Through the Tempests Dark and Wild: A Story of Mary Shelley

Considered as a story, or a miniature biography, this short book is a curious and unsuccessful hybrid, which keeps changing its mind about its objectives. Regarded as a picture book, however, it is a beautiful and striking publication, with illustrations by Angela Barrett which are remarkable colour compositions, rich in atmosphere. The book is a fictionalised account of Mary Shelley, the author of Frankenstein, in the phase of her early youth just before her elopement with the poet Shelley. This is preceded and followed by potted biographical material in a quite different style. After pages of simple storytelling prose, readers are told that efforts were made to ban Frankenstein 'because of its underlying criticism of society's move towards industrialization'. The purpose seems to be to introduce a life in some ways waywardly romantic, but in others an exemplary feminist model, and a body of work both gothically creepy and politically radical. In consequence the book seems directed towards two quite different potential readerships, separate in age and interests. A wonderfully eerie Scottish ghost story - a short tale within a tale, only tenuously linked to Mary - proves to be its greatest narrative success. So this is an erratic, indecisive text, in part redeemed by admirable illustrations.

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