

Author Interview (continued)

so the language in *Dark Endeavour* might be a little more formal, but I made sure it's effortless to read.

4) How important was it to you to keep some of the features of the original story?

Very. The cast of characters, with the exception of Konrad, is all drawn from the original. I made the love interest, Elizabeth Lavenza, a distant relation (as opposed to a first cousin). Their best friend, Henry Clerval, was transformed into a slightly comic Woody Allen-like character who's riddled with phobias and fears, making him the least likely person to enjoy a Frankenstein-style banquet of horror. Victor's parents I actually based on Mary Shelley's real parents, the radical writers William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, so my Frankenstein household is very liberal for its time. Mrs. Frankenstein writes pamphlets on the rights and education of women; Mr. Frankenstein is a fair magistrate who insists on his own family making the servants their Sunday dinner as a gesture of egalitarianism (a concept that was sweeping through Europe in the late 1700s). And my Victor himself certainly shares traits of both Percy Shelley and Lord Byron (as did Mary Shelley's Victor). So I tried to work in lots of insider Frankenstein information.

5) Do you feel you have a special connection to your main character, Victor Frankenstein? Did you enjoy being able to create your own interpretation of his childhood?

Very much. It was great fun to imagine what one of my favourite literary characters was like as a sixteen-year-old. I found him to be a fascinating mix of the good, the bad and the ugly. Anti-heroes can be incredibly charismatic and exciting. I'm not sure I'd go so far as to call Victor an anti-hero. He has some dislikeable traits, but he's never truly wicked (not in this first book anyway). You cheer for Victor, I think, because he has so much life and drive and passion in him; and you never forget he loves his brother, even though he's ragingly jealous of him, and wants to steal his girlfriend. You might not like him always, but you always understand him. It's so much more interesting to take a character that really exhibits every element of human nature than just focus on someone that's calm and heroic and does the right thing 95 per cent of the time. I mean, he's Victor Frankenstein, not Harry Potter. Do I have a special connection with my protagonist? I am Victor Frankenstein. Every day I obsessively dig up graves, steal corpses, chop them up, sew them back together, and jolt them with electricity to try to create life out of death—it's a great metaphor for the writer's creative process.

6) Can you tell us a little about the sequel, *Such Wicked Intent*?

At the end of the first book, Victor promises himself he'll unlock every secret law of the earth to achieve his goals—let's just say he honours his promise.

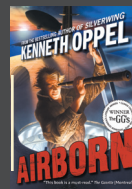
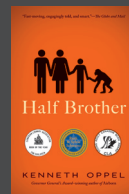
About the Author

Kenneth Oppel is the Governor General's Award-winning author of the Airborn series and the Silverwing Saga, which has sold over a million copies worldwide. He lives in Toronto with his wife and their three children. Visit his website at www.kennethoppel.com.



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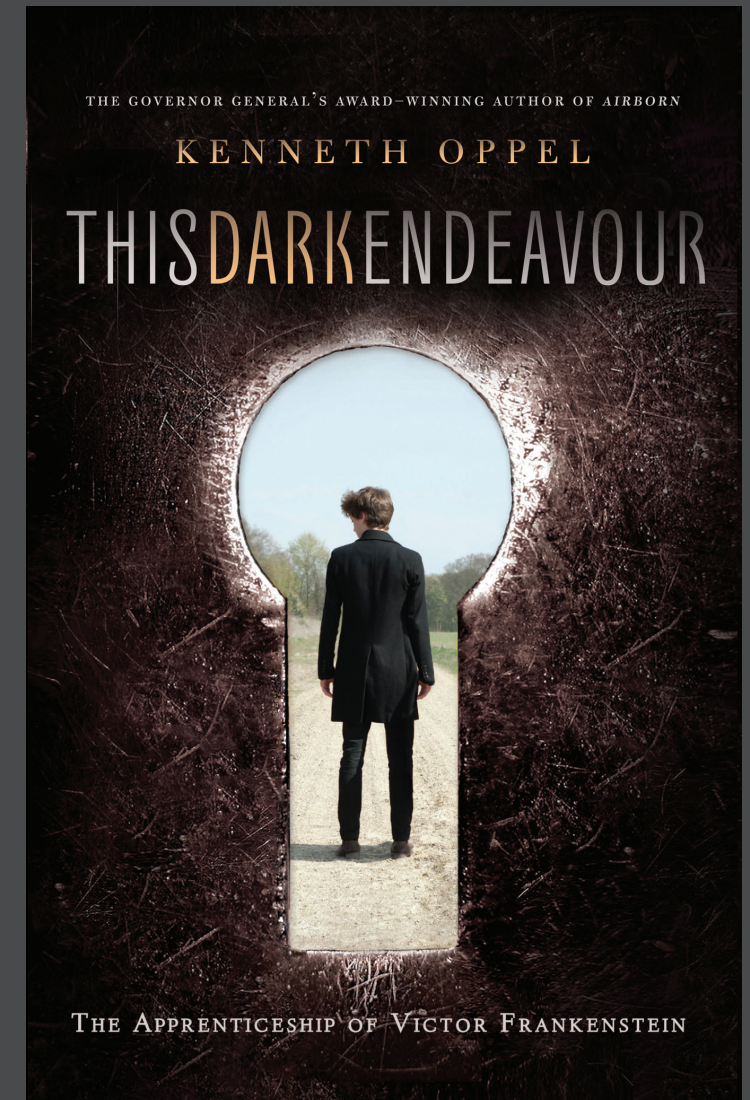
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Discussion Guide

THIS DARK ENDEAVOUR

BY KENNETH OPPEL



About the Book

Victor Frankenstein leads a charmed life. He and his twin brother, Konrad, and their beautiful cousin Elizabeth take lessons at home and spend their spare time fencing and horseback riding. Along with their friend Henry, they have explored all the hidden passageways and secret rooms of the palatial Frankenstein chateau. Except one.

The Dark Library contains ancient tomes written in strange languages and filled with forbidden knowledge. Their father makes them promise never to visit the library, but when Konrad becomes deathly ill, Victor knows he must find the book that contains the recipe for the legendary Elixir of Life.

The elixir needs only three ingredients. But impossible odds, dangerous alchemy and a bitter love triangle threaten their quest at every turn. Victor knows he must not fail. Yet his success depends on how far he is willing to push the boundaries of nature, science and love—and how much he is willing to sacrifice.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Victor's father claims that the Dark Library is "...not knowledge. It is a corruption of knowledge. And these books are not to be read" (pg. 23). Do you agree with this statement? Can any type of knowledge ever be considered corrupt?
- 2) When Victor and Elizabeth first meet Polidori, he states that "When a loved one falls desperately ill, and all else fails, any risk is worth taking" (pg.73). Do you think Konrad would feel the same way? Do you agree? What kind of risk is acceptable in any situation?
- 3) Victor and Konrad are identical twins, but really in appearance only. What are some of the major noticeable differences between the two brothers?
- 4) Henry ends up playing a big role in the story by overcoming his (many) fears and risking his well-being for his friends. What are some of your fears? Do you think you would be able to be as brave as Henry if the situation were the same?
- 5) After being attacked by vultures in search of the tree lichen, Elizabeth admits that biting one of the vultures in the throat "seemed like the only thing to do" (pg. 120). What would you have done in her situation? Have you ever been in desperate circumstances and felt the same way?
- 6) Consider the following statements: "I was meant to be the one to heal him, to put the Elixir of Life to his lips and watch as the colour and vigour rushed back into his body" (pg.124) and "If I am asked to testify in court, I will not lie...I cured him. If I'm to be jailed for that, so be it" (pp.287-88). Do you think Victor

has good intentions in trying to cure his brother? What do you think are his actual reasons for trying to help him?

7) After finding out that his father has used alchemy before, Victor deems him "A liar. The man who I had admired all my life, whose every word I had trusted, was a liar" (pg. 205). Do you think because he had experience with alchemy Victor's father could have done more to make sure his son stopped? What are the steps he could have taken? Would it have made a difference in the outcome?

8) Victor's obsession with Elizabeth is problematic because she and Konrad were in love. Do you think that Victor's feelings are pure? What has led (or misled) him to the conclusion that he loves Elizabeth? What advice would you give Konrad in this position?

9) On page 204 Victor has a dream involving the re-animation of his brother's corpse on a laboratory table, a scene which takes place in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Do you believe in fate? Do you think the dream foretold the future or does the future event happen because of the dream? Have you ever had a dream about your future that came true?

10) In the end, Victor ended up sacrificing two of his own fingers in order to complete the Elixir of Life and to have a chance to cure his brother. What would you be willing to sacrifice for a loved one? Have you ever been in a situation where you have had to make sacrifices for others? Is sacrifice something we value in today's society? Why or why not?



Author Interview

1) What gave you the inspiration to write a prequel to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*?

A couple of years ago, while re-reading the novel, I was struck by how quickly Victor Frankenstein's youth is described—and one line in particular stuck out: "No youth could have passed more happily than mine." Now, remember that this is a kid who goes on to dig up corpses, chop them up, sew the body parts back together, jolt them with electricity in the hopes of revivifying them, and creating life from death. Doesn't sound like a very happy youth to me. What might have happened to Victor to lead him to become the "mad scientist" we all know? That, I thought, would make an interesting story. A few pages later, Shelley goes on to give a helpful clue: "I entered with the greatest diligence into the search for... the elixir of life.... What glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!" Right away I had an image of a teenager who was curious, ambitious, possibly arrogant, but also adventurous and brave. The search for an elixir of life, while perhaps not the activity of a perfectly well-adjusted kid, would make for an excellent quest. But it seemed to me there had to be something more behind it. What if Victor needed the elixir for a personal purpose? Was he himself ill? Or maybe a friend, parent—or a beloved sibling?

2) Have you travelled to Switzerland, specifically Geneva? How difficult was it to describe the setting accurately?

I didn't travel to Switzerland. I toured it virtually on the Internet and looked at antique maps, and read about its history and most famous monuments and institutions. The trick to writing is to create the illusion of reality, so a few concrete details go a long way in terms of stashing [establishing?] a credible setting. Maybe mention a famous square or fountain or street name, or an odd architectural feature, and the reader does the rest of the work for you.

3) How did you go about adding context to such a famous text? Was this a daunting task?

It is quite daunting to attempt a companion piece to a masterpiece of English literature—because it's possible you will look meagre by comparison! I like to think of *This Dark Endeavour* as an alternative backstory to the Frankenstein myth. Once I invented a twin brother for Victor, I was making a pretty clean break from the history of the original. But at the same time, I was trying to invent a plausible origin story for Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein—and I was guided by real childhood incidents cited in the original. I'm a pretty good mimic, so I did try to capture the linguistic flavour of the original, but without making it inaccessible to contemporary readers. I quite enjoy the richness of period fiction,