

October 2023



"It's your New York!"

The Rondout Reader



HIS STORY



By Kevin Ahearn



"That queer, penetrating personality of Karloff's was more important than his shape, which could be easily altered."



"Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man can invent."



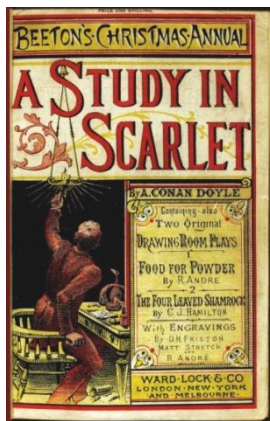
"Every actor is somewhat mad, or else he'd be a plumber or a bookkeeper or a salesman."



I am eight days *older* than Sherlock Holmes.

On November 23, 1887, I was born in Camberwell, London, the youngest of nine children. William Henry Pratt was my name.

The very next week...



"Where there is no imagination there is no horror."

Conan Doyle's '*consulting detective*' was an instant international sensation while it took take me more than forty years to get anywhere.

I grew up in Enfield, and after my mother's death, was raised by my older brothers and sisters. When I was nine, I took to the grammar school stage to play a 'demon king'. I loved the fun of it. Could I really *do* this?



At King's College in London I studied to go into the consular service, but it just wasn't for me. I dropped out in 1909 and worked as a farm laborer, menial jobs.

Was a life of unskilled toil to be my lot? I was bow-legged, had a terrible stutter plus a lisp. My legs never straightened, but I conquered my stutter, and lived with my lisp.



Did I have any chance of becoming an actor?

Not in England. In 1909, I sailed for Canada and began appearing in stage shows from city to city, but only as a 'supporting player' or an 'extra'. Never the *star*. To prevent embarrassment to my family (of the dignified British foreign service), I took another name...

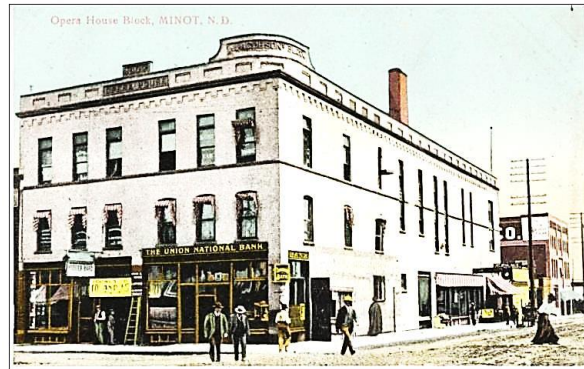
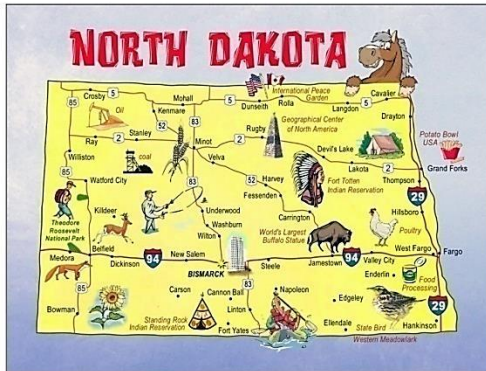
Boris Karloff has a dark, distinguished ring, don't you think?



Disaster found my troupe in 1912, the devastating 'Regina Cyclone' in Saskatchewan. We 'theatre people' performers helped with cleanup efforts.

My good deeds did not win me a steady paycheck. I worked as a railway baggage handler, and other lousy jobs.

I made my American 'premiere' in Minot, North Dakota, in an opera house above a hardware store.



Years of manual labor in Canada wrecked my back which in turn saved my life; I was deemed 'unfit for combat' and spared World War I.



After 'the war to end all wars', I finally got to Hollywood. And while I did dozens of bits in silent films...



My most consistent role was that of ditch-digger!

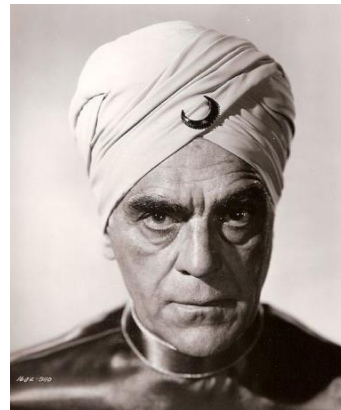


I got advice from, of all people, a *horror star!*



"If you're going to act - You're going to act. Even if you have to starve, never give up. It's the only way."

Was I "too much one type"? Not handsome or talented enough? Or was it because I wasn't *white* enough? My beloved grandmother and great-grandmother were of Anglo-Indian blood and I was quite proud of that. I told Hollywood that outdoor work had given me a 'healthy tan'.



Then things got much worse.



Hollywood lost money, but didn't go broke during the Great Depression. Audiences kept coming, craving escape from their heartbreaking lives.

I only cost a nickel to see.

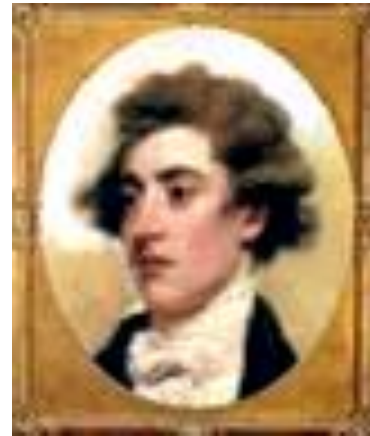
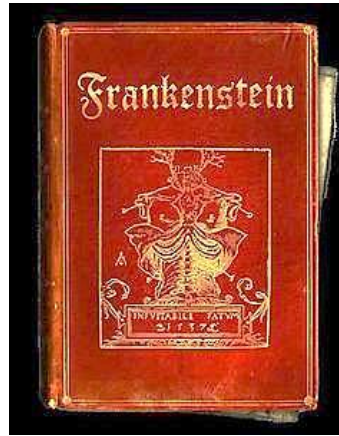


In the fall of 1931, I played a swarthy newspaper reporter in a skewering of tabloid journalism which was nominated for Best Picture. Didn't win anything, but surely my big break had to be just around the corner.



Hollywood is a man's industry. But thanks to two talented women, I got the strangest gig of all.

My lisp hadn't hurt me; I wouldn't speak a single word.
An initial review of the source material...



"This is, perhaps, the foulest Toadstool that has yet sprung up from the reeking dunghill of the present times."

"Neither principle, object, nor moral," scoffed another esteemed critic.

Proclaimed a third, "Cannot mend, and will not even amuse its readers, unless their taste have been deplorably vitiated."

Pompous asses! *Frankenstein or, the Modern Prometheus* was a book for the ages.

Written by a teenage girl, a waif between Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, two literary giants!



The three had a contest - Who could write the best *ghost* story?



"A thing of beauty is a joy forever."



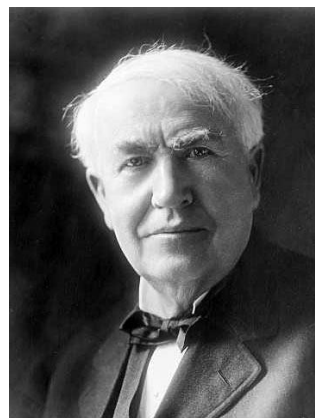
"Beware; I am fearless, and therefore powerful."



"A celebrity is one who is known to many persons he is glad he doesn't know."

Who would have dreamt, that one day her first novel would dwarf their collected poetry?

Universal Pictures was not the first to film *Frankenstein*. Thomas Edison was.

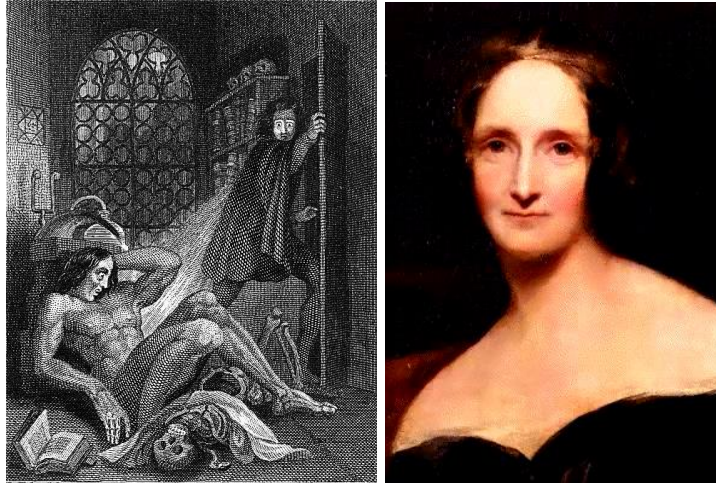


"Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time."

Scripter John L. Balderston worked, not from the long Gothic novel, but the *play* by Peggy Webling which he called "illiterate" and "inconceivably crude".



To play the 'monster', I would first have to *become* him.

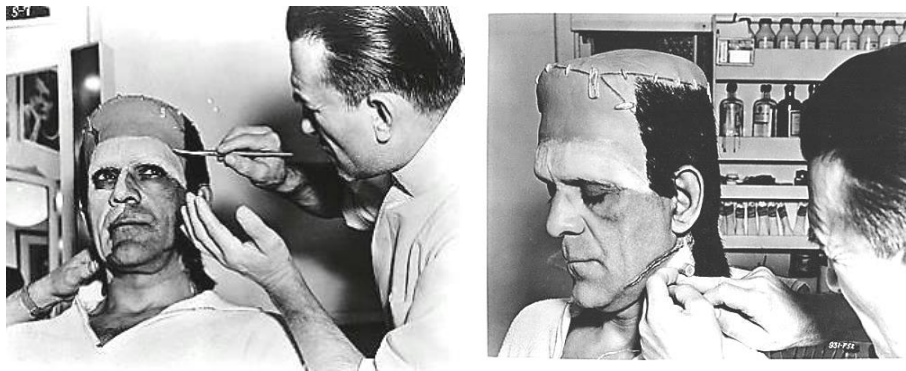


"I beheld the wretch — the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped and rushed downstairs. I took refuge in the courtyard belonging to the house which I inhabited, where I remained during the rest of the night, walking up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively, catching and fearing each sound as if it were to announce the approach of the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life."

The director was an open homosexual who had earned his stripes, not on Broadway or any normal way, but as a 'drama leader' in a POW camp!

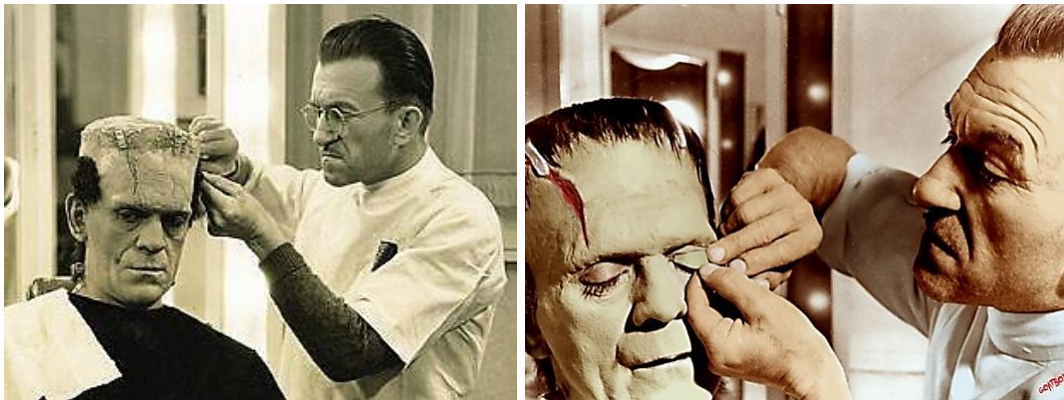


Jack Pierce, the most unappreciated artist in Hollywood history, would create the 'monster'. Once a cinema manager, a stuntman, actor, assistant director—all led to his mastery of makeup.

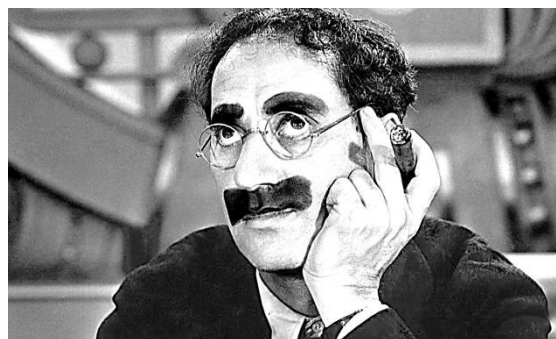


"This's gonna be BIG, Boris, I'm tellin' you!"

And four hours long every day and forty-eight extra pounds to carry in this damn heat!



Finally in all my glory, the first star to see me...



"I was in the back room playing my guitar when the doorbell rang. The maid opened it. I heard her scream. She later fainted. Then I heard those heavy footsteps coming down the hall to my room. The door opened and there stood this monster.

"Karloff in his get-up!"

On November 21, 1931, *Frankenstein* opened with a monologue...



"How do you do? Mr. Carl Laemmle feels it would be a little unkind to present this picture without just a word of friendly warning. We're about to unfold the story of Frankenstein, a man of science who sought to create a man after his own image without reckoning upon God. It is one of the strangest tales ever told. It deals with the two great mysteries of creation: life and death. I think it will thrill you. It may shock you. It might even horrify you. So if any of you feel that you do not care to subject your nerves to such a strain, now is your chance to, uh... Well, we've warned you."

Then...



"It's alive! It's alive!"



"Now I know what it's like to BE God!"

When I appeared...



The New York Times: "far and away the most effective thing of its kind. Beside it *Dracula* is tame."

Variety: "a new peak in horror plays."

But because of "cruelty and tended to debase morals", I was banned in Kansas

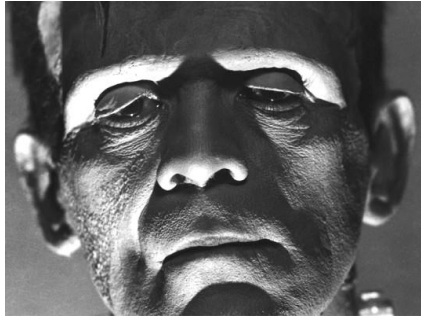
Dear Mary had given her 'monster' so much to say...

"I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel."



"Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me."

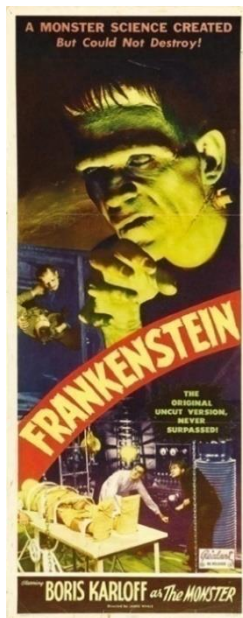
From beginning to end, I made him 'speak' with but a glance.



"Farewell! I leave you, and in you the last of human kind whom these eyes will ever behold. Farewell, Frankenstein! If thou wert yet alive, and yet cherished a desire of revenge against me, it would be better satiated in my life than in my destruction. But it was not so; thou didst seek my extinction that I might not cause greater wretchedness; and if yet, in some mode unknown to me, thou hast not ceased to think and feel, thou wouldst not desire against me a vengeance greater than that which I feel. Blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine; for the bitter sting of remorse will not cease to rankle in my wounds until death shall close them for ever."

Had my lifelong dream come true? The once-starving nobody at long last a star at the center of a gala Hollywood premiere!

BORIS * KARLOFF



Not quite. I wasn't invited to the premiere.

THE PLAYERS	
Henry Frankenstein . . .	COLIN CLIVE
Elizabeth	MAE CLARKE
Victor Moritz	JOHN BOLES
The Monster	?
Doctor Waldman ..	EDWARD VAN SLOAN
Baron Frankenstein	FREDERICK KERR
Fritz	DWIGHT FRYE
The Burgomaster	LIONEL BELMORE
Little Maria	MARILYN HARRIS

My beautiful **Boris Karloff**...a *question mark!*

Other roles quickly followed...



"Boris Karloff playing monsters is typecasting in reverse."

The torture of becoming the 'monster' pushed me to organize for safe working conditions for actors. In 1933, I was one of the founders of the Screen Actors Guild.

Next, Hollywood's first great *sequel*.



My on-screen 'marriage' didn't last. Neither did five of my others.

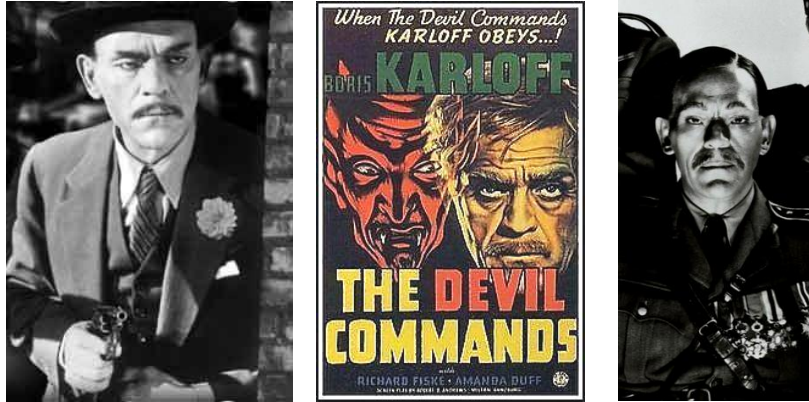
In 1939 came the third film in the trilogy. Starring as the son of my creator, the *Sherlock Holmes* of his age.



Reality had produced terrifying new 'monsters'.



I'd fight World War II from Hollywood.



In 1944, again I was Frankenstein, but not the 'monster', his *creator*!



Others would wear Jack Pierce's copyrighted makeup...



"Ugh! I'd rather be playing Dracula!"

Only I am Boris Karloff!

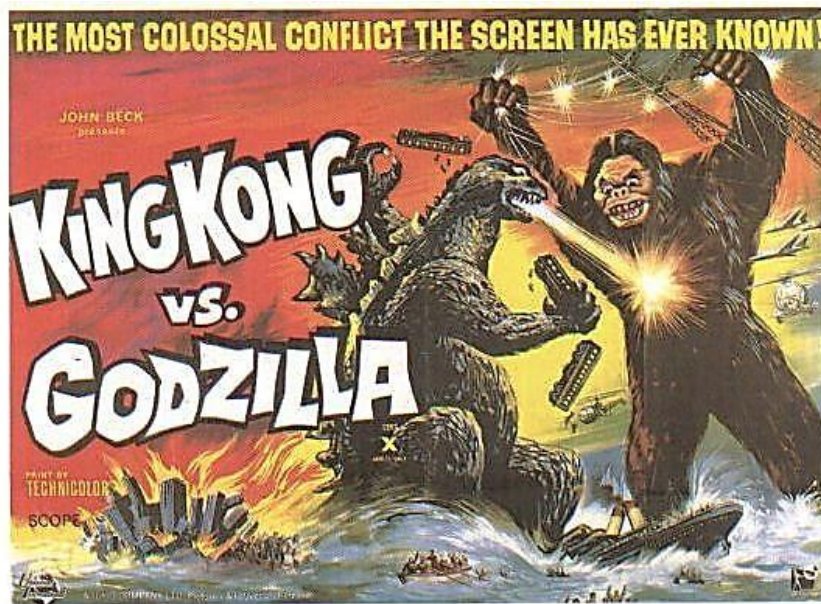
I wasn't quite done until 1958...



The scariest movie never made...



Another 'monster' beat out *Frankenstein* for the title role.



His revenge would be forthcoming...



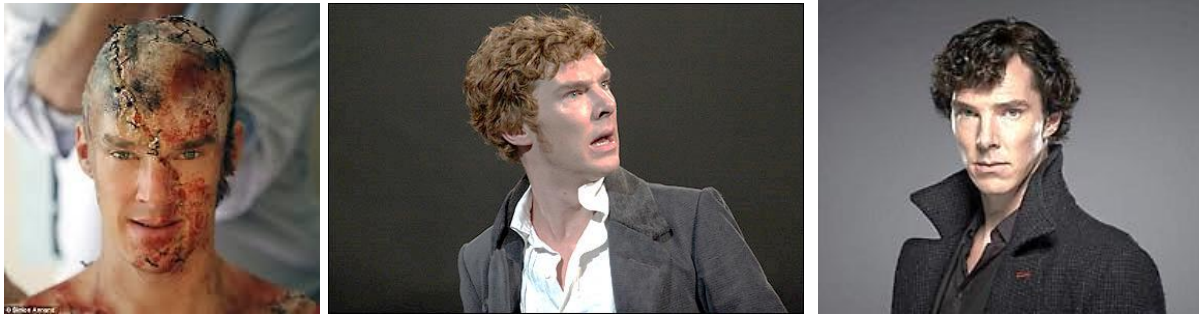
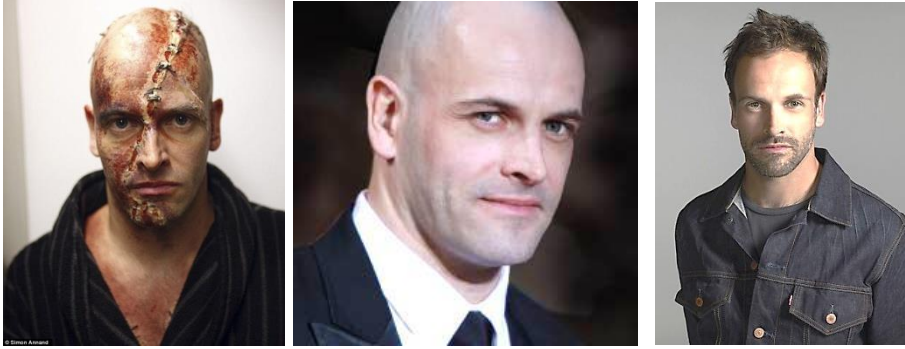
The British brought *color* to the 'monster' and...Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes!



And playing the 'doctor', *another* Holmes.



Years later, a pair of young Englishmen took turns playing the 'monster' and the 'doctor' on the London stage. Both went on to become Sherlock Holmes.



If an actor has not played the 'monster', the 'doctor' or the 'son', how good of a *Sherlock Holmes* can he be?

I never played Sir Conan Doyle's 'consulting detective', but I got pretty close.

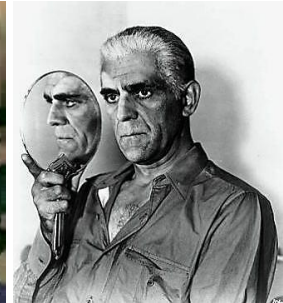


In Holmes' realm with the dash of a later, darker *Avenger*.

Over the years, taller, younger, better looking, funnier and more talented actors than I would star in *Frankenstein*.

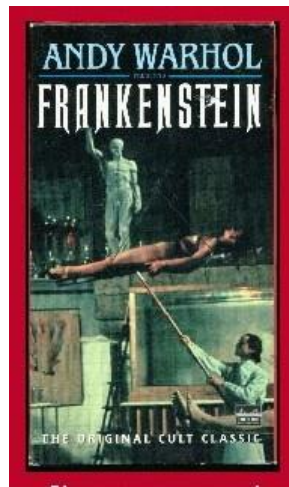
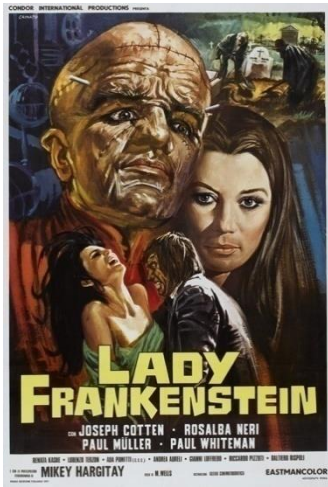


But as sure as my name is Boris Karloff, the 'monster' will always be mine!

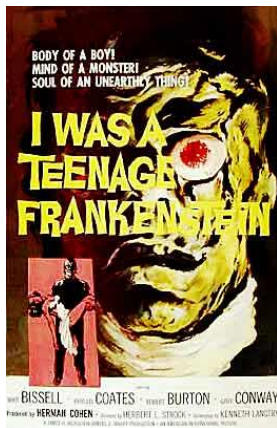


"Are you talkin' to me?"

Women had always been part of the show.



For teenagers, Negroes, and dog-lovers!



Cartoons for children of all ages.



"What, me worry?"



"Despicable!"



"Eat my shorts!"

A 'monster' of 'letters'!



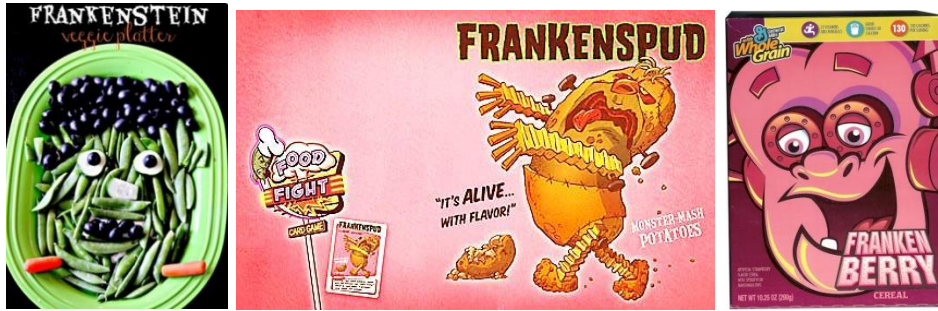
And literature!



A 'Prince of Pop Culture'!



Of food...



And of drink...



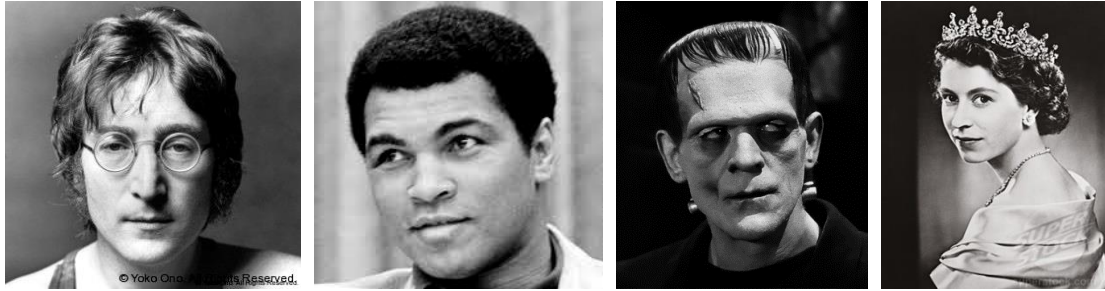
First I was read, then watched, and now, I'm *played!*



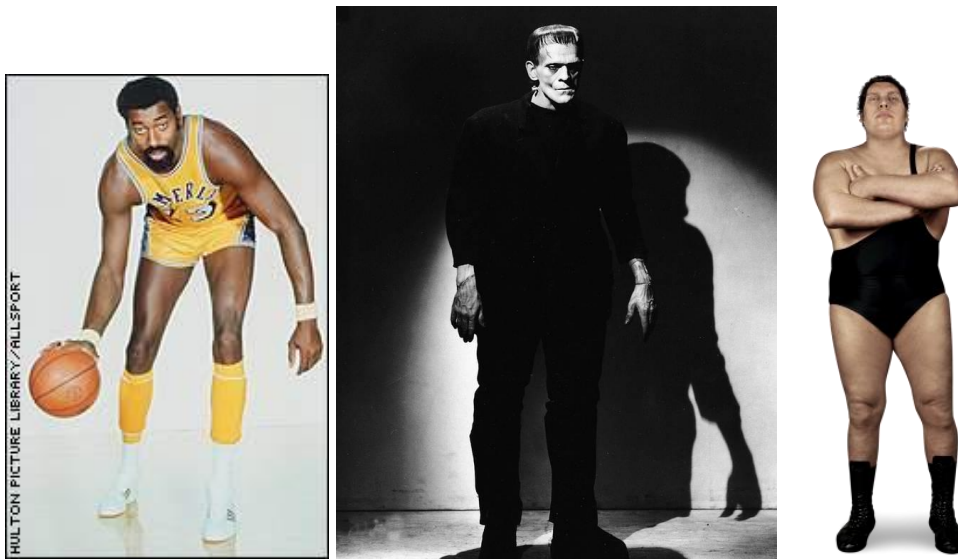
Depending on your politics...



One of the so few 'forever faces'.



I never reached six feet without shoes.



Yet I was bigger and more menacing, more intimidating, more feared, and more famous than the other giants of the Twentieth Century!

The Americans went to great effort and expensive to immortalize their greatest presidents.

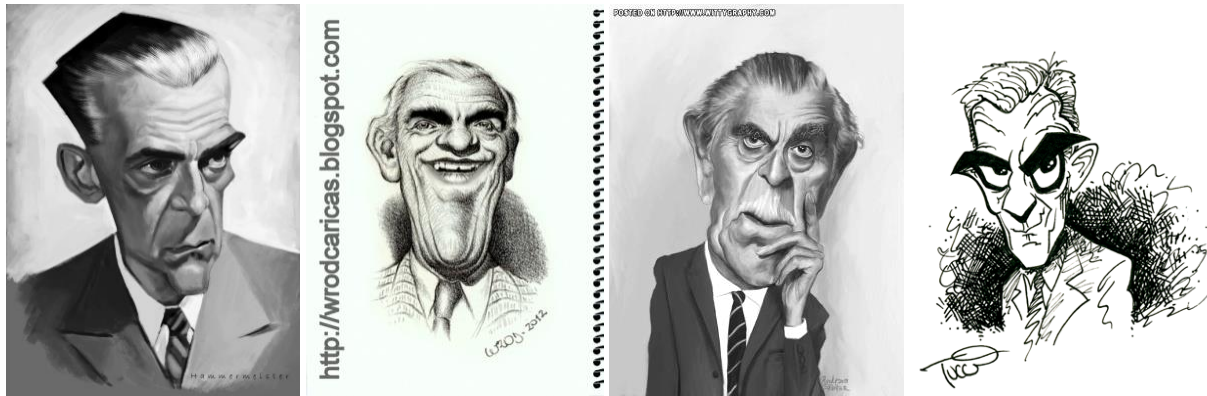


Yes, that's *me*...

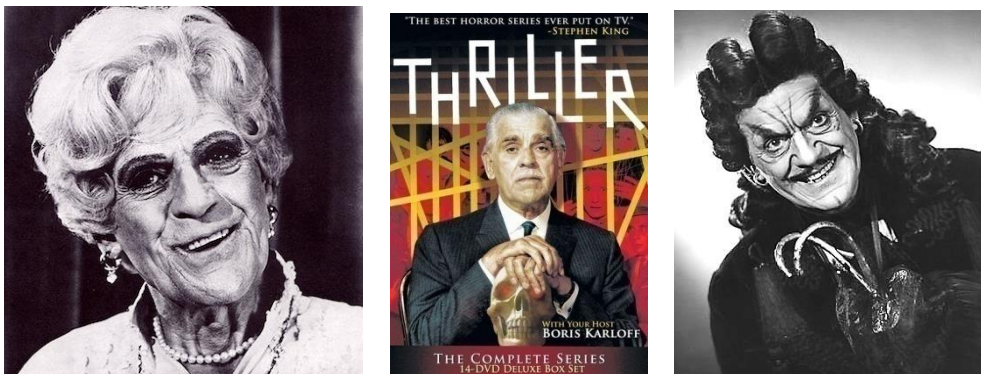


On the 'Mount Rushmore' of *Science Fiction & Fantasy*! Mary Shelley and James Whale can run the souvenir shop.

I had other faces.



My career took twists and turns of its own, in dozens of other roles in movies, on stage and on television. People kept wanting to see me, God bless them!



Teamed up with a good doctor to put on a show. To be the 'monster', I didn't need to say a word, yet with *only* my voice, I brought a cartoon fantasy creature to life.



"Everything stinks until it's finished."

Headlined my own comic book and got an action figure! How many Hollywood stars can say that?



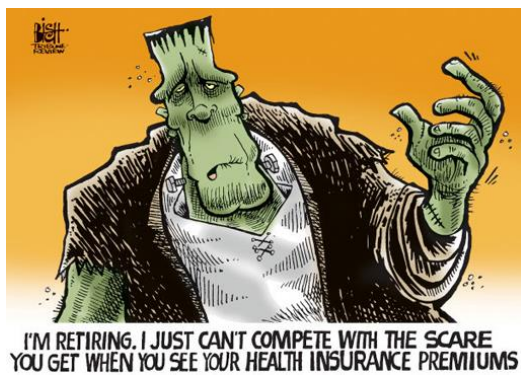
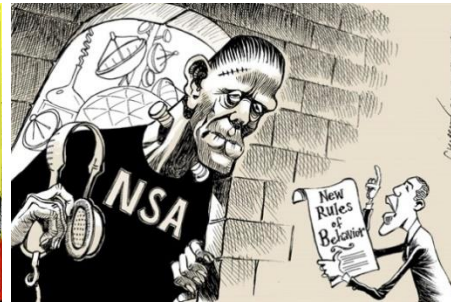
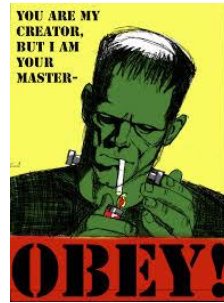
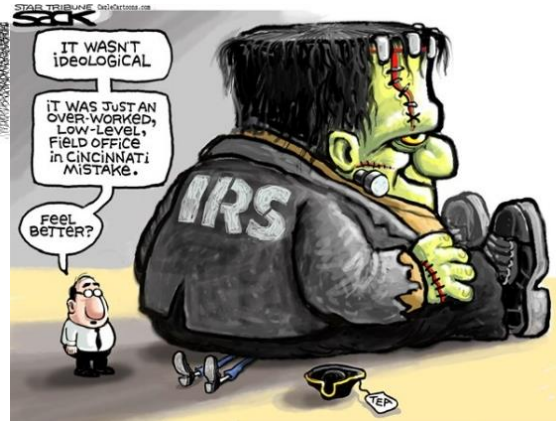
Because of the 'monster', the *best friend* I ever had!



"Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image;

but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred."

Of your own making, he continues to haunt you, doesn't he?



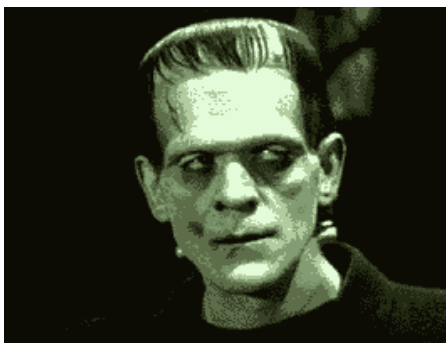


Alone on his throne, 'Long live the King!' Artificially created godless being, incapable of emotion or compassion, a brutal, unthinking thug. His heirs...?



This old bow-legged Englishman with a bad back and a lisp knows otherwise. *Frankenstein* gave me my life because I gave the 'monster' *humanity*.

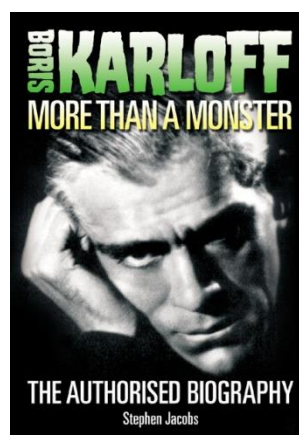
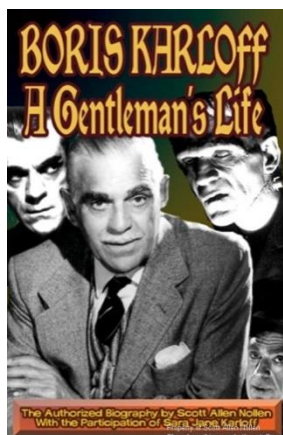
In the beginning, he appears cold and heartless, not unlike the 'humbug' miser before me and the logical Vulcan who followed.



Despised and feared, ridiculed and exploited, in the end, the hero is the most human of all.



The quest of all of us.





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