



## The Last Man

*Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*

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## **The Last Man** Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

A futuristic story of tragic love and of the gradual extermination of the human race by plague, *The Last Man* is Mary Shelley's most important novel after *Frankenstein*. With intriguing portraits of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, the novel offers a vision of the future that expresses a reaction against Romanticism, and demonstrates the failure of the imagination and of art to redeem the doomed characters.

## **The Last Man Details**

Date : Published September 10th 1998 by Oxford University Press (first published 1826)

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Author : Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

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## From Reader Review The Last Man for online ebook

### Sam says

I'll be honest, I didn't know much about this book until it came up on my kindle recommendations and since I loved Frankenstein I just had to give it ago, particularly once I read the synopsis for it. And while I really did enjoy Shelley's writing, it didn't feel like a post apocalyptic novel to me at all. Instead it felt more like an old fashioned adventure where rich aristocrats travel the world getting themselves into trouble, pulling along the odd 'outsider' for a bit of a fresh perspective. This isn't to say I didn't enjoy it but I just struggled to pull out the apocalyptic part until somewhere towards the end of volume 2/the start of volume 3 when it was referred to directly and became an integral part of the story (this could be entirely my fault but still). I also did get myself a little lost between some of the characters as a few of them seemed rather similar to each other, which made things a little difficult to follow at times. Having said all that though, once the plague starting ravaging across Europe again I was utterly engrossed and loved Shelley's portrayal of events as panic sets in and the ruling classes realize they are not immune from the carnage. I just wish it didn't take so long to get there.

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### Christopher Conlon says

Every once in a while in my reading life I've come across a book that has taken me completely by surprise—one that forces me to inhale deeply at the end and then, exhaling, utter an overwhelmed "Wow."

"The Last Man" is such a book for me.

Despite my love of Mary Shelley's great "Frankenstein," I went into "The Last Man" without much hope, based on its relative obscurity as well as some of the slams it has received right here on Goodreads. Yet I was awed by the power of this story. It's true that if today's readers go into it expecting, say, "I Am Legend" or "The Stand," they're going to be disappointed (just as readers expecting the fast pacing and graphic violence of contemporary horror novels are invariably disappointed by "Frankenstein"). "The Last Man," set in the late 21st century, is a long novel, and in some ways it's unfair to characterize it simply as "apocalyptic," though it is certainly that. Shelley spends the entire first volume of this 1826 triple decker on developing her characters: the narrator, Lionel Verney; his sister, Perdita; Adrian, the Earl of Windsor, who rejects the machinations of his mother in trying to secure for him the British throne; and Raymond, who eventually becomes Lord Protector of England in its new, republican form of government. Readers complain about this first part of the novel, but for anyone accustomed to the fiction of the period, it all reads just fine; my interest held firmly throughout the entirety of the first volume, even though the coming plague is never mentioned.

In Part 2, events grow darker. The plague begins to receive glancing, foreboding references, and by the halfway point, the devastation has reached England. Suffice it to say that things go downhill from there.

Part 3, the section that even people who dislike the novel as a whole are willing to praise, is indeed magnificent, as the human race begins to die out. Any number of indelible images arise in this section, and the final pages of the novel are both unbearably sad and unforgettably beautiful—writing as powerful as the hallucinatory final chapters of "Frankenstein."

Does the novel have flaws? Yes. Some of the characters (not all, as a few reviewers claim) are flat, the dialogue is often impossibly literary, and there are occasional jumps of logic or credibility in the development of the plot. (All of these problems, it should be pointed out, are also present in "Frankenstein.") Yet, at least for me, they detract little from the sweeping grandeur and tragic power of "The Last Man." To think that this book was published in 1826 is simply mind-boggling, and perhaps its failure at the time shouldn't be a surprise. (It received extremely harsh reviews, one critic referring to the author's "diseased imagination"; despite this, it remained one of Shelley's favorites among her own works). "The Last Man" quickly fell out of print, and would not be rediscovered until the Cold War era of the 1960s, when no one could any longer dismiss as "diseased" its horrifying images of the end of humanity.

"The Last Man" is an astonishing novel, one that deserves to be far better known than it is.

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### **J.G. Keely says**

I don't really like reading, which must strain credulity, since I devote so much of my time and energy to doing it. But reading, for me, is never an easy thing. Only rarely do I get caught up and find myself turning pages heedlessly, plunging into the text. More often, I am well aware of what page I'm on and how many pages until this chapter ends.

The reading itself is slow and ponderous, winding a sinuous path through the book, and this leisurely pace always sets my mind to wandering, looking for clues and foreshadowing, word use, structure, ideas, half-ideas, and flashes of brilliance. All of my friends read more quickly than I do, and many have described their experience as being totally divorced from the text: that once they get into the book, they grow unaware of the process of reading.

And yet I am the one who writes the reviews, whose mind whirls and reels with layered meanings and critical analysis. So I keep reading, though it is can be a chore, as my brain must always perk up and churn along, processing and considering.

Many a time, I've wished I had my friends' eyes, and could knock out a book in an afternoon, could simply read as if I were watching TV--then I could afford the luxury of rereading. I can read more quickly than is my habit: in college, I often forced myself to do so, to make due dates. Yet it was always unpleasant, rushing through without a moment free for thought, so that by the time I came out, I had only half the ideas and observations I would normally glean from a good book.

I was tempted to rush with *The Last Man*, not because it was dull or poorly written--which often tempts me to rush through worse books, knowing I won't miss much--but because it is thick and long, and may be even more ponderous than I am. This book was a haul, moreso than any other in my recent memory, it took time and energy to get through the long chapters, poetic language, and asides.

Yet it was not poorly-written, the poetry of its language was not misplaced, nor was its pacing some accident of language; it's a good book. It was merely a great deal of book to get through.

Like many Victorian authors, Shelley felt no need to rush the plot along, nor to curtail her flood of words. Luckily, she backed them up with ideas and feelings, so it was not merely the empty deluge of words so common in many American novels of the same period.

There were some problems with the book's structure, most notably that Shelley often passed over moments of action or character growth with a short summary, but almost never curtailed her descriptions of places or emotional states. But this gives the book a very introspective bent, which complements the protagonist's isolation as he attempts to come to terms with the world as it collapses around him.

The book is thematically intriguing, especially to someone who has an interest and a familiarity with the ideals, philosophies, and art of the Victorian period. Much of the book is a deconstruction of Romanticism, showing how an aesthete's optimism never long survives contact with the real world. This wasn't a problem for Shelley's compatriots, as they had the money and influence to avoid the more difficult aspects of reality, but after they all died young, only Mary was left, a lone woman in a changing world, writing a book about the death of the grand Romantic ideal.

The 'Last Man' from which she takes her title was not an original idea of Shelley's, either, but a Victorian notion that had been explored by many previous authors. It was Shelley's intention to create a whole story around the concept, presenting the fall of that last man with the image of the death of the Victorian ideal itself in the face of overwhelming democratic industrialization of every aspect of modern life, including art.

For Shelley, man was not a uniform mass: there were remarkable men, and there were unremarkable men. This distinction has been widely condemned in modern democratic states, where Payne's notion that men should be treated equally was mistaken for the idea that men actually *are equal*. *But Mary cuts us to the quick, reminding us that great men (and particularly great artists) can do little to stem the tide of the mob, or of industry.*

*It is a strikingly postmodern message, prefiguring Nietzsche and the American postwar authors. It is a message that Shelley's refined peers were not prepared to hear, so they attacked the book, and the author herself, calling her 'perverse' and 'ugly'. She presented a perverse and ugly world, a naturalistic world, which she had come to know through hardship, and which her peers failed to see looming on the horizon.*

*For them, Keats' ultimate line "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" held few notes of irony, but for Shelley, they were already the words of a dead compatriot, whose beautiful ideas served mainly to ennable his tragedy.*

Shelley's book was reviled, and her career stagnated--despite all the promise of 'Frankenstein', 'The Last Man' would fall out of print for more than a century, and its prescient foreshadowing our modern obsessions with death, isolation, and other such eschatonic concerns went long unnoticed. Now, the story she told seems familiar and reasonable, and even somewhat idealistic in the throes of slow degradation, though it stands up beside the works of Eliot and Beckett as an unrelenting vision of doom.

What Shelley came to recognize, which none of her critics mentioned, was that the death of mankind is not merely marked by our spilled blood and lifeless bodies, but by the fall of art, of idealism, of love and joy, and all the heights that we have reached, or hoped to reach. The death of man is a tragedy only inasmuch as it cuts off our possibility, our future, our promise; though if we lived forever, we still might never reach it, there remains always, hope.

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## Tony says

THE LAST MAN. (1826; this ed. 2012). Mary Shelley. \*\*.

Most of us have read Frankenstein by Shelley (born Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, 1797-1851), but most of us haven't come across her other best seller of the time, "The Last Man." This novel is an early rendition of 'an end of the world scenario' and would be followed by many more like it. It was originally issued as a three-volume novel, but, in today's world even a mediocre editor would have cut it down to one volume. It is set in the 21st century, and starts off in 2091. I'm not sure why she decided to call it a novel of the future. There is nothing of the future in it. Transportation is still by horse and carriage – although there is an air balloon used for long distance travel. Battles are still fought with 19th century weapons. There are no other projections of anything that smacks of modern in the book. It starts out in England, which has abolished the monarchy and is now ruled by a "Protector." The central character and narrator of the novel, who must also be 'the last man' since who else could have written the book? is Lionel Verney. He and his family live just outside of London and are fairly well off. We meet his circle of friends and the rest of his family. That's mostly what Volume I is about. In Volume II, we learn of a war between Greece and Turkey. Several of the characters we have met get involved in that war for no good reason other than seeking self-glory. Finally in Volume III, we learn that a 'plague' is slowly creeping across Europe. It is deadly, leaving no one who is stricken to survive. Whole countries contract the disease. We don't know much about the disease or what it might be other than the fact that it is terminally deadly. We learn, too, that other countries of the world have contracted the disease too, although we don't know how it is spread. Medical science, even in the 21st century, is at a loss. As you might suspect, our narrator is the 'last man,' choosing to spend the rest of his life – for as long as it might be – in Italy. He got there by migrating with those few of his family and friends left alive when they went looking for other survivors. During the course of this migration, we get the Cook's tour of Europe. That's good for one-hundred pages or so. When you finally get to the end of this long novel, you have to ask yourself why you stuck it out. I don't have a good answer. At least now I can say, when "Frankenstein" comes up: "Have you read 'The Last Man'?" In today's world, a really good editor would have taken the one-volume condensation of our earlier mediocre editor and finally condensed it down to a short story.

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### **Jim says**

That was long! Good in places, boring in others, it wasn't really what I expected. From the author of Frankenstein: The 1818 Text & set in the end of the 21st century, I expected some SF elements, but there were none. The war is one that could have taken place any time in the prior centuries & was taking place then. While there is some travel by balloon, most is by horse. Ships still rely on sails save for a few steam powered ones. Being published in 1826, there is no knowledge of germ theory so the plague is basically the Black Plague on steroids, but she left out or skimmed over many of the most horrific parts.

Few stories could have used an editor more. If they were to make a movie of this brick, they could pack it into a 2 hour made for TV movie without much trouble. The story is worth reading, though. It gets 3 stars for in it lie the seeds for many great action, SF, apocalyptic, & post apocalyptic novels, but be warned; most are contained in the last half of the last volume. It's a long hike to get there. Although it contains spoilers, I'd highly recommend reading the Wikipedia entry on this story.

The introduction uses an interesting device for finding the story. Shelley is on vacation & finds her way into the rarely visited, scary cave of Sibyl where she finds Verney's manuscript. Edgar Rice Burroughs adored this device & used it often. He shared Shelley's theories of physiognomy which I remarked on in my recent review of The Mucker, too.

The book is broken into 3 volumes. The first is a pastoral English novel that introduces the characters in

'stunning' detail. By 'stunning', I mean that I was almost stunned into insensibility by sheer boredom. Think Pride and Prejudice on Prozac. The most redeeming features were the autobiographical (She's Verney.) & biographical references/comparisons to her circle of friends (Most especially Percy as Adrian & Byron as Raymond.) so if you're not familiar with who she was & hung out with, read her bio on Wikipedia first. These references run throughout the novel.

The second volume is about the final war between Greece & Turkey in which the plague is born, but not through any scientific artifice, just typical bad sanitation, siege, & general war. Warning, the Plague is first mentioned not long before the 40% mark - a LONG time coming, IMO. The Plague strikes the world & generally everything breaks down, but Adrian provides a shining example. There's a thread of just how good benevolent tyrants are for a nation.

The final volume was by far the best part & even that is told in a distant voice that rarely elicits much in the way of empathy. Verney tells of great emotions, but I never really felt them due to the writing style & his self-centeredness. For instance, at the end, wretched with loneliness, he finds a dog who is really happy to see him, but he doesn't mention anything about making provisions for it in his final journey. As a dog lover, that's an oversight that I can't overlook.

It's this final volume that holds the germ of so many great & popular novels that came after. Verney's access to the abandoned fruits of civilization, the dog, the False Prophet, & more were brought to life in I Am Legend & Earth Abides. Toss in zombies & you have "Dawn of the Dead". His visit to the abandoned monuments forms an iconic scene in This Immortal. The Road has the same despair & aimless wandering. (OK, the last isn't even particularly good, but it does have some popularity.)

Shelly has a real flair for description, although a grounding in the classics is required to understand many of her allusions. There I was on firm ground, but again I wish I knew Latin. I had to translate that which required searching the text copy & I don't spell Latin any better than American. It was trying at times, but generally the meaning was clear enough without translation. I see her influence here on Zelazny & this part of her style, more than anything else, gave me the ability to get through the seemingly interminable first volume.

My edition (I'll try to correct it later.) is the LibriVox recording which can be found here:  
<https://librivox.org/the-last-man-by-...>

It's 30 chapters were read by a dozen or so narrators so the quality varied, but most were quite good & all were acceptable. My appreciation to all of them. The text is available for free on Project Gutenberg in a variety of formats here:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/18247>

Overall, I recommend this to anyone with an interest in the origins of SF who is feeling somewhat masochistic.

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## **Jan-Maat says**

Mary Shelley did not stop writing after Frankenstein and I was excited to come across her last novel "The Last Man", unfortunately I found it a difficult book to read and I came close to giving up on it all together. Indeed the first time I read it, I took a break of over a year in the middle of the book - it was not exactly

compelling, read through the night material.

The idea is that a plague wipes out humanity leaving one man alone to survive. This story is set in the future, Shelley's vision of which includes airships as an important means of transport.

For added interest she revisits and re-imagines the interrelationships of herself (view spoiler), her husband P.B Shelley, and Byron, adding in their political interests in Greek independence and constitutional change in Britain as elements in the plot - all of which sounded promising. Here was early science fiction, written by a woman and rich in the ideals of the Romantic poets.

The problem however was in the execution.

The constitutional deposition of the King doesn't make waves in future Britain, the character based on Byron (inevitably a leading figure in the powerful House of Lords) makes unconvincing speeches before going on to defeat the Ottoman Empire (though admittedly with some help from a few Greeks, so it's not as the book is pure wish fulfilment), luckily the plague then intervenes and starts to kill people off.

Unfortunately this takes a long time while the titular last man travels about in Europe with bands of people, who grow fewer and fewer in number as the plague bites, until eventually everybody else is dead bar our eponymous hero (view spoiler). Then the book continues for a while with the last man wondering about feeling lonely.

No doubt Mary Shelley also felt lonely after the deaths of the people who had played such a major part in her own early life, but the eventual effect in the novel was tedious, and from a biographical point of view one can feel that she saw herself as the last man standing from her group of early friends, as indeed she was. I did not feel engaged with the sentimental death scenes of characters that I hadn't spent much time with, or who don't feel as though they are more than pencil sketches of people from her past. Overall I found this a book more interesting to have read, than to read.

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## **David Sarkies says**

### **Shelley's apocalypse**

13 December 2013

Being a lover of older books and science-fiction when I discover a book that is in effect both I become really interested, so when I discovered that Mary Shelley (of Frankenstein fame) wrote a book about the last man left alive on Earth (or as she puts it in her book the LAST MAN), I was immediately interested, so instead of attempting to troll through the chain store bookstores here in Australia (which generally consists of Dymocks, now that Borders has effectively gone, and all of the other bookshops simply sell rubbish that you read once and then toss – not that I am in favour of book burning, but these books are the types of books that simply take up space on an overcrowded bookshelf) I jumped onto Amazon and ordered it (along with a bunch of other stuff, but now that the Australian government is doing is damndest to undermine the strength of the Australian dollar, that is going to be an unlikely event in the future).

Anyway, when I started reading this book I found that it was pretty slow going, and because I did not want to waste my overseas holiday earlier this year reading a boring and dull book, I put it away to go back to it again later. Granted, this book does start off really slow, but when you hit part two it really begins to pick up.

The book is set three hundred years in the future (at least from Shelley's perspective, though it is only a hundred years from ours) though the thing that I noticed was that technology had not effectively advanced that much. While Shelley did not have much to work from with regards to speculative science-fiction (this only started to occur with Verne and Wells) one would have expected that there was a suggestion that people were not running around in horses and carriages. However, as I have suggested, the concept of speculative science-fiction was still at least fifty years off, so one cannot blame Shelley for not creating a more futuristic like world (and in any case, it was not her intention to write a speculative piece). However, the story begins with a political crisis in England (actually it begins with the narrator being found wondering around as a man beast and being brought back to civilisation) where there is a push for the abdication of the king and a movement to a parliamentary democracy. This occurs at the end of book one, and book two begins with the former king and the narrator going on a European holiday and ending up in Greece.

This is interesting because at the time of writing the Greeks had just won the a war of independence (with a lot of help from the likes of Lord Bryon and the British) but there was still a large Turkish influence in the land. The story fast forwards to the future where the protagonists join the ongoing struggle where the Turks have been completely removed from Greece and they are laying siege to Istanbul, and this is where things begin to pick up, because while the Turks are pretty much defeated, out of the ashes of Istanbul comes this disease which spreads out from the ruins of this great city to begin to envelope the world. The rest of the book has the protagonist watch as the disease begins to decimate the civilised world and as one by one everybody close to him begins to die eventually leaving him left as the LAST MAN left on Earth.

The Last Man is a somewhat dark, yet poetic, book, and Shelley does drop in numerous lines from poets throughout the ages (something that is generally not done anymore, but then again the writers back then wrote for the sake of writing rather than writing simply for money – Shelley did not really have a need for money). If you look at the Wikipedia page on this book you will see that the main characters all relate to people that Shelley knows, and it is suggested (quite strongly in fact) that the book is written after all of her friends had died effectively leaving her alone in the world.

Loneliness is a funny thing because you can be surrounded by people yet feel utterly alone, and this is the feeling I get from Shelley, being the last of her peer group to survive (and since she was a woman, and back in those days women were not supposed to write because that was a male domain, it must have been very lonely for her). I guess this is one of the curses of old age in that as we watch the people that we know and have known for a while begin to die we lose part of ourself because at that age, while we can still make new friends, the thing that a new friend does not have is the time spent with our old friends, the influence that we have had on each other, and the connections that a lifetime of friendship has created. I know that I have friends which simply cannot be replicated by a new person because that past simply does not exist. This is much more truer when it comes to family because, once again, there is an aspect of the relationship that simply cannot be replicated. Every relationship is different, in fact every relationship is unique because there are things and events that cannot be replicated (for instance if you go to the 2010 Stereosonic Music Festival with a friend, no other friend is going to have the same experience, and the same relationship, that you had with this friend at the 2010 Stereosonic Music Festival).

The last thing I wish to note is that as I read this book I felt that there was a lot of Day of the Triffids here. Obviously Shelley did not base her book on that book (since it was written about 150 years after) but I suspect that John Wyndham had been influenced somewhat by Shelley. Shelley is pretty much famous for Frankenstein, however it is clear that she wrote much more than just that one book. While we may consider Jules Verne to be the father of Science-fiction, we can go further back and consider Shelley to be its mother (though this is not the first apocalyptic story written, because St John wrote one 1800 years earlier called the Book of Revelation).

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## Andrew Breslin says

I desperately tried to convince myself that I didn't loathe this, but I'm just not that good a liar. I saw right through my shameless chicanery. It was so obvious. Remind me never to play poker with myself.

With all due respect, I firmly believe that all the people who gave this book rave reviews could take themselves to the cleaners at Texas Hold-Em. Really, they could win the shirt off their own backs, they are just so good at self-deception. I envy them.

*Frankenstein*, arguably my favorite book of all time, is so staggeringly good that I physically tremble when I read it, and I have read it over and over. So yes, I went into this with high expectations. I did not expect it to be as good as *Frankenstein*. I did expect it to be marginally more entertaining than reading a telephone book, but I was disappointed.

Granted: there are beautifully written passages. Prose and poetry weave together in a seamless lyrical ballet, and it is nothing less than sublimely elegant. But there's a reason I read Mary Shelley and not Percy Shelley. Because I am interested in fiction, not in poetry. There is a story buried underneath hundreds of pages of scintillating, mellifluous verse. But it moves at the approximate pace that continents drift.

There are actual poetic passages all through the novel, just sprinkled in liberally right in the middle of chapters, where they might have proven highly distracting, if there were some sort of story being told, which, fortunately, did not present a problem. These are quoted from famous poets, all from sometime before the early 19th century, of course. Which immediately implies that not a single poet worth quoting arises throughout the rest of the 19th, the 20th and the 21st centuries. (A sentiment with which I might be inclined to agree, but then again, I'm not a big fan of poetry that does not involve Nantucket.)

Last summer I was part of a panel discussion of the five essential science fiction authors. Mary Shelley topped my list, because I feel that she essentially invented the genre, half a century before Wells and Verne. She was the first writer to take the cutting edge science of her own day, and envision the philosophical implications of a rational extrapolation of existing technology. It was such an impressive leap of imagination that right now, as I'm typing this review, I just want to reread *Frankenstein* yet again.

It is not accurate to say that the picture Shelley paints of the late 21st century includes no allusions whatsoever to technological advances. There were two. In the first, she describes 21st century air travel, which consists of very fast balloons. Fair enough. In the second, she makes a brief, vague reference to improved methods in agricultural and industrial production. But that's it. She foresaw artificial intelligence but not light-bulbs? Cars? Recording sound? Some means by which people communicate at a distance? Was that really so hard to imagine, Mary? You wrote *Frankenstein*!

Her time was slightly before that of Robert Koch and Louis Pasteur, and so she couldn't have been expected to know much about the germ theory of disease. But while the world slowly succumbed to a deadly plague of unprecedented virulence, none of the characters, essentially the leaders of the free world, the Lord Protector of the most powerful nation on Earth and his inner circle, none of them think for a moment "let's get some scientists to look into this!" No, the Lord Protector's actions in this moment of crisis are essentially limited to ensuring that the theaters remain open to keep the nation's spirits up.

Isaac Asimov (my other favorite science fiction writer) once noted that when science fiction writers had exhausted ideas or at least grown bored with exploring speculative developments in technology, they would turn (as he did) to social science fiction, centered not on gadgets and gizmos, but instead toward an examination of the progression of societies themselves. Shelley does this, to a degree, but the depth of her vision is disappointingly myopic. She doesn't predict grand sweeping changes in society over the course of 300 years. Instead, she is so bold to suggest that by the end of the 21st century, England might relinquish hereditary monarchs in favor of a small group of privileged elitist nobles electing the same guy who would have inherited the throne. For the daughter of two of the most radical political philosophers of her day, I expected a slightly more dramatic prognostication of political upheaval.

None of this is going to diminish the high opinion I have of Mary Shelley. I remain steadfast in ranking her as one of the most influential novelists ever. And even while I was bored to tears and crushed with disappointment as I trudged through this elegantly dreary, beautifully dull tome, I still took note of how majestically all her words were put together as they went absolutely nowhere. I only wished that she would not have tried so hard to emulate her husband and his poems, all of which together could not hold a candle to her first novel. I wish she would have stuck with crafting imaginative stories in which visionary ideas are examined, raising deep philosophical questions, while simultaneously keeping the reader on the edge of his seat. Percy had far too great an impact on her if you ask me, and Mary would have done well to seek out some different literary influences. I wish she would have read *Frankenstein*.

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### **Nathan says**

I thought this was a fairly difficult read and not one everyone would enjoy, but I really liked it. Basically, if you like early 19th century British novels AND post-apocalyptic fiction, you should check this out.

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### **Adam says**

A profoundly sad reaction to Romanticism, initially vilified, mocked, and essentially blacklisted, before being recovered and championed in the 1960s.

It's overlong, the language is annoyingly exalted, most of the characters are flat, and there's a lot of rubbish. Sounds tedious? It sort of is. This is definitely one of the few examples I've encountered of an excellent literary work that for much of its padded length feels somewhat interminable, but that emerges as a remarkable, deeply interesting piece of writing.

Shelley takes on humanity's crumbling death from an unstoppable plague with great skill, and presents a powerful critical engagement with Romanticism and its ideals, making it hard to read even the Romantic poets I appreciate without a sense of sadness and an acknowledgment of their enterprise's ultimate meaninglessness and futility. Mary Shelley was certainly a more interesting, perceptive, and intelligent writer than her husband, though also infinitely more depressing and certainly less cuddly. I might write more later.

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## **Vanessa J. says**

*The Last Man* is, as its name says, the story of the last man (Lionel Verney) living on the surface of Earth. During the course of his story, a deadly plague that killed most of mankind started to spread. He told everything he witnessed since his childhood till his experiences in the plague.

The book starts really slow. As I said, this is about Lionel's life, so he tells his story from the beginning. The plague we are promised does not appear until half the book. Based solely on the first half of the book, I would have rated it 2 stars, because that part was a bit boring. The second half, however, deserved 5 stars.

As you might expect, the feeling I was left with was sadness. I mean, it's the story of the last man on Earth. You surely cannot wait unicorns and rainbows everywhere. I am not spoiling the book to you if I say that every beloved one he had would die at some point in the book. To tell you the truth, when those deaths happened, I was not grieved by them alone because I never felt connected to the characters. I was grieved by those deaths because just picturing myself in Lionel's place made me feel sad.

I love being alone. If I could, I would be perfectly happy living alone in the moon without anyone else's company, but I kid you not when I say that if I'm *forced* to be alone,—if the people are ripped from me—that feeling of happiness would no longer be there. In a world consumed by a deadly plague that almost no one survives, would you be happy being alone? Would you be happy watching all your loved ones die while you go on until there's no one else? Would you be happy if you knew you're the last human?

*"To none could I ever relate the story of my adversity; no hope had I."*

The writing was one of the things that made my rating get a little higher. As in *Frankenstein*, it is dark, depressing and poetical. Perhaps beautiful writing was Shelley's best attribute. If the story was not what kept me reading because it was dull at times, it was the writing. I think I've said in other reviews that an amazing writing can sometimes be the only reason why I finish a book. This was not the case, don't worry. I just said it to highlight the point that the writing is marvelous.

Something that really impressed me in the book was how realistic it felt. It's set in late 21st century, and the culture might not be what was realistic, because it was that of the time in which it was written. What felt so realistic were the other aspects: Social, political and economical consequences of the plague. This realism also made me rate this book better.

Finally, it was totally worth reading this book. Sure, it was slow at first, but then it picked up and I enjoyed it immensely after I had read 60% of it. I recommend this book to you, but take into account all the things I've said, otherwise, you might not enjoy it. And please, if you read it, don't compare it to *Frankenstein*.

*"Thus around the shores of deserted earth, while the sun is high, and the moon waxes or wanes, angels, the spirits of the dead, and the ever-open eye of the Supreme, will behold the tiny bark, freighted with Verney—the LAST MAN."*

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## Bookdragon Sean says

Mary Shelley loved her husband; she adored his poetical voice and he admired her intellect: theirs was a marriage of minds. So it's not overly surprising that in her later work she spent a good part of it paying homage to her late partner.

The novel begins with a wretched youth, Lionel, utterly distraught at the injustice that is his life. He is poor, uneducated and desperate. Lionel wants revenge on what he perceives as the cause of his problems; however, when the said problem appears his life is turned around. It is a man, a noble and a landowner. When Lionel sees the man his anger at the tyranny of the world is quenched in an instant, such is the power of this individual. He embodies nobility and goodness: he is the romantic hero. He teaches Lionel to read and how to understand poetry: he teaches him how to live and how to open up his heart. Lionel is transformed by this experience; he develops true moral awareness and imagination. Poetry rejuvenates his character; it teaches him natural Shelleyan values. This man is Mary Shelley's ode to her husband; he is called Adrian, and he is Percy Shelley incarnate. He becomes the only hope for the future of mankind, his philosophy is it's only balm:

*"I read or listened to Adrian; and his discourse, whether it concerned his love or his theories for the improvement of man, alike entranced me. Sometimes my lawless mood would return, my love of peril, my resistance to authority; but this was in his absence; under the mild sway of his dear eyes, I was obedient and good as a boy of five years old, who does his mother's bidding."*

But, first, another must try his hand at saving the world from the oncoming apocalypse. Enter Lord George Byron in the form of Adrian's friend Raymond. Domination, manipulation and power are what his personality evokes. Adrian becomes quickly ill after their encounter. Raymond strives to be good; he strives to do the right thing but passion, in the Byronic sense is far too strong. He is a lover and user. He is poison and tonic. He is quick to change his mind, and is prone to rash and erratic behaviour; thus, he quickly falls in love and runs away from his dream of ruling in harmony. The wind ever changes his mind and his sexual interest. With this man a relationship would only end one way. Lionel later becomes his friend and is trapped between the influences of each.

As the novel progresses and the apocalypse comes ever closer, the world becomes darker. Raymond's (Byron's) ideas prove ineffective and he exits centre stage. A plague wrecks the world, one caused by man's unnatural state. The population of the world decreases to mere thousands and eventually hundreds. And who does humanity look to in its most dire hour of need? Who do they look to as the last hope of mankind? Adrian (Percy Shelley) of course, and he comes. He does his best to teach mankind how to be itself again; he tries to bring back the tatters of civilisation, thought the unnaturalness of man has seeped into the very fabric of his being; it is in his soul: it is in his heart. The pure words of the vegetarian were heeded too late.

*"Adrian welcomed us on our arrival. He was all animation; you could no longer trace in his look of health, the suffering valetudinarian; from his smile and sprightly tones you could not guess that he was about to lead forth from their native country, the numbered remnant of the English nation, into the tenantless realms of the south, there to die, one by one, till the LAST MAN should remain in a voiceless, empty world."*

And here's where Mary Shelley voice comes through. The Last Man may refer to our narrator Lionel. But I think the meaning goes much deeper than this. Granted, he is the final witness of humanity's fate. But there is more to consider. When Mary wrote this novel all of the major Romantics were dead. The young Romantics, Shelley, Keats and Byron, had all died tragically young. Some of the old Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge were still kicking around, but their glory days had gone. Byron saw to that. The point is Mary is the last of the generation. Her peers were dead, her friends were dead, and her lover was dead. This is their eulogy; this is a writer lamenting the loss of the greats of her literary generation; this is a writer who was forced to carry on living after her soul mate had perished.

### **Mary Shelley is The Last Man.**

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### **Nicole Hogan says**

Oh, The Last Man! One of the (many)books perpetually on my re-read list.

This later work from Shelly shows her talent as a mature innovative writer and secures a literary legacy outside of her husband's shadow. Written four years after Percy's death and some ten years after the publication of Frankenstein, Shelly weaves a fantastic version of the end of the world in the year 2100. Told from the perspective of the only survivor of a devastating plague that snuffs out humanity, the story subtly incorporates elements of proto-science fiction and horror. While still writing in the Romantic style, Shelly envisions dystopic 21st century life through the interesting lens of 19th century technology. Her narrator's world is also populated by figures clearly inspired by Shelly's own - the Byronic Raymond and Perdita, the stand-in for Shelly's stepsister Claire.

But aside from the novel being delightful and arguably obscure entertainment for the Romantic literature aficionado, it is the foundation of English Sci-Fi from H.G. Wells to Arthur C. Clarke, not to mention such works as The Stand by Stephen King and I am Legend by Richard Matheson. If you've liked any of the recent apocalyptic movies like *28 Days Later*, *Children of Men*, and the *Resident Evil* trilogy, do yourself a favor and read this book.

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### **Althea Ann says**

I'm glad I read this book.

As a fan of the post-apocalyptic genre, I felt like it was a must. Shelley didn't originate the concepts found here, but this is still arguably, the first actual post-apocalyptic novel, as such.

It was quite fascinating to see how many of the common tropes we find in so much of today's post-apocalyptic fiction are also found in this book: the urge to travel, even in the absence of a clear goal. Scavenging and exploring abandoned places. Hordes of those willing to victimize the unwary. Religious cults with a dark edge. The list could go on...

However, I have to say - normally, I am passionately opposed to any kind of bowdlerization or abridgement of any artistic work. BUT - I have never encountered another work which could so clearly have benefited from the ruthless work of a zealous editor.

This is touted as a book about a plague which lays waste to the earth. There is not even a passing mention of a plague until 37% of the way through the [extremely long] book. The entirety of the first part of the book is a dull pastoral drama which slowly introduces the characters and their romantic complications and woes. Note the emphasis on the pastoral. It's classically Romantic, bucolic idealism - with a bit of politics thrown in. I felt like I was reading about what the characters in a Maxfield Parrish painting do when they're not posing...

Although I found this part of the book frankly boring, in some ways it was definitely the best-written part of the work. It has the best character development and interactions. The characters are apparently based on Shelley herself and her close friends (the Romantic circle including her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, &c.), which generated interest in the book both at its time of publication and among Victorianists today.

In parts 2 and 3, the plague finally kicks in and some action starts happening. However, the narration style becomes very removed and distancing. It's all 'telling' not 'showing.' There's pretty much no dialogue. Although there are some quite interesting contents, actually getting through the pages was an effort.

Below, I've put in links to some contemporary reviews of 'The Last Man' which I found highly entertaining. [Incidentally, they also serve as a good reminder to some of today's more sensitive authors that scathing reviews full of personal attacks are nothing new in publishing.] I neither agree with nor condone the blatant sexism in some of Shelley's contemporaries' critiques, however, some of their complaints are all too valid.

One thing I was willing to give the author a 'pass' on was her utter failure to predict what the 21st century might actually be like. (The lifestyle of her characters feels more medieval than modern, in many ways). I found it interesting that even the reviewers of 1826 noted that the book lacked a sense of futuristic modernity.

They also noted the oddness - [and, to my view, inutility and lopsidedness] of the 'Sibylline' framing device.

But most of all - they noted the unnecessary bloatedness of the language used [The style is nothing like that of 'Frankenstein' - I would never have identified it as the same author had I not known that both books came from the same pen.]:

"But the pages in the work, of which this can be said, are comparatively few:--ornament, ornament, ornament, glittering conceit and spangled metaphor, heaped together without order, till meaning is lost in the glare of affected brilliancy, is the vice of these pages, the prevailing vice of the prose, and the poetry--of all that is called the amusive, and ought to be elegant literature of the day. Metaphors are not used to minister to compression, or enforce by vivid illustration; but to dilate sentences into pages, or substitute shewy verbiage for ideas."

<http://www.rc.umd.edu/reference/chron...>

The Panoramic Miscellany, or Monthly Magazine and Review of Literature, Sciences, Arts, Inventions, and Occurrences, 1 (March 1826): 380-386.

Review of The Last Man (1826)

<http://www.rc.umd.edu/reference/chron...>

<http://www.rc.umd.edu/reference/chron...>

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## Anna says

It took me some while to get into ‘The Last Man’, both because of its slow start and my present preoccupation with moving house. The style throughout is extremely florid and capital-R Romantic, as you would expect from Mary Shelley. To set the scene prior to the apocalypse, however, the narrator describes in minute detail how noble, beautiful, and wonderful his friends, wife, and children are. This dominates the first 70 or so pages. There follows a war between the Greeks and Turks, concurrent with some emotional melodrama, which advances us to around page 175. Thereafter the novel really gets into its stride, because from then on the main character is Death. Mary Shelley devotes reams of voluptuous, epic description to a plague that over years wipes out the human race. She summons gorgeous metaphors and heights of emotion to convey the horror of events. Moreover, she anticipates the current fascination with post-apocalyptic ruins by repeatedly describing cities denuded of human life; London’s streets are often said to be covered in long grass, for instance.

I quite liked this book just as a novel, but it is really most interesting as a very early example of the post-apocalyptic genre that now has such great popularity. I also found it curious to contemplate Shelley’s ideas of how the UK would be in the 2080s. She thought that there would still be a quasi-feudal aristocracy, but that England would be a republic with a ‘Protector’ (title presumably borrowed from Cromwell). Somewhat sadly considering that Mary Wollstonecraft was her mother, the female characters in this book don’t get much involved in politics and are generally to be found fainting and looking after their children. Perdita and Evadne have more complex lives than just caring for others, but both are very unhappy.

Ultimately, though, the strength of the book lies not with the characters, who are largely props to contextualise the overwhelming disaster of the plague. When Shelley was writing, there was no expectation that a new plague would be cured by scientists working feverishly; in her vision of the 2080s no-one even knows how it spreads. As a meditation on death, at the individual, group, and species level, ‘The Last Man’ is powerful and in places frightening. The inevitability of humanity’s end reminded me of the much later novel *On the Beach* by Nevil Shute. Many passages in it demand to be declaimed and the dialogue feels akin to that of a play. For example:

“Hear, O ye inhabitants of the earth,” he cried, “hear thou, all seeing, but most pitiless Heaven! Hear thou too, O tempest-tossed heart, which breathes out these words, yet faints beneath their meaning! Death is among us! The earth is beautiful and flower-bedecked, but she is our grave! The cloud of heaven weep for us - the pageantry of the stars is but our funeral torchlight.”

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If you enjoy language of that nature, you will like this novel. I am not surprised to learn that it was the first that she wrote after Percy Shelley’s death. And as ever, I advise you to read the introduction last. One notable comment in it is that the novel was badly reviewed when first published. It was rather before its time.

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## Amy says

Review originally posted in full at [warmdayswillnevercease.wordpress.com](http://warmdayswillnevercease.wordpress.com).

## Rating: 4.5 stars

The start of this book is incredibly slow and you definitely have to work through the first few chapters (possibly even the first volume depending on how you feel about autobiographical stories) before the pace of the story picks up. That can be off-putting so I took off half a star in my rating. Okay, on to the good stuff.

I love the autobiographical elements of this book. It's definitely centred around Percy Bysshe Shelley, who had just died when Mary started writing this book, and it's clear that the heavenly Adrian is based on Percy. Lord Raymond is obviously Lord Byron and Lionel Verney seems to be based on Mary herself. I think that Mary's grief for her husband is evident in this book and she memorialised him in the form of Adrian. Since the characters are mainly autobiographical I'm not going to comment on how well they're written, except for mentioning that Lord Raymond is one of the most wonderful representations of Byron that I've ever read. He's arrogant, passionate, strong-willed, and very charming.

The first volume seems like a fairly standard nineteenth-century novel to be honest, except for the fact that it's set in 2073 and the monarchy of Britain has fallen. This volume concentrates on forming relationships, both romantic and platonic, and nothing even remotely post-apocalyptic happens in this volume. I think it was clever to set the novel up in this way because it lulls the reader into a false sense of security as it just seems like your run of the mill novel. Also, despite the fact that it's focused on romance and friendship, this volume is pretty captivating. There's a lot of complex relationships involved, love-triangles typical of this era, but I love the focus on platonic relationships too.

The second volume introduces us to the plague which threatens to kill off mankind. This section of the novel is full of death and disaster, exactly what you want from a post-apocalyptic science fiction novel, and the pace of the novel really picks up. Mary Shelley's writing in this book is absolutely captivating. I can't fault it at all. I know that the language is difficult for many people due to the era it was written in but I think it's worth reading. The final volume is tragic but I think that the ending was perfect. It's incredibly sad and disheartening but it's one of the best aspects of the novel in my opinion.

It's very odd to read a futuristic novel which was written before the industrial revolution. Industry is such a major part of Britain's past and future that this book just seems weird without it but I think it shows Shelley's vision and intelligence that she created a book which, although probably inaccurate (although I can't say that we won't have abandoned technology in favour of an early nineteenth-century lifestyle by the time 2073 rolls around), which has stood the test of time. Mary Shelley's vision of a plague which wipes out humanity is still a major threat today, even with advances in medicine, and that means that this novel still works as a post-apocalyptic novel in the twenty-first century.

I genuinely love this book. I think it's incredibly well-written, the plot is wonderful, and I love that it's partially autobiographical because it gives an insight into one of my favourite authors. I don't think that this book can easily be compared to Frankenstein but Shelley's writing style does seem a little more refined in this book (which makes sense because it was published 8 years after Frankenstein). I would definitely recommend this book to people who love Frankenstein, classic books in general, science fiction, or just anyone who wants to read something a little bit different to the post-apocalyptic dystopian science fiction that's written today.

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**Knjigoholi?arka says**

Maro, sestro, daviš dok ti ?italac ne poplavi kao Štrumpf. A i nešto nemam sažaljenja prema sirotoj, maloj, engleskoj aristokratiji, makar i crkavala od distopijske kuge. Vidimo se mi na ?itanju Frankenštajna, ostaj mi zdravo.

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### **Sheila says**

Oh Mary Shelley, really...is this the best you could do? Honestly, it should probably get a 1-star because I had to force myself to finish it. I continued with this torture because was hoping you would redeem yourself and make this book become at least remotely interesting in the end. But you didn't. You failed.

This is a novel of "the last man", who becomes the only survivor of a future plague. The story actually starts with an introduction by you, Mary Shelley, stating that you found a collection of "prophetic" writings in the cave of the Sybil in Naples in 1818, and the story that follows in based on these writings. So, I was with you to this point, Mary. I thought, "Interesting idea! I can go with this." But then your story starts.

The main thing I have to say about your story is...BORING! Really, Mary, it is incredibly, horribly, boring. You get stuck in a vicious cycle of trying to write poetic, wordsy descriptions for every event, person, or scene, and it all just turns into mindless babble that goes nowhere. Absolutely nowhere. In fact, nothing really happens in this story until two-thirds of the way in!

Also, Mary, do you really have no creative ideas at all for what life might be like in the year 2100, the year this story is set? I know you lived in the 1800's, Mary, but really, could you not at least TRY to imagine a life 300 years in the future that did not involve only horseback riding, and sailing on boats? There is NO technology in this book. None. You failed here, Mary. You needed to use your imagination. Try to think of some advances that might take place in the future. Anything. You were not expected to get it right, you were just expected to try. But as you wrote it, these characters are living identically to how you lived in the 1800's. You get an F for creative thinking, Mary.

So, all in all, you basically failed. And I see on Wikipedia that you later spoke of The Last Man as being one of your favourite works. Really, Mary? You think this was great writing? I should give you a 1-star just for that opinion you have of yourself, but since I am trying to be fair, I will give you a 2-star, but will call it a D-. You really could have done so much better, and I am very disappointed in you on this one.

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### **Henry Avila says**

You are the last person on the face of the Earth, every desire can be easily obtained, the best of the best, shelter, food , clothes, toys, transportation, an endless vacation, go anywhere , do anything , nobody can stop it, the enormous world is all yours...Only one little problem, the animals have inherited the planet, a lonely, solitary man, no humans to speak to, he is just temporarily standing, for a short while, and will soon be gone too ( and welcomes this fact), civilization has collapsed, buried under the rubble of its greed, to the delight of his fellow creatures, the horses and cows, and others, they are now at the top, nobody is left to mourn, the plague has destroyed a few thousand years... an experiment, that never quite succeeded... England in the far future, well not so far anymore, the time, the late 21st century , the king has abdicated, the country becomes a republic but the royals still retain their precious titles, the Earl of Windsor, Adrian (modeled after Percy Shelley), the son of the last monarch , he strangely supports the new, democratic government, to the great

annoyance of his haughty mother, the former Queen, now a widow, she wants the return of her privileges. Lord Raymond (Lord Byron), is ambitious, he desires to be king someday, but will settle now, for being Lord Protector of the nation, to rule and make England great again, in the north of the country, in hilly Cumberland, a shepherd boy, Lionel Verney (loosely Mary Shelley), takes care of a farmer's sheep , his irresponsible but amusing father, was a close friend of the late king, until gambling away his money that the generous monarch, had given him to start a business. Running from his unforgivable embarrassment, marries a local peasant girl, both died young, leaving Lionel and younger sister Perdita , orphans, to work at a very tender age to survive. Verney, the angry young man, becomes a petty criminal leading a gang of youths, fellow shepherds, in minor destruction and killing animals in a park, that belongs to the new Earl of Windsor , and ends up in jail for a day or two. When finally Adrian visits his mansion and property, after a couple of heated incidents, Lionel who blames Adrian, the son of his father's former friend, for his and Perdita troubles, becomes huge pals too and hears about Idris, the Earl's pretty sister. His life is transformed from the bottom , in lowly abject poverty, to the highest levels in society, schooling, a job as a secretary to a diplomat in Vienna , coming back to his native land, meeting every important person there, elected to parliament. Bringing with him, up the ladder his sister and closest confident, Perdita. also. Lord Raymond is smitten, by her, drops his intended, the Greek Princess Evadne ( who Adrian loves) , he marries the untitled but lovely Perdita , to the surprise of everyone, the ruler of the nation has as a bride, a commoner. Somethings never change in the future, Greeks are still fighting Turks, technology has stalled , though, the fastest transport is hot air balloons, and another mysterious illness appears in a distant corner of the Earth, killing many people, and life continues but for how long?

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## **Michael says**

### Review from Badelynge

It seems like I've been reading Mary Shelley's The Last Man all year. I'm not the fastest of readers but whenever I read poetry I read even slower. The Last Man isn't poetry but it is written using poetic prose, which keeps tricking me into thinking I'm reading an epic poem. The primary characters are based on Shelley's recently deceased husband poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron and herself (although personified by the eponymous male character). The woman can write some. The novel really shines when the story finally concludes on its note of tragic isolation. Unfortunately to get to this brilliant finale of loss you have to first present fully what is being lost. Shelley spends over half of the book setting this up and it is, admittedly quite a slog. And then the plague hits. This part of the book is unrelentingly morbid in what it depicts although Shelley's writing and exploration of themes and ideas during this section are delivered with great acuity. If I'd been aware how dark much of the book was going to be after such a long set up I would probably have given the book a miss. I'm glad I read it though because the writing is so good on certain levels but it is often rather daunting in its density.

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