

The Most Monstrous Kind of Art: Frankenfictions

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de Bruin-Molé, Megen. *Gothic Remixed: Monster Mashups and Frankenfictions in 21st-Century Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. x + 264 pages. ISBN 978-1350103054. Hb. £76.50.

Monster studies has become a rapidly developing and more and more visible discipline within literary studies in the past two decades. Since Jeffery Jerome Cohen's 1996 seminal essay "Monster Culture" the academic discourse on monsters has come back from the dead and scholars now keep producing valuable contributions to the fantastic by ways of interpreting the monstrosity that features in art and speaks of the age that produced them. Case studies in journals and anthologies as well as complete collections that focus on a specific type of monster have started to conquer the scholarly publishing market; yet, relatively little has been written on the grey area within monster fiction labeled as Frankenfiction, and perhaps even less is written about monster narratives with a generic approach. This is the twofold task successfully undertaken by Megen de Bruin-Molé in her monograph on monster mashups.

Frankenfictions, as de Bruin-Molé explains, are "commercial narratives, which insert zombies, vampires, werewolves, and multiple other fantastical monsters into classic literature and popular historical contexts" and lie "at the intersection of adaptation and remix" (1□ 2). Such a curious position of these texts makes it impossible to discuss them as constituting a homogenous genre within monster fiction. Thus, in the first chapter, "Frankenfictions," the author seeks to present her readers with a detailed theoretical framework within which she has worked, pointing out the difficulties that categorization on the generic level poses (and implying that Frankenfictions are themselves monstrous exactly because they defy clear-cut categorization as, Cohen argues, monsters do). After considering the general characteristics that Gothic remixes and monster fiction adaptations exhibit, de Bruin-Molé investigates to what extent Frankenfictions may be read as remix and adaptation. Such an approach proves fruitful, indeed, as the author pinpoints the possible problems with putting Frankenfictions into either category exclusively, especially since adaptation as a category has its own challenges, as the nine different definitions presented in Thomas Leitch's study "Adaptation and Intertextuality: Or, What Isn't an Adaptation and What Does It Matter?" (2012) demonstrate. To look beyond the two main

approaches—remix and adaptation studies—in which Frankenfictions so far have been discussed, the relationship between Frankenfiction and appropriation is examined. De Bruin-Molé suggests that while “Frankenfiction represents a palimpsestuous act of appropriation across time, from a past culture” (12), it would also be problematic to define it as simply appropriation, since the direction of appropriation is unusual. In Frankenfiction, the cultural encounter takes place between two dominant cultures whereas we generally speak about appropriation when a dominant culture borrows an element of cultural expression from a marginalized culture. As a kind of resolution, the term “mashup” is offered to describe Frankenfiction.

The next four chapters focus on the determining features historical mashups present, and in all cases a theoretical exploration is completed with elaborate close-readings of works to demonstrate the points made concerning the appropriation of characters and themes. Chapter 2, accordingly, looks at the function of the monster in historical mashups in contrast to its role in different types of contemporary texts and underlines the transgressive potential of the examined works, arguing that through constructing monstrous communities, each work becomes loaded with a symbolic content that allows a politicized reading of the monster as “physical, social, or cultural alterity” (44). The case studies are presented in separate subchapters and are written about works that come from various media but fit into the category of literary monster mashup. The section on Kim Newman’s novel *Anno Dracula* (1992) invites vampirism to be read as capitalism on the metaphorical level, directly referencing Margaret Thatcher’s Britain. The part on Alan Moore’s and Kevin O’Neill’s comic book series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-2019) brings in the theme of multiculturalism to comment on the treatment of otherness in the historical British Empire. Showtime’s TV drama series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-16) is shown to play with the idea that monstrosity is inseparable from our human nature, while finally, Theodora Goss’s novel trilogy *The Extraordinary Adventures of the Athena Club* (2017-19) is read as a prime example of intersectional feminism promoted by its use of varied (and most often female) monster characters. Beyond revealing the general politics these works demonstrate through their application of the monstrous teams, de Bruin-Molé’s comparative method also highlights the nuances in the aforementioned works’ effects, pointing out flaws that to various degrees may challenge their transgressive and progressive content. These subchapters thus provide a very useful model for a critical application of monster studies even

for those who may not be familiar with the specific works that are discussed at length. The author provides clear contexts for her analyses and the interpretative strategy her close readings demonstrate is enlightening, even though it appears that some of the flaws she notes are encoded in the very genre of historical mashup (and it seems to me that creating a perfectly politically correct rendering may be deemed impossible for most of the cases).

Closely connected to the political dimension of mashups is the irony these texts exert, which is foregrounded by chapter 3, entitled “Mashing Up the Joke.” The theoretical context provided for this focus includes a discussion of parody and satire, as well as a consideration of camp as sincere parody “in the sense that it repeats with distance, but its irony or play distances through overperformance rather than opposition” (97). The introduction to these concepts allows readers to perceive the novel-as-mashup texts as examples of works demonstrating camp aesthetics and parodying several traditions at the same time—a feature, again, that renders these texts monstrous in Cohen’s concept. In the sections including close readings of novel-as-mashup texts, the starting point of de Bruin-Molé’s discussion is Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), the first and thus best-known contemporary mashup in which a classic comedy of manners is mixed with a very trendy fantasy genre, that of zombie (apocalypse) fiction. The next subchapter includes several other works, among others, *Jane Slayre* (2010) and *Wuthering Bites* (2010), to demonstrate that the novel-as-mashup genre endeavors to occupy diverse parodic positions, such as being “an authentic object of criticism,” “the logical extreme to postmodernism’s ironic appropriation of history,” and “a camp nod to the realist classics of the nineteenth century” (106).

Diverting from the mostly textual analysis that so far dominated the book, chapter 4, “Remixing Historical Fiction,” focuses on visual historiographies as narratives and performances in order to explore the complex relationship between historical monster mashups and history itself. For this purpose, four artists’ visual Frankenfiction works are studied in detail. These artists modify historical images, turning them fictional by adding monstrous details to them, which directly addresses our relations to history and reality. Dan Hillier’s works are shown to communicate “a Gothic history of repressed wonder and difference” (155), whereas Travis Louie’s art—an unusual combination of visual art and extended caption—reverses “Victorian capitalist and colonial stereotypes” with the help of the fantastic (166). The other two artists’ performances are especially suitable for reminding an

audience of history's ghostly nature. The "freak show parody" (178) function is observed in how Colin Batty's cabinet cards evoke the Victorian era's spirit photography, whereas Kevin J. Weir's GIFs as animated horror reflect on the uncanny nature of history by exploiting the eerie, repetitive quality of the medium. The visual focal point of this chapter reinforces the connection between Frankenfiction and (visual) adaptations as well as parody, showing that analyzing the visual is not a diversion from the original subject matter but an effort to show the extended applicability of the aforewritten.

Finally, "Appropriating the Author," gives an insight into the general problematics of authorship, first by giving a brief overview of how the concept of authorship was viewed in Romanticism, when Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) was published, and how that view is challenged by "the postmodern construction of the reader as 'author'" (199), which corresponds to the position that authors who produce Frankenfictions take. As a closure to this discussion, de Bruin-Molé examines how Shelley, the author is appropriated "as both an object of remix and a remixer herself" (212), questioning the possibility of feminist readings of these texts, as they are rooted in popular culture.

Thoroughly researched and well constructed, *Gothic Remixed: Monster Mashups and Frankenfictions in 21st-Century Culture* is thus a valuable contribution to monster studies as well as adaptation studies and is an essential work for anyone who researches Frankenfictions of any kind. Its chapters are pragmatically divided into clearly defined subchapters to help scholars, and its balanced content of theory and close studies makes it suitable as suggested reading for university courses (primarily at a graduate level) where adaptations and especially mashups are part of the course material.

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Works Cited

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