



Vindicated: A Novel of Mary Shelley

Kathleen Williams Renk

Cuidono Press (Nov 10, 2020)

Softcover \$16.00 (202pp)

978-1-944453-10-7

Kathleen Williams Renk's novel *Vindicated* reimagines Mary Shelley's life through diary entries.

At fourteen, Mary misses her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who died while giving birth to her. So she adopts the mantle of a free spirit, longing to be more than some husband's property. When she falls for Percy Shelley, who is married and who dubs her his "child of light," her father disowns her. Life with the radical poet fuels Mary's vigorous experimentality, and her intellect sustains her through the years.

Mary's influences are suggested even before the Lake Geneva trip that inspired *Frankenstein*. She takes an abbreviated tour of Europe, experiences pregnancy and loss, and has visions of her mother. Speculative and historical details are used to build a plausible map of her interior life as she witnesses electrical experiments, ponders over her characters' lives, and spars with Lord Byron. Her musings about her fiction are intense, and her impressions of Italy are rich. She takes idealistic offense to men's outdated thinking, reinforcing her progressive outlook.

The book's diary format leads to time lapses and omissions that imply, rather than pronounce, Mary's off-page daily life, including her financial concerns and Shelley's mad bouts. Demimondes and controversial writers enliven the Shelley household, though Mary's frequent reflections about her stepsister Claire's pursuit of Lord Byron are tangential. Still, despite some intimate revelations, including of her guilt over hurting Shelley's first wife, Mary is enigmatic when it comes to sensitive topics. The book's later entries digress to focus on Shelley's emotional affairs.

Vindicated is an admiring and graceful tribute to Mary Shelley, who was challenged to bridge her writing with the tasks of motherhood.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2020)

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