

# The intriguing blend of fact and fiction

## Peter Ackroyd

Peter Ackroyd's latest novel, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* is an interpretation of Mary Shelley's famous tale, *Frankenstein*, adding new layers of meaning to an age old story.

**P**eter Ackroyd is a writer whose talents are vast. His large and varied output includes poetry, novels, biographies and literary criticism. Ackroyd was born in London in 1949 and began writing poetry in his teenage years. He studied at Clare College, Cambridge and Yale University before returning to London to work as a literary editor in 1973. His varied literary offerings include biographies of T. S. Eliot and Charles Dickens.

Ackroyd's latest novel, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, draws influence from Mary Shelley's renowned novel *Frankenstein*. Since *Frankenstein's* publication in 1818, Mary Shelley's tale of the inventor Victor Frankenstein's relentless desire to create a being unencumbered by the imperfections of human beings, utilising science and technology has enchanted readers. It has previously been adapted into theatrical plays, films and has inspired many horror and science fiction writers. *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* adds to the list of adaptations, adding new significance to the story and deep subtext of Mary Shelley's original.

*The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* is an engaging first-person narrative, which immerses the reader in the mind of Victor Frankenstein. We meet Frankenstein as he begins to tell the story of his journey from his home in Switzerland to Oxford University, to an unknown third party, where he befriends a radical young poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley. This is one of many intriguing twists by Ackroyd, who marvellously blends fact and fiction throughout — including interweaving the imagined lives of Mary Shelley, Harriet Westbrook, Byron and Keats into the narrative.

Ackroyd transposes *Frankenstein* into London, where he conducts his experiments in a deserted pottery factory in Limehouse, making contact with the "resurrectionists" who deliver him bodies of the recently dead. "I wanted to see if I could write a Gothic novel in the old-fashioned style with all the tricks of the trade and the effects of the trade. More specifically, I had been asked to do a TV series on the Romantics and I studied quite hard to get that right, and I had never written a biography of any of the Romantic poets, apart from William Blake, so it seemed to me an ideal way to use and energise all the research I had picked up in the course of research into the Romantics. When we began filming that series we went to the Villa Diodati and spent the night on the balconies and lakeside there and that also helped to inspire me."

Ackroyd's interpretation of *Frankenstein* charts his descent

into the study of electrical science and natural philosophy as he contemplates new principles and beliefs. His aim to create a new being leads to a number of disturbing experiments on cadavers in his secluded workshop in Limehouse. "As soon as you have mastered the language — the tone and timbre and vocabulary of the principal protagonist, then everything else seems to flow from that. It is a remarkable thing, but once you think that you have got the language right, the personality, temperament and even the story of the main character comes into life."

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was distinctive at the time of publication for its treatment of social, political and technological ideas. She wrote *Frankenstein* when the discoveries of contemporary science focused on experimentation, and the use of technology was challenging preconceived notions about the relationship of humans and their origins. "I re-read the original Mary Shelley version and I had to acquaint myself with some of the intellectual and political controversies of the time — not only the burgeoning interest in electricity, but also the social and political unrest of the period, as I felt that was all part of the same pattern and the same theme I concentrated upon the society and culture of England in

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Issues relating to science and technology are particularly pertinent in our contemporary society, where debates over stem cell research and cloning draw headlines around the world. Ackroyd's depiction of Frankenstein's desire to wake the dead using technology emphasises moral issues, including the need for human beings to take responsibility for the actions caused by technology that they have created. "I didn't set out to examine any particular themes of that kind, they just happened. In the course of writing the book, certain ideas spring forth from the characters, as well as from the narrative and I just went with them. They hadn't occurred to me in advance, but as soon as they presented themselves, they were obviously useful in terms of the plot and nature of the characters. It did occur to me that there might be parallels with modern





technological or bio-technical investigations.”

Ackroyd’s vivid descriptions of the physical locations in London and elsewhere that Victor frequents are magnificent. The detail Ackroyd provides makes London a character in its own right in *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*. “Physical locations were very important to me, particularly the Thames and the estuary settings. I had just finished writing, *Thames: Sacred River*, which is all about the life of the river and its history. I have always been entranced, or excited by the estuary of the Thames and its mournfulness, and the Thames itself and the life of the Thames as it rides through the city. I was very keen to attach the story of Frankenstein also to the story of the Thames and its landscape. The riverscape of the Thames in the East End and by Limehouse and by Bermondsey has always fascinated me as an area and intrigued me, so it seemed natural

to set this somewhat mournful tale in an appropriately mournful landscape.”

*The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* is a prescient take on a mythical tale and Ackroyd’s evocative narrative takes the reader on a journey into Frankenstein’s mind. Ackroyd’s work ethic is admirable and he too becomes entrenched in the world of his characters when writing, or when researching a new project. “I’m beginning another novel now, which is set in contemporary England and I have also been commissioned to write a six-volume history of England, which will take anything up to 13 years, so my work is set for me.”

*The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* is out now and published by Chatto & Windus.

Shona Fairweather