

## [Frankenstein – 1931](#)

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The story of Frankenstein's monster has long been one of the staples of horror. The book *Frankenstein*, written by Mary Shelly, wife of poet Percy Shelly is one of the modern horror stories and is also considered one of the earliest science fiction stories. The 1931 movie *Frankenstein* is very loosely based on Mary Shelly's book. One of the most striking differences being that of the appearance of the monster. In the book the monster begins as an almost handsome and well-spoken man and only turns ugly as his skin begins to rot away due to poor blood circulation. For most of us however Frankenstein's monster is best remembered as the large, groaning brute with a flat head and bolt shaped electrodes sticking out of his neck. *Frankenstein* stars Boris Karloff as the monster and Colin Clive as inventor Henry Frankenstein.

The 1931 *Frankenstein* has become one of the Universal Studio's Horror Classics. It follows Dr. Frankenstein in his attempt to bring to life a man made of the parts of many. He does so with horrendous results when his creation seems to go mad and turn not only its creator, but also on the world around it. Indeed the monster was horrible to look upon, at least for the time it was made, but I don't really think of the movie as a horror story. Director John Whale turns this into a story of a creature with the mind and emotions of a small child trying desperately to understand the world around it. Feared and abused by those around him, all he desires is to understand and learn. This sense of longing is best seen when the monster who has never experienced sun light first sees it. You see him, head bowed, almost weak, when suddenly the sunlight is allowed to come through and shines on his face and he turns slowly to look at the light, he rises and stretches his arms longingly towards it; then as the window is closed again he falls again into shadow and slumps again into sadness. A horror film? No, not really, I find in it a metaphor for those who are not understood and judged not by who they are in reality, but who they appear to be at first glance. I did not always see the film this way. I remember cringing into my chair when the monster appeared as I watched the movie on TV as a child. But as I grew older my viewpoint changed. I don't think I will ever think of this movie as a horror story again.

There are a great number of stories around the making of this movie. I don't really know how many of them are true but one of my favorites concerns the little girl who features prominently in one of the more infamous scenes. It is said that the director was concerned that she would be scared by the sight of Boris Karloff in his full monster make up and wanted to introduce her to him in make-up at the studio before driving to the filming location to give her time to adjust. It is said when she saw him for the first time, she gave a little squeal and ran over to Mr. Karloff, took his hand and looked up to him and said, "May I drive with you?" and rode to the location with "The Monster."

I do have another favorite story about this film. It's one I am sure I will never forget. A long time ago, back in the early days of VHS tapes when the average cost of a VHS tape was often over seventy dollars and the Monroe County Public Library Audio-Visual Department was just starting to circulate video tapes a family came in asking if we had a copy of the 1931 Frankenstein with Boris Karloff. We did and after I found it for them they shared with me that their grandparents had immigrated to the United States and one of the first jobs they had upon arriving was as extras in this film and they were even featured in a couple of close-ups of the villagers. They were checking out the movie not just to watch the film, but to see the only known images of their grandparents. It is a story that has stayed with me and served to increase my enjoyment of this classic film. I can't help but wonder as I watch which of the many villagers in this film belonged to this family.

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