

Frankenstein in Vermont

"The Children on the Hill"

Jennifer McMahon, Scout Press, 2022

The children on the hill are Violet (Vi) and her brother Eric, who, in 1978, are living with their grandmother near a picturesque town in Vermont. Gran is a psychiatrist famous for her brilliant treatment of the mentally ill. She has adopted the children after the car accident in which their parents were killed, and they live with her in the keeper's house of a one-time hotel that is now a psychiatric hospital. Vi, the narrator, tells us about their imaginative lives, in which monsters



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

play such an important part that she has written, and Eric has illustrated, "The Book of Monsters," chapters of which are shared with the reader. One day, Gran brings a girl named Iris home with her. She is almost wordless, terribly shy, and she wears an old orange hat all the time—but Gran insists they should treat her like a sister. They do, and Iris opens up so well that they share their imaginative monster world with her. Then, gradually, Vi becomes curious about the background Iris has completely forgotten; soon, she figures out ways she can get hold of Gran's records and help Iris remember who she is.

Vi's story, embroidered with evocative recollections of a late '70s Vermont childhood, alternates with another story 40 years later in which Lizzy Shelley, the host of the podcast "Monsters Among Us," travels to Vermont to find a girl who has disappeared without a trace. In successive chapters, we learn that Lizzy, like her brother Eric, changed her name

after a traumatic experience in their childhoods; he has put his name and his past behind him, but she is still obsessed with monsters. In particular, she is hunting for a monster that has abducted a series of troubled girls who have never reappeared. She strongly suspects that the monster is her sister.

The juxtaposition of the two stories, which are themselves interspersed with chapters from the children's "Book of Monsters," a few 2019 passages written by "the Monster," and a 1980 journalistic description of the history of Gran's hospital, warn the reader that Vi's investigation of Iris' history is not going to end well.

Despite Vi's determined charm and the children's adventures (which include a secret monster clubhouse and bike rides to a hole in the fence of a drive-in movie theater to watch monster features), the repeated warnings don't develop over the first half of the book, substantially slowing its pace. It is only when Lizzy closes in on the monster she is seeking that the plot begins to move—and its twists and turns, while initially shocking, become so entangled that they limit the effect of the finale.

These weaknesses, however, are mitigated by McMahon's skill with untrustworthy narrators and her ability to imitate and update the changes of voice and time that characterize Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein."

Again and again, the reader admires McMahon's familiarity with what Vi admires as the greatest monster book of all time. Chief among the strengths of "The Children on the Hill," in fact, is its echo of Shelley's implied question: Which is more monstrous—a horrifying creation, or the distorted noble intentions of its creator?

