

“We relished being spooked”  
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Robert John Andrews  
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“Happy Halloween”  
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It was the same black wig that my mother wore for our parent’s notorious Beatnik Party. My evil older brothers, Larry and Ricky, made me wear it for our monster movie. We had absorbed hundreds of B-grade monster movies courtesy of Zacherley’s TV show. It was our turn to create one, unabashedly derivative. Aren’t most movies? Larry appropriated dad’s 8 Millimeter camera, and, of course, directed. A fertile mind is fertile only when it is full of lots of fertilizer. Ricky was the monster, a freakish albeit adolescent variation on Frankenstein’s monster: white faced, cosmetic blood dripping from mouth and eyeballs, his movements plodding yet inexorable. After killing sister Peggy with a karate chop to her neck – Peggy portraying the young innocent -- he attacks another damsel in distress. I am that damsel. They wouldn’t let me in the movie unless I acted the part of the hapless victim. The woman. The dress and wig were mine to wear. Anything for stardom and fame.

My hero (one of the neighborhood gang) arrives at my moment of peril and slays the monster. He flexes his muscles. We hug in relief. Larry wanted me to kiss my rescuer on the cheek, but I did have some scruples. Then.

Halloween was designed for boys. It was more than free Milky Ways. It was more than costumes. It was Mischief Night and nefarious deeds under the cover of darkness. It was especially scary movies that became our boyhood staple, whether gothic horror, such as “Frankenstein” or “Dracula,” or beasties such as “The Giant Behemoth” or “Tarantula,” or alien invaders such as “The Day of the Triffids” or “The Thing” or “Invasion of the Body Snatchers.” Who dared fall asleep after that movie, lest the pods take over your soul? We relished being spooked.

One college age New Year’s Eve, sick and dateless, I finally read the real story of Frankenstein. To redeem my Don Juan honor, let me explain that I rarely bothered with New Year’s Eve. My preferred celebration always has been with friends on New Year’s Day. Amateurs do New Year’s Eve. Back to Frankenstein. The scary 1931 film version (“It’s alive! It’s alive!”) is as close to Mary Shelley’s novel as is Mel Brook’s hysterical “Young Frankenstein.” Both movies meet the goose bump requirements for Halloween far better than the book. Alas, there’s no hunchback assistant in the book. But then Mary’s work is a philosophical effort rather than an attempt at thrills. It’s mostly monologue anyway. Written in 1818, what would you expect?

“Whence,” scientist Victor Frankenstein explored, “did the principle of life proceed?” Victor succeeded in discovering the secret of “generation and life.” He realized he alone could bestow animation upon lifeless matter. Obsessed, he proceeded to do so. Later, overwhelmed by the horror of his experiment, he refused to disclose his discovery lest others follow his path of destruction and “infallible misery.” Some secrets are best kept buried.

Because of the minute intricacies of anatomy, he created his creation larger, outsized, resulting in a hideous monster. The monster, animated rather than born, did not initially realize he was a monster. It was how humans reacted to him that forced this attitude. Monstrous behavior followed attitude. He was a creature denied. He was utterly alone. Victor Frankenstein, at first sight of his creation, recoiled

in disgust and abandoned his responsibilities toward his creation. He abhorred rather than loved his creation. The confused, abandoned creature fled. In hiding, the creature observed a farm family. Seeing affection among humans, the creature reached out to them. They screamed and drove him away. After saving a little girl from drowning, her father, alarmed at seeing him with her, shoots him.

Consider the calamities we create. Creature chose to become the monster they thought he was. Echoing Satan in "Paradise Lost," Frankenstein's creation resolved: "If I cannot inspire love I shall cause fear." Victor's loved ones end up murdered to punish guilty Victor.

Victor hunts to destroy his creation. They confront each other. After a long conversation about complicity and blame, his creation convinces Victor to create for him a female companion. Victor agrees when creature promises they'll exile themselves. Close to completion, repulsed by his work, Victor breaks his promise and tears the female to pieces. The monster retaliates with more intimate deaths. His final revenge? Strangling Victor's wife on their honeymoon.

The 1931 Frankenstein movie supplies fun Halloween shivers. The book is the more chilling. Treated a monster, he acted the monster.