

Review: Mallory O'Meara, *The Lady from the Black Lagoon: Hollywood Monsters and the Lost Legacy of Milicent Patrick*

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The Lady from the Black Lagoon: Hollywood Monsters and the Lost Legacy of Milicent Patrick

By Mallory O'Meara

Hanover Square Press, 2019

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When Mallory O'Meara was seventeen years old, she discovered Milicent Patrick. Having just watched *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954), she was completely entranced by the graceful and primitive form of the Creature. Immediately, O'Meara researched everything she could about the film. During this process, she was stunned to find that the designer of the iconic creature was a woman. Up until that moment, all the monster-making artists O'Meara knew of and admired were men. The discovery of Milicent Patrick changed her life; Patrick opened the door to a world of monster movie magic and horror filmmaking she had assumed would always be closed to her.

With *The Lady from the Black Lagoon: Hollywood Monsters and the Lost Legacy of Milicent Patrick* (2019), O'Meara has set out to unearth and rightfully restore Patrick's place in film history – a contribution to cinema that has through the years been overlooked, neglected, and overwritten. Now a filmmaker, writer, and producer of horror films, O'Meara tells Patrick's story through the lens of her own personal experiences of the movie business, in particular a series of misogynistic and sexist encounters similar to those that suppressed Patrick's promising but short-lived career.

In *The Lady from the Black Lagoon*, O'Meara alternates between narrating Patrick's biography – enriched through scrupulous historical and archival research – and delivering her own observations on the spaces and places her study has taken her. The early chapters of the book give Patrick flesh and blood by providing her origin story pre-*Creature from the Black Lagoon*. These chapters chronicle her life from the 1920s up until the early 1950s: her childhood spent on the grounds of the Hearst Castle at San Simeon; her late teenage years in the suburban neighbourhood of Glendale, California; her term as an art student at the Chouinard Art Institute; her time in the Ink & Paint and the Animation & Effects departments at Walt Disney Studios; and her stint as a background actress in Hollywood films, such as *Texas, Brooklyn & Heaven* (1948), *Thunder in the Pines* (1948), *Abbott and Costello Meet Captain Kidd* (1952), *Limelight* (1952), and *We're Not Married!* (1952).

The middle chapters of the book record Patrick's career development in the makeup department at Universal Studios in the early 1950s and her success as the designer of the Creature from *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. They detail Patrick's meeting with Bud Westmore, head of said department, and his invitation for her to join his workshop. They recount Patrick's distinguished makeup work for *Against All Flags* (1952), *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), and *Abbott and Costello Meet Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1953), and delve into the project that would become both her career's crowning achievement and the most contested chapter of her life – *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. They illustrate Patrick's process of creating the Creature and relate her triumphant tour around cities across America, promoting the film and showcasing the creature's design to its future audiences. They discuss how, out of jealousy, Westmore had engineered the tour to falsely credit him as the designer of the creature, and how, contrarily, Patrick's presence on the tour made her all the more popular with the public. The book goes on to report how Westmore, engulfed with rage and resentment, removed Patrick from Universal's makeup department and from all of her

then current and future projects – *Captain Lightfoot* (1955), *This Island Earth* (1955), and *The Westmore Beauty Book* (1956) – thus preventing her from working in makeup at Universal ever again.

The later chapters of the book focus on Patrick's life post *Creature from the Black Lagoon* until her passing. They describe her short return to background acting and her retreat into living a more private life preoccupied with charity work and society events. The most telling passage of these chapters describes how only after Westmore's death in 1973 did the unspoken embargo lift on the bogus narrative that he was the Creature's designer, allowing Patrick to finally update her CV with the truth about her work on *Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

Although *The Lady from the Black Lagoon's* core focus is indeed Milicent Patrick's story, the book also offers accounts of other significant women who crossed paths with her. Such women include: Julia Morgan, Head Architect of the Hearst Castle; Madam Nelbert Chouinard, founder of the Chouinard Art Institute; Marcia James and Retta Scott, Disney's first female animators; and Adela Rogers St. Johns, writer and journalist in California since 1912.

The Lady from the Black Lagoon debunks the long-standing misconception that the Creature was Bud Westmore's creation, and deservedly reinstates Milicent Patrick as the Creature's chief designer. By outlining Hollywood's systemic gender biases that limited Patrick's career – biases that are still rampant in the industry today – O'Meara's work provokes two questions: which other women's labour has gone uncredited, been overshadowed or forgotten? And who really are the Hollywood monsters referred to in the book's title?