



AN INTERVIEW WITH SHARON DOGAR

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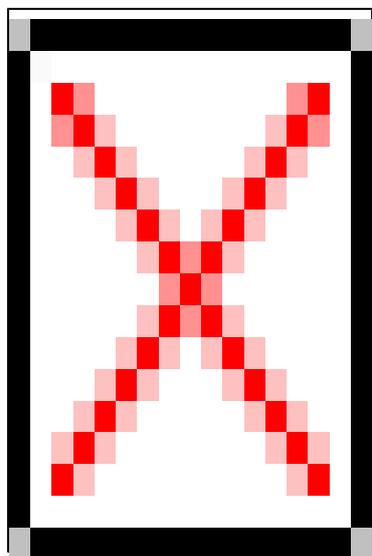
[Sharon Dogar](#) [1]

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Byline:

An interview with the author of **Monsters: The Passion and Loss that Created Frankenstein**

The author answers questions posed by Nicholas Tucker about her new novel, [Monsters](#) [3], based on the life of Mary Godwin.



*Although **Frankenstein***

is a remarkable piece of work, I get the feeling from your excellent novel that it is Mary's whole life that strikes you as the most truly remarkable thing about her. Am I right?

Yes, you are. And thank you for your kind words about [Monsters](#) [3]! I started out wondering why and how a nineteen-year old girl came to write such a genre-defining novel. I rapidly came to understand that **Frankenstein** is extraordinary because it arose out of a remarkable life. It's as though each event in Mary's young life inevitably drove her towards creating Frankenstein, not just 'the creature' as she calls him in the novel, but also the ideas that surround his creation. Mary's life (like her creature's) began with the loss of her creator (or mother) when Mary was but ten days old. Mary never recovered from her dead mother being replaced by her step-mother when she was four years old. Whilst her Father continued to educate and parade Mary as the mirror image of her mother in both beauty and intellect, he failed to either support or understand the pain behind her refusal to acknowledge her stepmother.

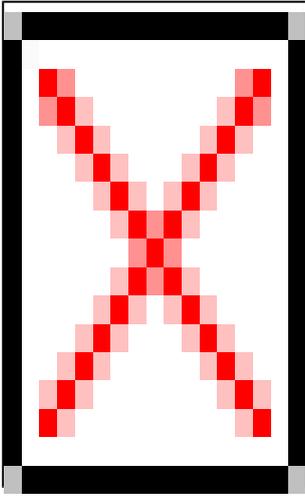
All of her young life Mary came up against the clash between ideology and reality, and each time the men in her life clung to their ideals rather than dare to understand the nature of Mary's feelings. In a sense that original 'abandonment' by her mother at birth was re-enacted - over and over again, in different ways; by her father's rejection of her, by Shelley's failure to understand her struggle with the reality of 'free love' and by the devastating loss of her own child, also at ten days old.

In writing **Frankenstein** Mary pulled off the remarkable feat of capturing a transitional moment in history, a moment when life could no longer be considered sacredly conferred by God, but a random thing, or perhaps even able to be

scientifically engineered by man - and yet the underlying context of **Frankenstein** is of what happens when one is abandoned and rejected. When love is withheld at the very moment of birth, whether it be the birth of the self, or of an idea. All of this comes from Mary's own experience of each of these things. Her life could not be made up.

Why on earth did Shelley go on financing Godwin so long after his cruel behaviour to Mary?

Discovering Godwin's behavior towards Mary was one of the most shocking realisations in researching **Monsters**. It



took me a while to understand that Shelley's continued support of Godwin came about partly because Shelley had an extraordinary capacity to separate his ideals from what was actually happening. He believed that Godwin's philosophy (and therefore his writing) should be supported, and that that should take precedence over any personal animosity he might have towards his non-father in law. He also understood the depth of Mary's love for her father, her shock at his rejection of her, and her hope that they would eventually be reunited ? I suspect it was this knowledge that really inspired his continued support of Godwin.

When did the pair ever find the time to write, given the poverty, constant travelling and baby-care they were faced with?

They often didn't find the time in those early years back in London. Shelley's output was practically non-existent, as was Mary's. But what they never failed to do was read. Mary's diary reveals lists of the books they set themselves to study, and each of them found solace in grappling with new ideas and studying languages. Mary was brought up in a strict routine of study in the morning, walking, exercising in the afternoon, and conversation in the evening. In times of stress she may well have found some comfort in returning to this routine. As soon as Shelley managed to borrow money (against his inheritance) they employed child-care and domestic help, which enabled them to continue with their work. Without Shelley's money it is unlikely **Frankenstein** would ever have been written, or Shelley's poetry come to fruition.

Your question is as relevant now as it was to Mary and Shelley then. Where are the grants for writers and artists who do not happen to be able to support themselves? Why is it that only those who can afford to undertake unpaid internships get the jobs in creative industries, or can afford drama school? Unless we support young writers and artists from different backgrounds we will increasingly be presented with narrow perspectives.

How come Byron and Shelley remained popular poets while their private lives were considered so scandalous?

Byron was actually at his most popular *before* he left for Geneva. He fled England partly because he feared that the 'English rabble' might harm him, disgusted as they were by the rumour that he had been sodomising his wife. It was not an unreasonable fear; any association with sodomy or homosexuality at the time was likely to incite violence. It was only once Byron arrived in Geneva that Mary, Shelley and Claire became subject to the same level of scrutiny as Byron ? prior to that Shelley was a little-known essayist and poet.

In answer to your question I suspect that the nature of celebrity hasn't really changed much over the centuries. Just as we love to vilify those celebrities we once feted, so in Byron and Shelley's time people were both horrified and yet utterly intrigued by the poets' behavior ? and by the women who dared to break free of societies' constraints. I suspect there may have been a terrible unconscious envy of their coterie. How and why should they be allowed to behave with

such freedom?

Quite apart from that their poetry was supported by political radicals such as Leigh Hunt, so in a way the two things are, eventually, quite separate, with a section of radical thinkers supporting the poets, and the public coming to vilify them. After Shelley's death Mary worked tirelessly to maintain Shelley's reputation as a poet, and it's due to her efforts (as well as his talent) that he became such an established part of the English canon.

Shelley and his various ladies seem to have no particular understanding that sex in a pre-contraceptive age almost inevitably leads to babies. Any comments?

I suspect that as a part of the concept of 'free love' Shelley (and perhaps Mary and Claire initially) had a notion that within their radical community children would be looked after jointly - that they were the 'flowers of the field' and to be welcomed, so pregnancy was not necessarily something to be feared. However, yet again the reality proved to be something quite different to the ideal. Young women who become unexpectedly pregnant often feel that it isn't real. They 'know' they are pregnant and yet at the same time cannot understand, (and sometimes do not want to understand) what it really means. I think this is how Claire reacts, whereas Mary's first pregnancy was probably welcomed by her until she recognized the constraints it put her under and began to fear its effect upon Shelley. As to the men I'm not sure that Byron saw 'what happened next' as of any interest to him, whilst Shelley seemed to welcome, support and acknowledge his children.

What would Mary and Shelley have made of the current political situation?

I often asked myself this question as I wrote. I like to think they would surprise me. I suspect they would be appalled by how the gap between rich and poor continues to grow - not just in the developed world, but globally. I imagine Shelley would be a radical supporter of preventing climate change, deeply shocked and saddened by the loss of our communion with the natural world. They would be fascinated by the discourse amongst young people around poly-amory and sexual fluidity. I suspect Mary would have a very sharp eye for the ways in which women continue to be objectified, and might have something to say about the fact that objectifying men in the same way does not make for equality. Both of them believed passionately in equality of education for both genders and all classes. I think they'd be stunned by the universal entitlement to free education in Britain today. That is an ideal of theirs that has come to fruition - but they might be dispirited by the narrowness of a curriculum forced into measuring education overwhelmingly by examination only.

Monsters [3] is published by Andersen Press, 978-1783448029, £12.99

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