

It was a dark and stormy night.

I know that's the ultimate cliché, but if there ever was a story that began on a dark and stormy night – this was it. It was the middle of June 1816, exactly two hundred years ago this month, when Mary Shelley started writing a novel called, "Frankenstein; or the New Prometheus."

Now, Arizona State University is actually using this date to kick off a bicentennial project on Frankenstein with lectures, art installations, performances and conferences. They even have a whole department focused on science fiction. Professor Ron Broglio says its overall mission is to encourage positive thinking and less cynicism in sci-fi.

RB: So for much of sci-fi it's easy to write yet another dystopic novel but challenge can we use sci-fi to imagine a more productive or better-sustained society?

But here's the funny thing, usually we celebrate the year a work of art came out, which in this case would be 1818 because Mary Shelley spent two years writing Frankenstein. So why are celebrating the moment of inspiration? Because June 16, 1816 – not just what was happening not just in Mary Shelley's room that night but what was happening around the world -- might actually offer us a glimpse into *our* future.

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky. On today's show -- the stormy birth of a masterpiece.

Or you could say:

CLIP: IT'S ALIVE! IT'S ALIVE! IT'S ALIVE!

That's just after the break.

UNDERWRITING

Mary Shelley was famous long before she wrote Frankenstein – famous and infamous. Her mother Mary Wollstonecraft was a controversial advocate for women's rights, who believed that marriage was a type of slavery – at least under English law.

Mary Wollstonecraft died from complications giving birth to Mary Shelley – who became obsessed with the mother that she never knew.

CG: It doesn't seem to be a coincidence that the author of Frankenstein would be someone who was longing for dead mother.

Charlotte Gordon wrote a dual biography of both women -- mother and daughter.

CG: She made her peace on some level with the idea her mother couldn't come back but not really, and I think the driving motivation of her life was keeping mother alive or mother's ideas alive.

At the age of 17, Mary fell in love with a 22-year old, aristocratic poet named Percy Shelley

Percy was already married. So the two of them fled to Paris, leaving Percy's pregnant wife behind. It was a big scandal.

But they were not alone. They actually had a posse. There was Mary's half-sister Claire – who had a crush on Percy and may have slept with him before moving on.

CG: Claire had heard that very famous rock star poet Lord Byron between lovers, he was in London, and she decided if her sister Mary could have famous entanglement with Percy, a poet, she would try and do one better love affair with Byron who was much more famous than Percy.

But:

CG: Some of the English get mad at me when I say this by Byron's primary interest we think was probably men.

And Byron had a keen interest in Percy Shelley, Mary's lover. So this group of young sexy renegades decides to spend the summer together by Lake Geneva.

CG: So they all met in Geneva, at first they stayed in posh hotel, so much gossip about them, and it was so uncomfortable no one would speak to them, so Byron rented a villa, which is still standing, just up the hill from the lake.

And we have detailed notes about what happened because Byron brought his personal physician, John Polidori, who was supposed to chronicle the great poet Byron -- but he developed a hard crush on Mary Shelley and wrote about her every thing she did instead.

CG: I think all of this also contributed to incredible charged atmosphere.

Yeah this was going to be hot and steamy summer by the lake full of drama. But it didn't turn out that way. It turned out to be very, very different.

Gillen D'Arcy Wood is the author of "Tambora: The Eruption That Changed The World."

GDW: The largest volcanic eruption last ten thousand years on the planet occurred six degrees south of the equator in Dutch East Indies is now Indonesia, a small island large dominated volcano called Tambora, which exploded extraordinary fury. The volcanic matter in the atmosphere 100-megaton sulfate layer that enveloped the planet, plunging world into 3-year period of extreme weather -- a global cooling effect.

RB: Europe is experiencing frosts in June and July,

Professor Ron Broglio.

RB: And it's having real effect on crops, 1816 was absolutely devastating, so we have a lot of food shortages, in fact in Britain the price of bread rose almost double.

Apocalyptic cults were springing up. The press called it "The Year Without A Summer." But they didn't know yet that the effects of the volcano would last for several more years.

On a smaller scale, the weather was ruining the summer by the lake for Mary Shelley and her friend.

CG: It rained and rained, and rained, you can't keep people like Byron and Shelley cooped up all day long, they get impatient, restless, up to no good.

And Charlotte Gordon says they plowed through every book they got. And finally in the middle of June:

CG: When it was really stormy and they were really bored, Byron had been reading from ghost stories and he finally said these ghost stories aren't scary how about if we all try and write scary stories ourselves? Everyone separated that night and here's what happened. Byron tried to write ghost story and got bored and went back to writing about Byron. Shelley started trying to write same thing, he got bored went back to writing about Shelly. But Mary started writing a ghost story and she did not stop.

READING: We witnessed a most violent and terrible thunderstorm. It advanced from behind the mountains of Jura, and the thunder burst at once with frightful loudness from various quarters of the heavens. I remained, while the storm lasted, watching its progress with curiosity and delight. As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump. When we visited it the next morning, we found the tree shattered in a singular manner. It was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribbons of wood. I never beheld anything so utterly destroyed.

That passage from Frankenstein described a real event near Lake Geneva. And Gillen says you can see the motif of lightning running all throughout Frankenstein.

GDW: Which Percy described as a storm lashed novel.

READING A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy daemon, to whom I had given life.

Now obviously there were a lot of things inspiring Mary Shelley beyond just the gloomy weather. The news at that time was full of all these experiments on electricity. Earlier that summer, she and Percy traveled in Germany past a castle called Frankenstein. But when Gillen reads the novel, he sees a

reflection in a crisis that was unfolding in Europe in 1816, after all that volcanic ash had blacked out the skies and destroyed crops.

GDW: The numbers of peasants who abandoned their farms and took to roads were described as armies on the march, tens of thousands of people displaced. If we think about the Syrian refugee crisis today and the tens of thousand of people making highway and byways of Europe, that gives us some sort of image of civic disruption. Seen in that light, remember the novel and the monster is shunned, abandoned and homeless and turned away from towns and cities is a kind of refugee, that captures, he symbolizes the human crisis unfolding before Mary Shelley's eyes.

Again Professor Ron Broglio.

RB: Each of the characters in MS's Frankenstein, particularly scientist creates the monster is always in isolation cutting himself off from the rest of humanity, and of course the creature flees to isolation, he doesn't know what's going on and then when he tries to extend himself to community he's shunned.

GDW: The market towns and cities which were centers of power, they saw these armies of displaced peasantry as a threat because they brought not only demands on food supply, but they brought disease, so we have very graphic and demoralizing accounts of their almost subhuman character and desperation.

READING: I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? You, my creator, would tear me to pieces and triumph; remember that, and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me? Shall I respect man when he condemns me? Let him live with me in the interchange of kindness, and instead of injury I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude at his acceptance. But that cannot be; the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union.

Frankenstein wasn't the only work of literature to emerge from that cabin. Byron wrote his famous poem, "Darkness." And he and his physician slash frenemy Polidori came up with a story called "The Vampyre" – which is one of the first vampire tales in Western literature. And Charlotte Gordon says the darkness in their writing also reflected their political despair.

CG: They felt the radicalism of previous generation was kind of being eradicated and a terrible right wing backlash was occurring.

And the publication of Frankenstein didn't help Mary Shelley's reputation.

CG: But the reason why she became a household name is because in those days in England playwrights and theater people could take any novel they wanted or any story produce it without paying author and people were enchanted, this was great story and they put it on the stage and that's how it became so famous, and so MS never made any money really and on the other hand notorious because linked with shocking story on stage in London.

But she was able to establish herself as a writer, and eventually Frankenstein was appreciated as a great work of literature within her lifetime.

Her warnings about scientific hubris started to feel more and more relevant in the 20th century – from atomic power to biotechnology. That “year without a summer” just became a footnote, a piece of trivia.

Gillen D'Arcy Wood wants to bring it back, front and center.

GDW: I feel like the conventional readings of Frankenstein are somewhat stale and the environmental reading the ecological break down reading is a new one and it's a reading for 21st century.

Of course the year without a summer was very cold and our climate is warming up. But Gillen says 1816 and 2016 stills have a lot in common – temperatures being wildly unpredictable, massive storms are erupting around the world.

A lot of scientists think the solution to climate change is something called cloud seeding, which is to inject particles into the atmosphere to mimic a volcanic eruption like Tambora that would force temperatures down. In other words, they want to Frankenstening the weather.

GDW: I mean, even if there were international authority vested with power the uneven impacts of artificial cooling of planet would be grotesque and impossible to reign in.

EM: It seems also, we all know on a small level you can be better mood sunny day, if you look at the atmosphere in Frankenstein and think this could be happening in your head it makes it very personal.

GDW: Absolutely, and this psychological dimension of climate change has been neglected, and we haven't reckoned on, I like phrase you used the Frankenstein in our heads, the stress of coping with the unpredictability of weather systems. It will create collective nervousness and anxiety that -- it's impossible to predict what that will be. Will it spur creativity and innovation and adapt well or will stresses bring us undone somehow?

Mary Shelley understood adaptation. She took a gloomy summer into an opportunity to create a literary masterpiece. After the love of her life Percy Shelley drowned, she restored both of their reputations by evolving into an ideal Victorian woman, carefully cultivating his legacy as well as hers. She refused to allow forces beyond her control to turn her into a monster.

RB: It's interesting and it's part of her romantic self-fashioning, what kind of self does she want to create for herself?

Ron Broglio says that theme runs throughout all of her work.

RB: Other worlds are possible, not just world we live in, and as fiction writer that's important but also as an ethical person that's important, and if we talk about adaptation or sustainably that's the case, to be able to see or imagine or project out or model or whatever language you want to use, to imagine those features and I would extend that not only for ourselves but for those who are radically other than ourselves, for the monsters who can't find refuge.

READING:

*We rest; a dream has power to poison sleep.
We rise; one wandering thought pollutes the day.
We feel, conceive, or reason; laugh or weep,
Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away;
It is the same: for, be it joy or sorrow,
The path of its departure still is free.
Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;
Nought may endure but mutability!*

Well, that's it for this week, thanks for listening. Special thanks to Charlotte Gordon, Lily Dorment and Gillen D'Arcy Wood – with original music by

Alexis Cuadrado. And thanks Bob Beard for telling me about ASU's Frankenstein bicentennial project.

Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky. The show's website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.