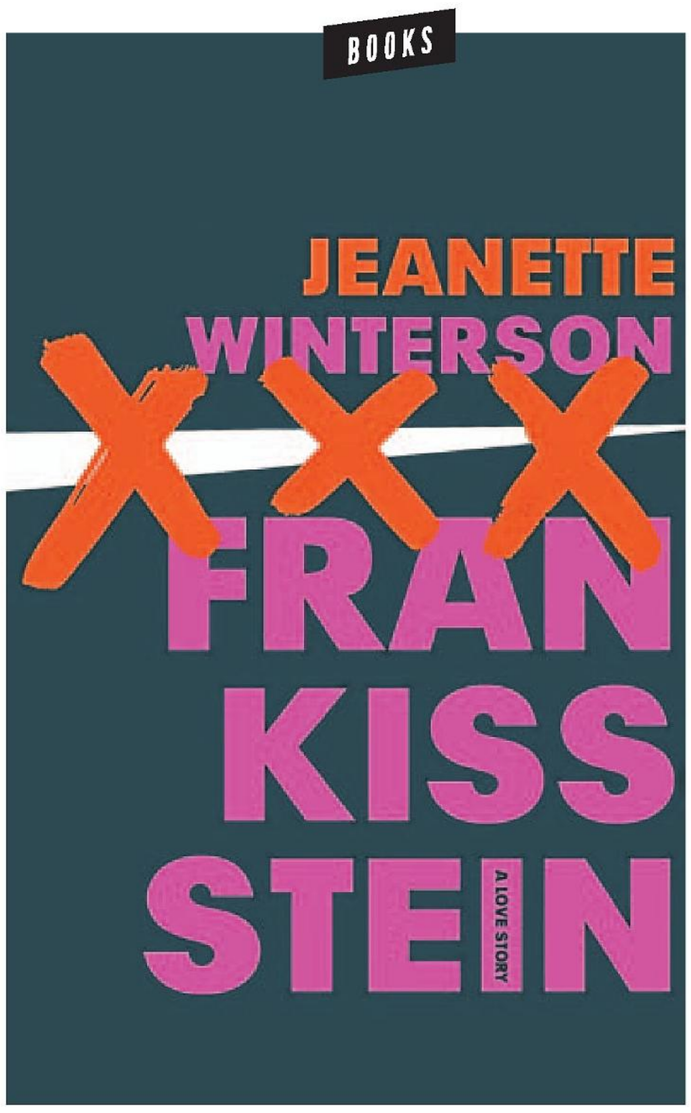
BOOKS

MONSTERS ARE US

Narrative brings together past and present, sexual fluidity, AI and the hybrid nature of human beings, writes **Claire Keeton**



Jeanette Winterson is not a mad scientist although there's a dash of that in her ambitious new creation, *Frankissstein: A Love Story*. Instead, she's an alchemist who dazzles readers by turning its concepts, characters and narrative into something precious, though one or two leaden seams remain embedded in the mix.

Longlisted for the 2019 Booker Prize, *Frankissstein* has much in common with her first novel, the bestselling 1985 Whitbread Award winner, *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*. "In structure, style and content, *Oranges* was unlike any other novel," she wrote about the book years after its release.

Winterson described it as experimental, threatening and comforting. *Frankissstein*, which explores artificial intelligence, sexual fluidity and human enhancement among other topics — from the Elon Musk and Trump era, back 200 years to the Romantic period — is no less provocative.

The novel opens in 1816 on Lake Geneva with Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, Lord Bryon and his mistress and physician, during a wine and waterlogged summer in the Alps. One morning a naked Mary goes for a walk outdoors and glimpses a gigantic, ragged figure before returning to her future husband's bed. Conjuring up these scenes, Winterson's reflective and sensual imagery blurs into a dreamlike story. Confined by the rain, the poets muse on consciousness, revolutions and

Frankissstein: A Love Story
★★★★
Jeanette Winterson, Jonathan Cape, R290

vampires, while Mary begins the novel *Frankenstein*, giving shape to her vision.

The story abruptly switches to the present, to a robotics exhibition in Memphis, Tennessee, attended by transgender doctor (I am fully female. I am also partly male) Ry Shelley, who is there to interview sexbot inventor Ron Lord and "consider how robots will affect our mental and physical health".

When Shelley meets Lord, who believes his XX-BOT sexbots are the future, the pace accelerates and Winterson's tone takes on a staccato and satirical edge. The dialogue is crass but flowing, showing her versatility.

"Deluxe (sexbot) will listen to what you want to talk about — football, politics or whatever. She waits till you finished, of course no interrupting, even if you waffle a bit, and then she'll say something interesting," says the chauvinist Lord.

"Climate change. Brexit. Football ... Some men want more than sex. I get that."

He wraps up with: "They're all pretty. We're all kings. What did you say? Does it make real life more difficult?"

"What is real life these days?"

That's what Shelley's lover, Professor Victor Stein, hopes to redefine with his experiments conducted in underground bunkers. Shelley procures body parts from the morgue for these secret trials.

Is Stein on the side of the humans or robots?

"(Stein would) say there are no sides — that binaries belong to our carbon-based past. The future is not biology, it's AI," writes Winterson, imagining a world where bodies are irrelevant and we "share the planet with non-biological life forms created by us".

That's the thread that brings the stories together: Mary Shelley becoming immersed with her wretched Frankenstein and his monster, while Ry Shelley's relationship deepens with Stein, as his obsession with his creations deepens.

The stream of ideas in these parallel worlds feels slightly didactic at times, even robotic, and the story falters somewhat. But then Winterson breathes life into it with her irreverent tone and observations, reeling the reader back in.

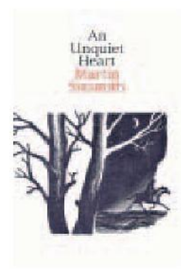
Frankissstein, with its sci-fi sketches of human-machine hybrids in our future, humanist poets and expanded realities, succeeds in stretching the imagination, sometimes to breaking point.

GIVEAWAY

We are giving away three copies of *Frankissstein: A Love Story*, signed by the author. To enter, name Jeanette Winterson's first book. Email your answer, name and contact number to lifestyle@sundaytimes.co.za with FRANK as the subject. Competition closes on Friday September 6. Ts and Cs apply.

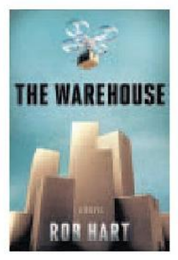
Book Bites

An Unquiet Heart ★★★
Martin Sixsmith, Simon & Schuster, R305



Martin Sixsmith combines a fictionalised biography of Russian poet Sergei Yesenin with the history of Russia in the early years of the 20th century until Yesenin's probable suicide in 1925. His Imagist poetry is popular in Russia but he is best known elsewhere for having had a brief, abusive and disastrous marriage to the ageing Isadora Duncan, one of his four wives. Born a peasant, Yesenin's poetry gave him an entree into society where he met Rasputin, the Tsarina and her daughters. Later he reinvented himself as a supporter of the Revolution — one of its darlings until his self-destructive behaviour alienated the all-powerful state. This is a monumental novel, Russian style. Biography and history alternate, along with Sixsmith's translations of Yesenin's poetry. While the descriptions of a country in torment are fascinating, the central character is deeply unpleasant, making it hard for the reader to care too much. **Margaret von Klemperer**

The Warehouse ★★★
Rob Hart, Bantam Press, R290



The US is ravaged by gun violence, climate change and joblessness. An enormous online retail empire called Cloud not only dominates the economy but also is slowly taking over some of the functions of government. Paxton, an entrepreneur who was financially ruined when Cloud snaffled his kitchen gadget invention, finds himself in the uncomfortable position of having to work for Cloud as a security guard to survive. In the same intake is Zinnia, who is a picker-picker-and-placer in the massive warehouse, ostensibly gathering goods but in reality working undercover as a corporate spy. The two are made for one another: Paxton needs emotional sustenance, Zinnia needs to usurp Paxton's security access to carry out her mission. As is the wont of dystopian novels, Hart is as preachy as one would expect but also unfortunately predictable in the storytelling. **William Saunderson-Meyer @TheJaundicedEye**

The inspiration for *One Day in Bethlehem* came from a news story in the Sunday Times. On December 31 2011, I read of two men, Fusi Mofokeng and Tshokolo Mokoena, who walked free after spending 19 years in prison. The story leapt out at me because of a single remark that Mofokeng made. "The thing that most amazed him in his first seven months of freedom," the reporter, Rowan Philp, wrote, "was not smartphones and Google, but that 'a white lady actually served me at a restaurant and was very nice to me too'."

The moment I read those lines, I wanted urgently to meet Mofokeng. I wanted to borrow the eyes of a person who had walked into 2011 from the past. For I had it in mind that we'd forgotten what had changed and what had not since the end of apartheid; that it would take an insurmountable effort to distinguish the old from the new. What an opportunity, I thought: to consult a person who has been as if asleep all these years. That same day, I wrote Mofokeng a letter. I wished to get in touch while the world around him was still surprising.

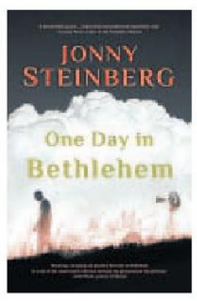
I interviewed everyone I could find who had known Mofokeng as a child and as a youth — friends, relatives, the white man in whose garden he once worked. I tried to track down those with whom he had shared a cell during his 19 years in prison, the warders with whom he had built relationships, the lawyers at his trial, people who had witnessed his TRC hearing, and the victims of the crime he was purported to have committed.

You can never do too much research, only too little. Each interview produces something fresh, something unexpected.

Jacket Notes

Jonny Steinberg

'I wanted to borrow the eyes of a person who had walked into 2011 from the past'



The book centres around what actually happened at 4.10pm on April 2 1992 on the outskirts of Bethlehem, the time and the location of the crime for which Mofokeng and Mokoena were sentenced to life in prison. Two years into my research the audio recording of their trial was finally found — it had been lost. Reading the transcript was a massive surprise; nobody's recollection of the crime or of the trial was reliable. Memory had played its tricks on everybody. In Mofokeng's case, he had superimposed what had been said at his TRC hearing in 1998 onto his memory of the crucial events of 1992.

What also surprised me — although I guess it should not have — is just how callously those who exercise power treat ordinary people. The timeline of the book begins in the dying years of apartheid when those who exercised power were, in the main, white men. It ends many years into the democratic era. And still, people like Mofokeng and Mokoena are treated like dirt. Their experience is an analogue for the experience of millions.

One Day in Bethlehem was a very hard book to write. When you start a non-fiction book about living people, you just don't know what sort of issues the material will throw at you. The central question the material ended up raising — how important is it, morally, to remember what has happened in our own lives? — is one of the hardest.

One Day in Bethlehem by Jonny Steinberg is published by Jonathan Ball Publishers, R270

LifeStyle
Book Club

Three fascinating life stories this week

For many years members of Umkhonto we Sizwe have kept their counsel about their operations in the 1980s. Now, in *Voices from the Underground* (Penguin Non-Fiction), 18 comrades from the Ashley Kriel Detachment in the Western Cape reveal their nail-biting deeds during that time and the burden of living a double life. Legendary singer and poet **Patti Smith** chronicles a year of her life as she navigates loss, ageing and the seismic shift in US politics in *Year of the Monkey* (Bloomsbury). **Alexandra Fuller** suffered her own seismic shift when her father died. In *Travel Light, Move Fast* (Serpent's tail), she examines his bold, eccentric life with affection.