A Reader’s Guide

_Frankenstein_ or, _The Modern Prometheus_

by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Common Reading Program for the Class of 2021
Letter from the Provost

Dear Class of 2021,

On behalf of the University’s faculty and the 2017 Common Reading Program, we welcome you to Washington University! We’re very excited you will soon be joining us, and we are busy preparing for your arrival.

The Common Reading Program initiates your intellectual college experience and highlights the essence of your education - habits of inquiry and debate that underlie effective citizenship in communities beyond the self. Throughout the first semester, you will encounter themes from the book in classes, discussions, and on-campus programming.

On Friday, August 25th, as part of the 15th annual Common Reading Program, you will be participating in what we anticipate will be a dynamic and thought-provoking discussion of the book, *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of *Frankenstein*. At age 19, Mary Shelley produced a novel that would shape our cultural narrative for two centuries. You’ve no doubt heard expressions such as ‘frankenfoods’ that refer to genetically modified crops or eaten Franken Berry cereal. You’ve seen film depictions like the Colin Clive classics *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*, Mel Brooks’ *Young Frankenstein*, Tim Curry (and more recently, Laverne Cox) in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and even last year’s Apple holiday commercial.

So much awaits you in the world of knowledge that you are about to enter. For some, you will learn about technologies like CRISPR that allow us to manipulate genes. For others, you will explore the ideas of the humanities that inform our perceptions of what it means to be human. *Frankenstein* crosses all of these boundaries: we could think of no better introduction for you to the life of the mind.

In your studies here, we’ll also be talking to you about the great problems of the world. Those underlying our approach to identity are certainly among the greatest facing society. But so are climate change, inequality, hunger, international conflict and disease. This sounds heavy, but it isn’t for us because we believe in the energy and optimism that you are bringing to all the great work you will do at WashU and beyond.

Welcome, Bears. Let’s get started.

Holden Thorp
Provost and Rita Levi-Montalcini Distinguished University Professor
Departments of Chemistry and Medicine
Washington University in St. Louis

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Book Download Instructions

This year, we will be accessing the Common Reading Program text, *Frankenstein*, through an on-line library, Project Gutenberg.

**Step 1:**
If you do not already have the Kindle app on your device, download it via http://bit.ly/washukindle.

**Step 2:**
To get you to the proper website, we ask that you use the following link, which will take you to the Washington University Library website, http://bit.ly/washufrankenstein.

**Step 3:**
Once there, you’ll see a link about mid-page, “Click here to access a downloadable ebook.” Select that link and it will take you to the Project Gutenberg website where you’ll see several versions of the 1818 text.

**Step 4:**
You can select any of the options that best suit you for reading on your phone, tablet, laptop or computer. We do suggest you download one of the versions with images as these may be topics during your discussion. We do not recommend accessing the book elsewhere as it’s important that you have the correct version of the text.
Dear Class of 2021,

In her groundbreaking gothic novel *Frankenstein*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote, “Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change.” You are all about to embark on sudden change, but know that you all have this fear of a huge shift in your life in common. You are all united in your common decision to choose WashU to be your new home and it is our hope that the Common Reading Program, facilitated by a dynamic faculty member, will bring you together even more. The reading program is only the first of many traditions to help you assimilate and bring you opportunities for discussion. You will get the chance to spend time with your residential college through many traditions, feel the uniqueness of your new community at convocation, get to know new people through Bear Beginnings and programs hosted by your WUSAs and RAs, and feel supported by the amazing people you will meet.

We will be reading *Frankenstein* in its bicentennial year. This powerful novel has remained relevant for its 200 years of publication as it helped develop the horror genre and used the uncanny as a clever way to spark discussions about gender, sexuality, what it means to be different, race, the limitations of science, god complexes, diversity, loneliness, and what it means to be afraid in a time when those discussions were not always welcomed. Throughout Shelley’s life, it was common for women’s authorship to be hidden behind a man’s name. She did not hide and her work was published with her full name on the cover. For her confidence and bravery in overcoming many tragedies in her life, she is considered an empowering feminist.

In 1816, Shelley spent time with her friend, Lord Byron, author of *Dracula*, at his house in Geneva. They, along with several other prominent figures, discussed developments in science and the possibility of reanimation. Lord Byron dared all of his guests to write about their discussion, so at the age of nineteen Shelley began to write *Frankenstein*. As you delve into her awe inspiring novel, I encourage you to read beyond the surface of her carefully chosen language as you will find moments that reflect your individual experiences and you will find that other WashU students feel the same way.

Welcome to WashU and happy reading!

Libby Evan
College of Art
Class of 2020

Part of your participation in the Common Reading Program requires that you email your discussion leader a 250-word response to one of the following three questions by Friday, August 18 at Noon CST. You will receive the name and contact information for your group discussion leader in early August. Your submission will only be read by the faculty or staff member leading your discussion group.

1. While it may be impossible to trace the wanderings - sometimes purposive, sometimes unexpected - of Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, it is clear that certain motivations persist. He welcomes love and tenderness, but also seeks answers to the greatest questions of his (or anyone’s) existence. Does your reading of his enormous, perhaps unanswerable questions, find him making progress in his understanding of the world we live in?


3. What comparison could now be made between the devoted, sensitive female characters drawn by Mary Shelley and contemporary women involved in experimental investigation, intent on further discovery and the passing on of unexplored questions to the next generation of female scientists? For that matter, how might a twenty-first century Mary Shelley want to approach her subject both historically and experimentally?
CONTEST GUIDELINES

For this year’s contest, we invite you, the reader, to create a book cover or contemporary synopsis of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Your submission may be created in written format, video, photography, art piece, music or any other creative medium that can be submitted electronically for judging. If you are submitting a written entry, please limit it to a maximum length of 500 words.

The contest is open to all members of the Class of 2021. Please e-mail your submission to commonreadingprogram@wustl.edu by **Friday, September 1st at Noon CST**.

The top five contest winners will have a meet and greet with our special guest speaker. **The grand prize winner will also win a $100 gift certificate from the Washington University Campus Bookstore.**

*The contest is optional but we hope you’ll consider including a submission!*

SAVE THE DATE

**Friday, August 18th at Noon CST**
Blackboard Assignment Due

**Friday, August 25th 10:00 AM - Noon CST**
Common Reading Program discussions with residential floor communities

**Friday, October 13th**
*Frankenstein at 200* Conference

**Sunday, October 29th at 7:00**
Performed by the WashU student orchestra, this concert will feature three student compositions on themes from *Frankenstein*, in addition to a Halloween-themed concert.

*For more information* on the Common Reading Program, upcoming events, and other resources, visit firstyear.wustl.edu.
Common Reading Program

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First Year Center
STUDENT AFFAIRS AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY