During the summer of 1816, Lord Byron invited Percy Bysshe Shelley and others to his villa by Lake Geneva. When unseasonable weather forced them indoors, Byron suggested a contest to see who could write the scariest ghost story. Nineteen-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (who would marry Shelley later that year after his wife drowned herself) won. The result was “Frankenstein.”

That’s a good tale. “Decoding the Past: In Search of the Real Frankenstein,” shown on the History Channel tonight, tells an even better one — about the sources of the Frankenstein myth. The one-hour documentary teems with grave robbers, mad scientists and mutilated corpses. It lends a whole new meaning to the idea of giving one’s body to science. It is a fascinating slice of medical history.

Brief profiles of four European scientists whose experiments may have jump-started Mary Godwin’s imagination. First there is Luigi Galvani, who made frog legs twitch by poking them with electrodes. “An orgy of twitching limbs,” the narrator intones, “began all over Europe.”

Shelley apparently was not immune to the craze. “It is rumored that he undertook his own galvanization experiments on the family cat,” the narrator says, “causing its death.”

Giovanni Aldini used the technique of his uncle, Luigi, to galvanize human limbs. In Glasgow, Andrew Ure inserted electrical wires into the flesh of corpses, turning them briefly into jerky automatons. In an unintentionally hilarious re-enactment, a Glaswegian scientist faints as a corpse flops about in front of him.

Finally comes the alchemist Johann Konrad Dippel, possibly the model for Dr. Frankenstein. Dippel pursued his grisly work, which involved grave robbery and “diabolical” experiments on corpses, at the Castle Frankenstein, described by the narrator as being “in deepest Germany, surrounded by impenetrable forests.”

The work of these scientists was important; it led to electro-shock therapy and cardiac defibrillation. Mary Shelley’s novel is a classic that modernized
the Prometheus myth for a new generation. Even today, “Frankenstein” continues to spawn strange progeny; a recent episode of the cartoon “SpongeBob SquarePants” was entitled “Frankendoodle.”

By focusing on the ghoulish, and ignoring the writer’s imagination, this report treats “Frankenstein” not as a work of art, but as a corpse to be sliced, diced and galvanized into life. But “Frankenstein” is literature, so it’s already alive. Read it, and the hair on the back of your neck will stand up, and it won’t be because somebody is poking you with an electric prod.