



HISTORY OF MONSTERS —

A new app reveals apocalyptic history behind novel *Frankenstein*

Relive the summer of 1816, when a volcanic eruption made Europeans fear the world was ending.

ANNALEE NEWITZ - 7/27/2016, 7:08 PM

An iOS app called *Summer of Darkness* was released earlier this summer, just in time for the 200th anniversary of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. What few people remember is that Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* during a terrifying summer in the Swiss Alps, after a massive volcanic eruption at Mount Tambora in Indonesia caused weather across the globe to turn grim and cold. Many Europeans believed this disaster-induced climate change meant the world was ending. *Summer of Darkness* recreates this historical moment with daily updates from the writings of four famous authors who traveled together that summer.



Shelley spent the apocalyptic months between May and September touring the Swiss Alps. She was joined by a group of literary friends, including poets Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who would soon become her husband, as well as writer John Polidari. Spurred by a writing challenge from Byron and the terrible weather, the group wrote ghost stories. Two of those stories, Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Polidari's *Vampyr*, gave birth to new genres of popular fiction. Meanwhile, Byron and Percy wrote poetry together in a blaze of productivity kindled by their new friendship.

Summer of Darkness offers a fascinating look at the lives of these writers, as well as the events that inspired their creativity that year. The app was built by designer Andrew Sempere and author Anindita Basu Sempere, an American couple who have been living in Switzerland for many years, surrounded by the same landscapes that Shelley and her friends saw two centuries ago. As you read snippets of letters, poems, memoirs, and stories by the group, the app provides beautifully rendered maps to show where exactly each person was as the summer unfolded. Brief flashes of rain and lightning illuminate the screen behind the text, providing a delightful but non-invasive hint of atmosphere. You receive updates to unlock material as the summer unfolds in real time, and if you download the app now you can consume all the past updates in one glorious binge. New updates continue into September.

Reading the frantic letters that these authors sent back and forth will also suck you into a centuries-old melodrama that fascinated people of the day. Percy and Byron were already public figures, sort of like rock stars, whose libertine lives and passionate poems made them darlings of the scandal sheets. Byron had abandoned his wife and daughter Ada Lovelace (yes, the same Lady Ada who wrote the first computer programs) in order to get Mary's sister Claire pregnant as the summer began (Claire's beseeching letters to Byron, begging him to see her, are heartbreaking). After reading the Byron and Claire bits of *Summer of Darkness*, I fell into an Internet hole researching Byron's love life. There, I discovered that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe had written [a giant, gossipy article for *The Atlantic* in 1869](#) that defended Lady Ada's mother and revealed for the first time Byron's affair with his half-sister.

But Byron wasn't the only one in the party with a tabloid-ready love life. Percy Shelley was still married to his suicidally depressed wife (also left behind in England), while Mary was merely calling herself "Mrs. Shelley" as a matter of convenience. Her name was actually Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin; she was the daughter of early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, a believer in free love, who chose never to marry Mary's politically radical father William Godwin. Percy Shelley and Mary Godwin began their affair after Percy became William Godwin's political acolyte, visiting him often at the Godwin estate. The two young lovers fled the country, much to William Godwin's distress, and devoted themselves to an open relationship that included many other partners.

Following these authors' adventures in *Summer of Darkness*, it's clear why this group of literary legends belong in a 21st century iOS app. They were quite simply ahead of their time. The celebrity relationship trainwrecks of their lives are better suited to a world ruled by social media and polyamorous sexual hookups than the early 19th century, when railroads were cutting-edge technology. Even the writing they produced, inspired by the terrifying experience of climate change, feels contemporary.

Anyone who is fascinated by literary history and the romantic radicals of the 19th century will swoon over *Summer of Darkness*. But it's not just an interactive journey into the past. It's about the minds of people who paved the way for pop culture as we know it, full of science fictional creatures like Frankenstein's monster and fantasy-horror demons known as vampires. If you want to take a break from hunting Pokémon this summer, you need to download *Summer of Darkness* and discover where modern monsters were born.

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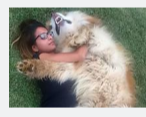
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