

Mary Shelley's Legacy in British Girls' Comics

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At their peak in the 1960s and 1970s British girls' comics were a thriving industry with international reach. They outsold the boys' comics and told many tales of supernatural terror and gothic horror. Yet today they are mostly forgotten and, when remembered, there is often an assumption that they were all about boarding schools and ballet.

Mary Shelley's role is often sidelined and marginalised within literature – even within the story of *Frankenstein's* own creation, where the Villa Diodati party is framed by the notoriety of Byron and Percy Shelley, and the novel's own publication was initially anonymous. There are further parallels to be found here with the comics industry. Creators were not given credit for their work and there is an ongoing perception that these comics were entirely the product of male writers and artists; although research has shown that in fact many women were involved.

In the 1970s, two girls' comics emerged: *Spellbound* (DC Thomson, 1976-78) and *Misty* (IPC, 1978-80). Both were anthology titles with a supernatural theme. *Misty* in particular told many tales inspired by *Frankenstein*. In some of these stories the creature appears as an avenger or saviour, emerging from a fairground ghost train or travelling freak show; in others he is shown as the 'real' face behind a human mask, with only his 'sad eyes of sorrow' giving him away.

Two of *Misty's* stories rework *Frankenstein* tropes to foreground the issues of family and fear that *Conception* explores. In 'The Four Faces of Eve' (#20-31, art by Brian Delaney, written by Malcolm Shaw), Eve Marshall awakens with apparent amnesia in a hospital. Haunted by nightmares, she slowly discovers the terrible truth about herself: that she is a creature made from the corpses of three dead girls, and her alleged parents are not who they claim to be. Eve despairs "I'm a freak, a monster!" (#29) – but the story ends happily, with her being accepted into the family of her new friend Carol. In 'The Family' (#6, art by Isidre Monés, writer unknown) Judy is teased at school about her 'mad scientist' father and decides to investigate his laboratory – but when she hears him return unexpectedly she slips and falls down the stairs, and the final panel shows her broken body; revealing that she is the creature he had built ('Poor Judy. Perhaps she shouldn't have hunted quite so hard for her father's... monster?').

These heroines' identities are undermined and destabilised, with terrifying (even fatal) consequences. There is a deep suspicion of patriarchal control, and the family unit is shown to be false and deadly. These stories acknowledge the uncanny and uncertain nature of girlhood: reflecting the struggles that puberty, womanhood and changing identities can bring and casting doubt on authority. Clair's Mary Shelley says that '*Frankenstein* was an assimilation of all my young experiences'. British girls' comics like these rework established horror themes and archetypes to suit the concerns and fears of their young female readers; just as Mary Shelley reworked contemporary fears of science and progress into metaphors for her own loss and grief.

Julia Round's award-winning book *Gothic for Girls: Misty and British Comics* (2019) explores the lost history of British girls' comics. She is an Associate Professor at Bournemouth University and shares her work on social media @hypnojoo and at www.juliaround.com.