



Such Wicked Intent

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Editorial Choice:

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This second book in Canadian author Kenneth Opper's **The Apprenticeship of Victor Frankenstein** sequence supposes that the fashioning of the monster in Mary Shelley's 1818 story was not the first time that Victor has shaped a human form and given it life. Shelley sidestepped the means by which the creature is brought to life since Frankenstein refuses to divulge his secrets for fear of spawning another terrifying murderer. Here, Victor, Elizabeth and their friend Henry Clerval, familiar as adults to Shelley's readers, are around fifteen years old. They find ways of entering the land of the dead, which lies beneath Chateau Frankenstein, in search of Victor's twin brother Konrad (he's died in Book One). Their plan, which turns out no better than the experiment of Shelley's adult Frankenstein, is to create a body in which Konrad might return to the world of the living.

There are some elements in this prequel which anticipate Shelley's original text. In his dreams, for example, Victor foresees his journey across the desolate Northern ice in pursuit of the monster. He shares with the original character a 'vehement passion' and a temper that the earlier Frankenstein admits was 'sometimes violent'. On the other hand, Opper sees no need to be faithful to detail; Shelley's Victor is importantly a 'single offspring' for many years - he has no twin. It is difficult to imagine the passionate and even wilful Elizabeth of the prequel growing up into the 'saintly', selfless woman of the original. Opper also enjoys some curious games. His Clerval again plays the role of faithful friend, though here he also fancies Elizabeth. As in Shelley, he is a romantic and a writer, but now he claims to have written 'She walks in beauty like the night' for Elizabeth, which seems bizarre rather than some playful nod to Mary Shelley's relationship with Byron. Even more odd is for Clerval to take as his credo (again allegedly composed by himself) the lines 'I will drink life to the lees/To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield', long before their author, Tennyson, was born.

It may be best, then, to set the 1818 original to one side and to take this unconventional series on its own terms. Opper's tale is told with a wildness and sense of danger which young adult readers could well enjoy. His plot risks losing some tension through repetition as the three central characters move to and fro between the two worlds in the limited environs of the chateau and its tunnels. However, Opper enhances his adventure through a romantic conflict which a present-day reader might well recognise, for Victor, Henry and the dead Konrad are all in love with Elizabeth. Above ground, the expression of their feelings is initially constrained by the decorous boundaries of their times, but the power released by

their encounters underground increasingly triggers emotions which are framed in 21st century terms. Victor and Elizabeth, in fact, show Opper at his most skilful, since their complex adolescent personalities are more interesting by far than most of those who populate Young Adult texts.

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