

## Lucy Meets Frankenstein's Monster By Richard Ratzan

As Stephen Jay Gould demonstrated many times in his essays, sometimes a theory or book is valuable as much for what it accomplishes as for what it doesn't. Although Lucy, a recent novel by Laurence Gonzales, raises several important issues that are currently very much in the scientific and moral foreground, its major value is its demonstration just how an eighteen year old girl effected a far superior novel almost 200 years ago with more foresight and more art.

Lucy is a novel named for the female hybrid offspring born of a bonobo mother and human father. The result of artificial insemination by her father, Donald Stone, a British anthropologist in the Congo with aims to improve the human species, Lucy is a very human-looking 15 year old girl. An American primatologist in a nearby camp, Jenny Lowe, finds Lucy next to her parents, killed by Congolese insurgents, and whisks her off to Chicago and enrolls her in high school, where Lucy excels at wrestling and meets a friend, Amanda Mather. After Lucy contracts a viral disease that bonobos, not humans contract, Lucy decides to pre-empt those who wish to expose her and posts the news of her hybrid karyotype on Facebook.

The plot now descends from the merely fantastic but plausible, kind of, (we'll overlook the purely human appearance of Lucy with nary a telltale bonobo feature), to preposterous, including (plot spoiler ahead!) her kidnapping by right wing extremists who consider her an animal, not a human, in order to conduct whole brain stimulation experiments in a secret animal lab on an Air Force base in New Mexico. Lucy escapes

and finds a new life with the Oglala Sioux on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The book ends with her, now pregnant, writing to Jenny who has not seen her since the kidnapping.

Lucy, the book as well as the character, can be considered an interesting confluence of two types of myths. The first is a creation myth much like the experiments of nature and man we see in the Island of Dr. Moreau and in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Of course Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is the paradigmatic creation myth in which a scientist intentionally creates a human being. The second type of myth in fiction is that of the juxtaposition of intelligent apes with humans. The Planet of the Apes comes to mind as does the bestseller from several years ago, Ishmael, and John Collier's wryly comedic His Monkey Wife. Lucy has been intentionally created, like Victor Frankenstein's Monster, but is genetically part bonobo.

In terms of the plot Lucy the novel does have striking similarities to Frankenstein: both are offsprings manufactured as part of a melioristic socialist agenda by a rogue male scientist working outside the norms of society; the creature discovers the creator's notebooks; the creature is acculturated successfully and in fact becomes a superior being morally, at first; the creature then becomes misunderstood, abused and hunted after killing an innocent person; the creator dies a tragic death in the presence of, but not at the hands of, the creature; and, finally, the creature disappears from sight by novel's end in a curious failure of resolution that does not disturb the reader all that much. The differences in plot are also striking: In Lucy, the creation is a female who, unlike the male Monster, loves her progenitor.

Unfortunately the differences between Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, written when she was 18 years old, and Lucy far

exceed those of plot. In the former, unlike the latter, serious discussions of personhood, its genetic versus behavioral definition, the rights of persons, and the morality, risks and dangers of unfettered research occur frequently and with great insight in the dialogue between several characters, mainly Victor Frankenstein and his two doppelgängers, the ship's captain, Robert Walton, and his highly educated creation, the monster. To be fair, the duties of a parent to his or her offspring do receive ample discussion in Lucy but not with the degree of nuanced subtlety that occur in Frankenstein.

Lucy is a highly readable and important but disappointing book that highlights significant issues about moral issues in medicine, but Frankenstein, almost 200 years old, is growing younger by each year and with each genetic and molecular biologic discovery. It is a much better novel to prepare oneself for wrestling with these controversial ideas and a must read for those who have not yet done so.

Lucy. Gonzales, L. Alfred A. Knopf, NY, NY: 2010.