



It's Alive!

Julian David Stone

Greenleaf Book Group Press

(232pp)

978-1-62634-931-5

Vibrant, surprising, and chaotic, the historical novel It's Alive! brings old Hollywood to life.

Julian David Stone's historical novel *It's Alive!* goes behind the scenes during the frantic days before the filming of the first *Frankenstein*.

Talking films are still new in Hollywood when Junior decides that he wants to ride the wave into the industry's future with a cinematic rendition of *Frankenstein*. Confident that his father, the Universal Studios founder, will name him vice president, Junior plans the start of filming to coincide with the celebration of his promotion. But his father's disapproval of *Frankenstein's* film-worthiness, as well as Junior's last minute casting changes, threaten the project. As the start date approaches, Junior panics about what the promotion and the movie will really mean to him.

Like Dr. Frankenstein, Junior wants to destroy the past and forge a brighter future with a brave new idea. Both men are tortured figures at a crossroads. The book works to flesh out the parallels between the two of them. And its settings are described in ways that illustrate how the making of the movie reflects its content and themes: scenes of lavish parties, movie executives driving around upscale sections of Hollywood, and the underground world of speakeasies and poker games set the stage for Junior's soul searching and existential questions as he navigates the artificial life of stardom.

Junior is also contrasted with the two actors contending for the role of Frankenstein's monster. Their threads ground the book's faux film world. Boris is a gig actor who takes any role he can get out of necessity. He is drawn to the monster role as a challenge, hoping to use it to bare his deepest fears and vulnerabilities, and to get to the heart of his acting abilities. Bela is a seasoned actor who must be convinced that the Frankenstein monster is worth his attention. He is offended at being offered a non-speaking role as a well-known voice actor. Like the monster shows Frankenstein's true colors, these two act as foils for Junior. Bumbling Boris sheds light on Junior's more vulnerable side, shown in the panic attacks he experiences. Cultured Bela illuminates Junior's egocentric side. Less affluent and famous than Junior, they both bring him, and Hollywood, down to a relatable level.

Choosing between the two men constitutes the story's suspense. They are developed enough in their own rights, through focus on their internal struggles, that getting invested in their plights is easy, and choosing between them is as difficult for the audience as it is for Junior. Still, the conversations between Junior and his actress girlfriend are formulaic, and some of the secondary characters' back stories are predictable, including those of the many immigrant writers, actors, and workers working behind the scenes. But the book moves steadily toward Junior's decision about the movie, which is portrayed using the same countdown device that is used leading up to the start of the film's production.

Vibrant, surprising, and chaotic, the historical novel *It's Alive!* brings old Hollywood to life by illuminating the first plans to film *Frankenstein*.

MARI CARLSON (May 18, 2022)

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