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Frankisstein: A Love Story Jeanette Winterson

Jonathan Cape, 2019, HB, 352pp, £16.00, 978-1787331402



BRAVE NEW TRANSHUMANISM

Artificial intelligence and robotics, gender politics, and transgenderism are brought together in this rich, thoughtful, and entertaining novel by Jeanette Winterson. This year is the 200th anniversary of the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Winterson celebrates it by interleaving Shelley's experiences and reflections with a present-day 'love story'. This unites Dr (Ma)Ry Shelley, an A&E doctor whose female to male reassignment (he still has female genitalia), and Victor Stein, a fanatical advocate of transhumanism whose goal is to download the content of a living brain (that of IJ Good, mathematician and student of Alan Turing) into non-organic data. Descriptions of their physical relationship may prove discomfiting to those of a traditional heterosexual, or

indeed homosexual, persuasion, but then that, I suppose, is the point — gender fluidity is a reality that we all need to respect and try to comprehend.

A comic element is introduced into the mix in the form of the ghastly Ron Lord, an entrepreneur and inventor who has developed a range of female sexbots to suit all tastes, including a version for Christian evangelists. When explaining to Shelley the difficulties of designing boy-bots for women he says, 'Women might enjoy sitting on top if I can get the action right. I've got some ideas from when I used to repair pop-up toasters.'

The plot becomes appropriately Gothic in the network of tunnels beneath Manchester's streets where Stein's grotesque experiment progresses towards its explosive conclusion. The consequences leave his lover, Ry, bereft, just as Mary Shelley was devastated by the death of her husband and her children.

Winterson does a good job of exploring the various possibilities of transhumanism, from smart implants to brain emulation, and through ingenious juxtapositions she shows how remarkably prescient was Mary Shelley's fictional inventiveness.

The final message I took from this heady combination of literary history, futurology, and romance is that affairs of the heart are as yet incapable of being replicated through AI and disembodied data. I find that reassuring.

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