New York, and his manuscript and computer are found in an abandoned building there in 2007, when the book begins.

Beyond the complex relationship of character to author, the book explores the nature of human identity. In her preface, Laurie Sheck puts it beautifully: "So much of a life is invisible, inscrutable: layers of thoughts, feelings, outward events entwined with secrecies, ambiguities, ambivalences, obscurities, dark-nesses strongly present even to the one who's lived it -- maybe especially to the one who's lived it."

For all its own obscurities, *A Monster's Notes* is both imaginative and intriguing. In an age of robotics and cloning, exploring the psyche of an artificially created being has special resonance.