



Saudi Film Director Haifaa Al-Mansour Talks to Bookwitty About Her New Film, Mary Shelley



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Haifaa Al-Mansour burst onto the international film scene in 2012 with the release of *Wadja*, a heart-warming film about a little girl in Saudi Arabia who dreams of acquiring and riding a bicycle. It won many awards, and was nominated in 2014 as best foreign film at the British Academy of Film Awards. Al-Mansour is also Saudi Arabia's first female film director, and her efforts were both lauded and criticized in her country. Moreover it was the first film to be shot entirely in Saudi Arabia. Al-Mansour, who has said change is a painful process, is careful to be sensitive to the issues in her country, all the while speaking out for women. She is about to start work

on her third film, *The Perfect Candidate*, a comedic drama about a young female physician who chooses to run in Saudi Arabian municipal council elections, navigating the male-dominated society. Although her second film, set to debut in the fall of 2017, took her far from Saudi Arabia, the subject remains close to Al-Mansour's interest in women manoeuvring within a conservative culture. Her *Mary Shelley* is a portrait of the turn-of-the 19th century English writer, best-known for her Gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, and also for being Percy Bysshe Shelley's wife. She kindly answered questions for Bookwitty about her work and inspiration for the film:

How did this film come about--were you asked to come on board or has it been a project you have been shepherding from the start?

The producers sent me the script and I have to admit, I was skeptical at first. I thought the script would feel very foreign to me, as the period and the setting were so far from what I felt comfortable with. But when I read Mary Shelley's story, I felt an instant connection with it. She grew up in this very conservative culture, where women's roles were much more rigid and opportunities were extremely limited. But she rose above it, and wrote a story that continues to capture the imagination of readers to this day. What I love is that she chose to write a book that was so outside of the "acceptable" realms of literature for women, and created a genre (science fiction) that continues to be dominated by male voices. In her own voice she wrote a book that challenged religious doctrine and raised new ethical questions about the impact of uninhibited scientific experimentation would have on a society. She's amazing!



Mary Shelley by Richard Rothwell

Mary Shelly's life was so rich (so Gothic!), what are the main elements you chose to focus on?

So much of Mary Shelley's life ended up in *Frankenstein*, so I chose to focus on the relationships she had with her parents and her tumultuous relationship with Percy Shelley. All of these influences found a way into the book, and are much clearer in their symbolism when you know everything that she went through. She fought to live an uncompromising life, to emerge from the shadow of her remarkable parents, and experienced incredible loss and sorrow. The journey of Frankenstein's monster reflects many of the tragic events of her own life.

Will there be any references to her untraditional upbringing by her father, William Godwin?

William Godwin was absolutely a critical part of the reason Mary was able to realize her masterpiece. For good and bad, the way she was raised led her to many of the questions that she explores in her book. Abandonment is the central theme of her work, and the emotional abandonment she felt from her father is clearly something that sparked these thoughts within her.

How do you represent the Gothic genre in your film?

Mary Shelley's life and work is the epitome of Gothic noir. The darkness, sorrow and loss of her life were directly channeled into her book. I wanted to show that despite all of her difficulties she found a way to fight through the darkness and find a light in the writing of her book. So the Gothic tone is extremely important in capturing the feelings and essence of her life.

What were the main bibliographical inspirations for the screenplay and for you?

I didn't write the first draft of the screenplay, but I worked a lot on it as we moved into production. The introduction to *Frankenstein* reveals so much in so few pages about what led her to write it. Her love for Percy [Shelley] and her father, who each influenced the creation of Victor Frankenstein, are clear in those pages. I read a lot of Percy's work as well, as their conversations and shared ideas were very much a part of her overall work. Finally, I read Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which had a clearly feminist influence on her daughter Mary's life, even though she died 10 days after giving birth to her.

Are there any parallels to Mary Shelly's life and the difficulties that women face today?

Many of the problems that Mary Shelley faced continue to challenge women today. Philosophically the way in which Mary went after what she wanted in her life, without regard to moral or societal limitations, was extremely shocking to the public in her time. Whereas the same behavior would perhaps be more acceptable for a man, public pressure to be chaste and morally pure is still something that women struggle with today. Sadly, even her struggles to publish her book under her own name show a societal reluctance to embrace works of science, horror, or other traditionally 'masculine' themes from a female writer that continue to this day. Look at a book like *The Outsiders*. Sarah Hinton had to abbreviate her name to S.E. Hinton so readers wouldn't know her gender just by looking at the cover. I don't think most people think about it, but it was clearly something her publishers felt (and still feel) is important in selling the book. Whenever women write something outside of the realm

of acceptable topics for the gender- romance, cook books, children's books, etc.- we see that there is still a long way to go in unrestricting the potential of the female voice in our society.

What have been the biggest challenges you have faced on this film?

I felt a big responsibility to be accurate and honor Mary Shelley's experiences. Her life story is an important aspect of the *Frankenstein* legacy, and it is a beloved work to so many people for so many different reasons. So I really wanted to focus on aspects of her personal journey that may not be that well known but are key to truly understanding everything that went into her writing. It was a wonderful challenge, and we had an amazing cast and crew that helped bring her story to life in a beautiful, touching story.

What would be your reading list for people wanting to read more about this time period and genre?

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is, of course, the work that the story revolves around. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a work that is directly referenced in her book, and one of the key influences Mary cites in formulating her own style and philosophy. Her father William Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams* is also thematically very close to *Frankenstein* and most certainly a work that Mary looked to when writing her own novel (as she notes in the dedication). Both Percy Shelley and Lord Byron's poetry is worth reading, as they were the real rock-stars of their time. Their works may not be as well known to the general public now, but at the time they were certainly bigger than life. Finally I would recommend John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, as it arose from the same 'ghost story' competition at Lord Byron's that sparked the idea for *Frankenstein*.

Tags

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