

READER'S GUIDE

**UNNATURAL
CREATURES**

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MEET THE AUTHOR



Photograph © Robert Presutti

KRIS WALDHERR is an award-winning author, illustrator, and designer whose many books for adults and children include *The Book of Goddesses*, *Bad Princess*, and *Doomed Queens*, which *The New Yorker* praised as “utterly satisfying.” Her debut novel *The Lost History of Dreams* received a starred *Kirkus* review and was named a CrimeReads best book of the year. Waldherr's fiction has won fellowships from the Virginia Center of the Creative Arts and a work-in-progress reading grant from Poets & Writers.

As a visual artist, she has had her illustrations exhibited in the Ruskin Library, the Mazza Museum of International Art from Picture Books, and the National Museum of Women in the Arts. She is also the creator of the Goddess Tarot, which has over a quarter of a million copies in print, and teaches the tarot to writers and other creatives.

Kris Waldherr works and lives in Brooklyn in a Victorian-era home with her family and two cats. In her spare time, she enjoys travel, long walks, and reading lots of books. She is also delighted to visit book clubs to discuss *Unnatural Creatures*.

To arrange for a virtual author visit: KrisWaldherrBooks.com.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

SOON AFTER MARY SHELLEY'S 1823 return to England from living abroad, she wrote to a friend, "Lo & behold! I found myself famous!" The cause of Shelley's surprised outburst: her 1818 novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, had been transformed by Richard Brinsley Peake into a rapturously successful London play entitled *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein* without her knowledge or permission. Luckily for the playwright, Shelley attended the play on the eve of her twenty-sixth birthday and proclaimed herself to be "much amused." Luckily for Shelley, the popularity of the play ensured continuing book sales for *Frankenstein*, which helped to keep her and her son solvent after the drowning death of her husband Percy Shelley a year earlier. *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein* was soon moved to a larger theater in London to accommodate audience demand. By the end of 1823, it had inspired five different thespian versions of Shelley's cautionary tale of hubris on other London stages.

While Peake's play is the first known instance of *Frankenstein* inspiring a work of art, it was far from the last—and now, over two centuries later, here I am with my own novel inspired by Shelley's gothic masterpiece.

Unnatural Creatures has incubated inside me ever since my first

reading of *Frankenstein* as a child of twelve. Even now, I can recall how viscerally *Frankenstein* affected me: the seductive appeal of the creature and his melancholy account of parental abandonment; my shock upon realizing that Elizabeth Lavenza would not survive her wedding night; the tears shed during the creature's last lament before he departs to attend his funeral pyre. Since then, I've reread *Frankenstein* more times than I can count, most recently during the writing of this novel, when I visited Geneva, the Mer de Glace, Chêne, Belrive (now known as Belle Rive), Mont Blanc, and the grounds of the Villa Diodati, where Shelley began writing *Frankenstein* on a stormy night in June 1816 as a result of a literary competition to write a ghost story between herself, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and Dr. John Polidori.

My intent in writing *Unnatural Creatures* was to reveal the untold stories of the three women closest to Victor Frankenstein—Justine Moritz, Elizabeth Lavenza, and Caroline Frankenstein—while incorporating the historical events that most likely coincided with Shelley's novel. In this way, I hope *Unnatural Creatures* might be considered a companion piece to Shelley's novel in the same manner in which Jo Baker's *Longbourn* is to *Pride and Prejudice*, and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* to *Jane Eyre*—novels that offer the other side of the story.

For the most part, everything that occurs in *Unnatural Creatures* either supports the timeline of events offered in *Frankenstein*, or takes place during periods that are “off stage” from Victor's first person narrative or subject to his unreliable perspective. The main exceptions to this rule are events occurring after Elizabeth Lavenza Frankenstein's wedding night, and those surrounding the trial of Justine Moritz.

During my many readings of *Frankenstein*, I've always been struck by the plot point of Justine's aunt in Chêne, who serves as the maid's ineffectual alibi for the murder of William Frankenstein. Why didn't the aunt testify at Justine's trial? Why does Justine mention Chêne, a small village south of Geneva, so specifically? When I learned Chêne was forced under French rule in 1792, I experienced a “Eureka!” moment that led me to notice the overlap between the tragic events described in *Frankenstein* and the historical events of revolutionary France and Geneva.

From there, I was stunned to learn Geneva had experienced several revolutions of its own. As I charted my way through the political events as they coincided with the timeline of Shelley's novel, I am particularly indebted to Frank V. Randel's paper "The Political Geography of Horror in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" and Janet Polasky's book *Revolutions Without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World*. In addition, Mary Shelley's travel narrative *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, which was published in 1817, the year before *Frankenstein's* publication, specifically mentions the July 1794 execution of the syndics in Plainpalais. Shelley writes: "Here a small obelisk is erected to the glory of Rousseau, and here (such is the mutability of human life) the magistrates . . . were shot by the populace during that revolution . . . From respect to the memory of their predecessors, none of the present magistrates ever walk in Plainpalais." Earlier in the same paragraph: "[Geneva] is surrounded by a wall, the three gates of which are shut exactly at ten o'clock, when no bribery (as in France) can open them." One cannot help but wonder if Shelley had experienced being locked out by these same gates, just as poor Justine was!

Though the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* describes Justine's trial as occurring in June, I shifted it a few weeks later so her hanging would overlap with the execution of the syndics. In addition, I tightened the length of time between Victor's return to Belrive from Chamounix and his departure for England for the sake of narrative tension. I also expanded the period Victor's journal covers; the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* states the journal only covers the four months prior to the birth of Victor's creature. I also took historical liberty in my description of Luigi Galvani, the inventor of the electrical phenomena known as galvanism, which Shelley hints at during her description of the creature's animation. The scene of Dr. Galvani's soirée presentation was inspired by accounts I read of public electrical displays of the era, rather than his scientific experiments involving "animal magnetism." I have no idea how much time, if any, he may have spent in Geneva.

While I wrote *Unnatural Creatures*, I did my best to weave in Shelley's original language when possible, incorporating quotes and snippets of dialogue and description where they best fit the story I yearned to tell, sometimes retrofitting these inside alternate scenes. One example: the

description of Elizabeth Lavenza's botanical watercolors before her wedding. This passage originally appeared in Shelley's novel soon after Victor has "given birth" to his creature, and illuminates his growing horror at what his hands have wrought. In addition, elements of Mary Shelley's life—her experiences with natal loss, her tumultuous relationship with Percy Shelley, her complicated history with her mother, father, and stepmother—served to enrich aspects of my novel. I particularly believe the writing of *Frankenstein* was influenced by the absence of Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who died of puerperal fever days after giving birth to her daughter, as well as the death of Mary Shelley's first child, a daughter born premature in 1815. Soon after, Shelley wrote in her journal of a dream where "my little baby came to life again; that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived."

I read (and reread!) all editions of *Frankenstein* numerous times, from Shelley's 1816 handwritten manuscript draft to her final revised 1831 edition, as well as numerous critical essays, studies, and biographies of Shelley and her circle. Of these, Fiona Sampson's *In Search of Mary Shelley: The Girl Who Wrote Frankenstein* and Charlotte Gordon's *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Her Daughter Mary Shelley* were particularly helpful to my understanding of Shelley and her tumultuous circumstances. Though all versions of *Frankenstein* served as basis for my characters and their travails in *Unnatural Creatures*, I drew most directly from the 1831 edition due to the description of Elizabeth Lavenza as an abandoned orphan unrelated to the Frankenstein family. In the 1818 edition, Elizabeth is a blood cousin to Victor, which makes her integration into the Frankenstein household a matter of course rather than choice. By using the 1831 edition for Elizabeth's backstory, all three of my main characters—Elizabeth, Caroline, and Justine—are thus rendered as orphans without blood ties to the Frankenstein family.

Finally, the *Frankenstein* excerpts at the start of each chapter are drawn from the 1831 edition. I also chose to use Shelley's anachronistic spelling of places and letter style in order to tie *Unnatural Creatures* all the closer to its literary predecessor.

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. *Frankenstein* is one of the most famous horror stories ever told. What was your first encounter with *Frankenstein*? Was it through the novel or a film or television series? How do your memories of Victor Frankenstein and his monster compare to what you read in *Unnatural Creatures*?

2. Negligent, abusive, and absent parents are a theme throughout *Unnatural Creatures*. They range from Madame Moritz to Victor Frankenstein, who rejects his “son” after creating him. Who else could be considered a bad mother or father in the novel? How are they so? Discuss.

3. Caroline Frankenstein, Elizabeth Lavenza, and Justine Moritz serve as the three protagonists of *Unnatural Creatures*. Which woman did you most identify with? Whose story most moved you? Were you surprised by who survived at the end?

4. Elizabeth Lavenza chooses to place her loyalty to the Frankensteins above her love for Henry Clerval, Victor’s best friend. Do you think she was right to do so? What would you have done in her situation?

5. *Unnatural Creatures* takes place during the French and Genevan revo-

lutions of the late 18th century. What are the ways *Unnatural Creatures* uses this politically volatile setting to further its plot and themes?

6. What did you make of Justine’s relationship with the creature she names Emet? Do you think Emet cared for her? Or was he too emotionally damaged as a result of Victor’s rejection?

7. Do you think Victor was right not to create a mate for Emet? Were there other ways Victor could have fulfilled Emet’s needs as a sentient being, thus avoiding the extinction of the Frankenstein family?

8. Rabbits, foxes, jackdaws, and other “natural creatures” appear throughout the pages of *Unnatural Creatures*. What do you think they symbolize, if anything? Do you associate them with particular characters? If so, who and why?

9. Finally, what do you think happened to Justine after she departed the Arctic? How do you envision the remainder of her life?

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ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Read (or reread) *Frankenstein*. The 1818 edition of *Frankenstein* was authored by Mary Shelley when she was still a teenager. However, Waldherr drew most directly from the revised 1831 edition when she wrote *Unnatural Creatures*.

2. Have a monster movie night. The first filmed representation of Victor Frankenstein and his monster appeared in a short film by Edison Studios in 1910. Since then, innumerable films and television series have been inspired by Shelley’s novel. Here are several that are available for viewing online:

- *Frankenstein*—1931 film directed by James Whale;

- *Young Frankenstein*—1974 film directed by Mel Brooks;
- *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*—1994 film directed by Kenneth Branagh;
- *Frankenstein*—2011 play directed by Danny Boyle at the Royal National Theater.

3. Learn more about Mary Shelley’s life. Waldherr cites *In Search of Mary Shelley: The Girl Who Wrote Frankenstein* by Fiona Sampson and *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Her Daughter Mary Shelley* by Charlotte Gordon as being particularly helpful to her during the writing of *Unnatural Creatures*. In addition, the 2017 film *Mary Shelley* offers a fictionalized account of her love affair with Percy Shelley and subsequent writing of *Frankenstein*.

4. Take an online tour of Geneva and the Villa Diodati, where *Frankenstein* was written. A quick search on YouTube offers numerous possibilities. For example, here’s a walking tour of the “old city”, where the Frankenstein family resided: <https://youtu.be/BE-lyw7MgHU>

5. Finally, if you’re a Doctor Who fan, watch Season Twelve’s “The Haunting of Villa Diodati” episode.

