The Three Investigators:
Modern-Day Mythology in the Making

By Chris Workman

In the early 1960s, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* scribe Robert Arthur was hired as an editor/writer by Random House, who utilized Arthur's association with Hitchcock as a marketing angle for a series of short story collections, using the director's name as a selling point. Arthur took it one step further, however, suggesting to his publisher a juvenile mystery series, aimed primarily at boys, that would feature Hitchcock as an important contributing character. Arthur's hope was to capture an audience that did not generally like to read, and he saw the Hitchcock image as the means to draw them in.

Bothered by the fact that the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew (in their respective series) so often stumbled into both their mysteries and their solutions, Arthur wanted to craft a series that featured young teenagers who actually sought out mysteries and used intelligence and deduction to solve them (Smolinske 1). In doing so, he hoped to influence young readers to use their minds and to steer clear of ignoble pursuits. In this sense, his literary creations — known as The Three Investigators — were not only role models, they entered modern mythology *à la* Claude Levi-Strauss's theory of structural anthropology. Levi-Strauss contended that mythic stories and characters repeated themselves in the stories of new generations, and that these archetypes perpetuated the enforcement of societal rules. Few bodies of work so eloquently illustrate this notion as does The Three Investigators series.

Levi-Strauss borrowed heavily from Swiss Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who believed that structures were often represented by dyads, or dyadic pairs. Dyadic pairs resonate because they are, to some degree, archetypal. They generally consist of basic conflicts that heighten interest in an audience hearing (or, in later days, reading) about them, while simultaneously teaching a concrete lesson. This came to be a signature of structuralism, a literary theory in which a work is analyzed in relation to the surrounding, or external, structures that helped inform its creation.

Looking at The Three Investigators from a strictly structuralist point of view, an analyst would have to consider the period in which the books were first created (the mid-1960s) and note what external structures affected their creation. A glaring example of such a structure is the use of real-life film director Alfred Hitchcock as a major character in each book. In addition to supplying the introduction and epilogue, he also figured in the stories themselves, often by sending people with a mystery to the eponymous amateur detectives. (In reality, Hitchcock did not write any part of these stories, even if the books were crafted around his popularity and fame.) Had Hitchcock's name not been well known, and had Arthur not known him personally, The Three Investigators would likely not have been born; or, if they had, they would have been radically different, and without a famous name to provide an identification point with young readers, it's quite likely that the series would have run its course after a book or two. Indeed, after Hitchcock died and his name was removed from the series, Random House saw a sharp decline in its sales (though, to be fair, there appears to have been a number of factors involved).

One must also bear in mind that The Three Investigators were deliberately representative of a whole subgenre (of which Arthur was an unashamed enthusiast) populated by teen and pre-teen sleuths. Thus, *The Mystery of the Stuttering Parrot* is similar in title and nature to *Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot*, *The Mystery of the Whispering Mummy* references *Jerry Todd and the Whispering Mummy*, and *The Secret of Skeleton Island* utilizes the same title as the first Ken Holt mystery. Not coincidentally, both *Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot* and *Jerry Todd and the Whispering Mummy* were written in the 1920s, when Arthur, who was an avid reader, was a teenager. It is also likely that Arthur's series was influenced by the popular mystery novels of Erle Stanley Gardner, which were first published in the 1930s. Each of Gardner's books had an alliterative title beginning with the words *The Case of the* (for example, *The Case of the Caretaker's Cat*, *The Case of the Dangerous Dowager*, and so on). While none of Arthur's book titles began with "*The Case of*," they did often contain alliterations, as in *The Mystery of the Green Ghost*, *The Mystery of the Silver Spider*, and *The Mystery of the Screaming Clock*. (It is worth noting that several much-later Three Investigator books, part of Random House's *Find Your Fate* series, did begin with the words *The Case of the* and contained alliterations, including *The Case of the Dancing Dinosaur*, *The Case of the Savage Statue*, and *The Case of the House of Horrors*.) After Arthur's death, the practice of having titles end in alliterations continued with titles such as *The Secret of the Crooked Cat*, *The Mystery of the Flaming Footprints*, *The Mystery of the Singing Serpent*, *The Mystery of Monster Mountain*, and so on.

Also of note is the fact that Arthur's young adult years saw the release of the film *The Unholy Night*, a 1929 talkie that featured a house supposedly haunted by a green ghost; the fourth book in The Three Investigators series was titled *The Mystery of the Green Ghost*. The 'villain' of *The Secret of Terror Castle* was obviously influenced by Lon Chaney, an actor who had become a household name after starring in several notable horror films during the 1920s. And also popular during the silent era were adaptations of Wilkie Collins's Gothic mystery novel *The Moonstone*, to which *The Mystery of the Fiery Eye* bears some similarity. These examples make it fairly apparent that Arthur proudly wore his influences on his erudite sleeve.

Levi-Strauss advocated the reading of literary tropes with other than a structuralist's eye, however. What made the anthropologist's work in relation to structuralism so revolutionary was that he took this overarching theory and applied it to other signifying systems. In studying the literature of Ancient Greece, for instance, he found certain themes — usually binary oppositions — that repeated themselves: human/animal, male/female, mother/son, life/death, and so on. He came to believe that what one reads in literature or sees in mythology may be affected by larger systems of social conditioning, the roots of which dated back to prehistory. That social conditioning, firmly in place, affected every aspect of humankind, from religion to politics to literature, and was passed down from one generation to the next, often in the stories that were communicated from older generations to younger ones. These stories, then, can be read with this anthropological view in mind.

Thus, when Robert Arthur fashioned The Three Investigators, he may have been unconsciously relying on deep-seated mythological constructs. Arthur established just who these characters were in the introduction to *The Secret of Terror Castle*, the first book in the series, before setting up a series of binary oppositions that are wholly identifiable as prompts for young readers to

engage in appropriate behaviors while exercising their mental abilities. Concerning Jupiter Jones, the leader of the investigative trio and whose given name recalls the preeminent god of Roman mythology, Arthur wrote:

> In order to get himself taken seriously, [Jupiter] studied furiously. From the time he could read, he read everything he could get his hands on—science, psychology, criminology, and many other subjects. Having a good memory, he retained much of what he read, so that in school his teachers found it best to avoid getting into arguments with him about questions of fact. They found themselves proved wrong too often. (viii)

In addition, Jupiter is overweight and has a general air of stupidity about his appearance (despite being of high intelligence). Invariably, he uses other peoples' mistaken impressions of him to his advantage, frequently luring criminal suspects to make revelations that they would not make to someone who was obviously bright or sharp-witted.

Arthur likewise drew upon mythic archetypes for the two other boys in the group: "Bob Andrews, who is small but wiry, is something of a scholarly type, although of an adventurous spirit. Pete Crenshaw is quite tall and muscular" (viii). He further established that Pete, though athletic, tended to frighten easily, while the studious Bob worked part-time in the Rocky Beach library; libraries, of course, are associated with intellectual stimulation.

Some theorists might argue that Pete's tendency to show fear does not reflect mythic heroism, but that simplistic view is easily discounted. According to the article "The Concept of the Hero" (which can be found at Harvard University's Web site), "The hero must struggle against the fear of death, in order to achieve the most perfect death." The author, in quoting from *The Iliad* 9.189, then provides a startling example of Achilles struggling over a difficult choice, one that will result in either his immediate death with a reward in the afterlife or the preservation of his earthly existence for a time (with no guarantee of a gratifying hereafter):

> My mother tells me that there are two ways in which I may meet my end. If I stay here and fight, I shall lose my safe homecoming but I will have glory that is unwilting: whereas if I go home my glory will die, but it will be a long time before the outcome of death shall take me.

Achilles, it seems, fears his own death, but his heroism lies in his weighing his actions against the possible outcomes and then making the right decision. Therefore, Pete's open willingness to show fear (particularly as it relates to self-preservation) and his decisive overcoming of it reflects, rather than foils, the very idea of Greek, or mythic, heroism.

Concerning Bob Andrews, it should be noted that his transition from a bookworm with glasses in the original series to a heartthrob who wears contacts in the *Crimebusters* series echoes another mythic type, that of the ugly duckling.

A description of the lead characters alone does not provide evidence of the dyadic pairs that Levi-Strauss so strongly believed were essential to instruct children in social rules. Beginning with the second book in The Three Investigator series, *The Mystery of the Stuttering Parrot*, the boys solve various crimes of property, going up against dastardly villains in the process. Therein lies the strongest example of a dyad within the series: heroes/villain(s), or, in even more general terms, good/evil. The boys are the heroes (good); the criminals they catch are the villains (evil). The Investigators exercise intelligent thought and are rewarded by capturing 'the bad guys.' In the process, they generally work within accepted social boundaries and in specific roles.

The Mystery of the Stuttering Parrot has the three teenage sleuths set out to find a missing parrot belonging to a friend of Alfred Hitchcock. The boys learn that the parrot was one of seven birds, each named after a classic/historic literary figure (Little Bo-Peep, Shakespeare, Robin Hood, Sherlock Holmes, and so on) and each bearing a message that forms part of a solution to a larger quandary – the whereabouts of a priceless painting stolen by a French art thief named Victor Huganay. Jupiter Jones (hero/good) and Victor Huganay (villain/evil) form an obvious dyadic pair. That they are flip sides of the same coin is illustrated when Huganay tells Jupiter:

> This is just a last-minute salutation from one sportsman to another. … You outmaneuvered me… Few people have done that. If you boys ever come to Europe, look me up. I will show you the French underworld and perhaps you may have a chance to try your wits on some mystery there. No hard feelings on my part, if there are none on yours. Agreed? (171)

In fact, upon their next meeting in *The Mystery of the Screaming Clock*, Huganay, recognizing Jupiter's extreme intelligence, attempts in vain to get the boy investigator to join his criminal organization. In the entire American series, Huganay was the only recurring villain. (He twice manages to escape justice, though his minions do not.) As Alfred Hitchcock states about their arrest in the afterward to *Stuttering Parrot*, "[C]rime is a losing proposition" (182). And therein lies the final aspect of Levi-Strauss's proposition concerning the necessity of dyadic pairs repeating themselves in literary (or mythological) structures: they prepare children to integrate into society by instructing them in the ways of right and wrong. (This will be addressed in more detail shortly.)

Of course, the dyad of hero and villain (good and evil) is not the only one The Three Investigators address. There are secondary dyads that also teach important social values. Though Jupiter's parents are dead, he has a very strong relationship with the aunt and uncle with whom he lives, providing the reader with a positive and loving example of a nontraditional family. Likewise, Bob and Pete have very strong relationships with their parents, and, understanding that their parents know best, they always do as their parents instruct them. The result is that the protective dynamic of the traditional family unit and the relationship between parents and children is displayed and enforced.

Also, Jupiter's relationship to the town bully, Skinner Norris, whom he constantly outwits, teaches children that bullying behavior is wrong and will often result in the humiliation of the bully. This may not be entirely realistic, but it does not have to be, given that the point of such

pairings is not to present a "real" world, but rather one in which certain behaviors are encouraged while others are discouraged. The result, theoretically, is the eventual creation of a "real" world wherein cultural structures that safeguard both individuals and people as a group are passed from generation to generation.

One problem with Levi-Strauss's theory of structural anthropology is that he assumed his dyads to be true and therefore did not formulate an empirical method of testing them. This in and of itself does not mean that his views are without merit, but his failure to take into account literary exceptions to the binary oppositions he proposed is problematic.

German writer Astrid Vollenbruch's German Three Investigator entry *Black Madonna* illustrates such a limitation. In the book, Jupiter breaks into a suspected criminal's home, hoping to steal evidence that will prove the man guilty. He is duly caught and arrested, and The Three Investigators are forced to disband temporarily until the legal issues are resolved. Vollenbruch herself posted on her Facebook page: "I thought it was about time Jupiter realized that the ends do not justify the means." In an effort to both humanize Jupiter and to make it clear to young readers that heroes cannot act outside the law, Vollenbruch's move was an indirect slap at Levi-Strauss's view of mythological structures, wherein heroes are superhuman beings who can act only within rigid social boundaries that dictate how heroism is defined. According to series enthusiast Toomas Losin:

> The concept of book characters 'getting away with it' is an interesting one to ponder, at least in the context of what type of story or series the reader is looking for. It seems that *Black Madonna* must have been inspired, at least in part, by such thoughts. Escapist fantasy demands superhumans (think Übermenschen, not comic book superhumans), which is what [The Three] Investigators are in the American series. It seems to me that making them subject to the same level of law enforcement as a real-life person must change a story from a fantasy into a drama as the illusion of invulnerability is stripped away. (9)

The debate is an interesting one in that it hints at just how deep-seated some literary tropes may be, particularly when they harken to mythological origins. In his 1961 essay "The Raw and the Cooked," published in the collection *Anthropology and Myth*, Levi-Strauss provided the reason he believed that such dyadic pairs repeated themselves throughout history: "[A]ll these myths made use of the same code, constructed from terms which, for all that they are qualitative and intimately associated with concrete experience, are nonetheless conceptual tools allowing the combination or separation of significant properties according to logical rules of compatibility and incompatibility, and in relation to cultural differences between various groups" (41-2). In other words, dyadic pairs resurface for a reason: they help inform and instruct groups how to interact.

For example, a dyadic pair in which a male and a female of a species are set up in opposition and which results in the female being subservient to the male would have been designed to indoctrinate those hearing the tale – most often children but quite possible members of other groups with differing belief systems – with a strict societal structure in which men were to be viewed as leaders in the group and women as followers. This reflects the common structure of

prehistoric societies, usually small clans of closely related families in which men put their lives in danger to bring home sustenance for the group while women fostered the young of the species. (Indeed, this structure can also be found in many primate and non-primate mammalian groups and perhaps even in some dinosaurian groups. Of course, it should also be noted that, in some rare cases, the roles were reversed, with females of the species providing food and males fostering the young.)

Vollenbruch's depiction of Jupiter's arrest touched a nerve with the series' fans: "I got mixed reactions from the 'consequences' stuff — some readers liked it, some hated it." That some people hated it may indicate just how deeply ingrained in us these mythic structures are. When they are tampered with, the result is often a negative emotional reaction from many readers, who feel a loss of empowerment at having their worldview deconstructed.

The Three Investigators mystery series lasted for fifty-nine books in the United States, with new entries being published virtually every year from 1964 until 1990. (The only years in which no new books were published were 1980, when Alfred Hitchcock died, throwing the series into a temporary limbo, and 1988, when the original series came to an end.) After an attempt at reworking the series, rebranded *The Three Investigators: Crimebusters*, resulted in disappointing sales, however, the entire series was terminated in the United States, though new entries continue to be published in Germany at an approximate rate of three to six per year.

The American series was at its most popular in the 1970s, and during that heyday it actually rivaled The Hardy Boys in terms of sales. After its departure, it was replaced by other series that taught similar life lessons, though in increasingly more realistic terms. Although set in a fantasy world remote from our own, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series crafted one of the most famous dyadic pairs in literary history, Harry Potter (hero/good/life) against Lord Voldemort (villain/evil/death). In the end, the villain lost and died while the hero won and lived. In popular storytelling, there can be no greater punishment than death and no greater reward than life.

As Levi-Strauss states in *Structural Anthropology*, "[W]e define myth as consisting of all its versions; or to put it otherwise, a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such" (217). The key point is not the specifics of a story, but rather the emotional impact it leaves behind. Ultimately, it does not matter whether the hero is hyper-intelligent boy detective Jupiter Jones or magical boy wizard Harry Potter, or whether the villain is French art thief Victor Huganay or sinister black magician Lord Voldemort. What matters is that the hero be heroic, that he or she work within rather than flout cultural standards, and that the villain who threatens such cultural standards be punished. And it is this dyadic pair to which The Three Investigators mystery series, in book after book, not only conforms (as defined by the paradigms established by Levi-Strauss's theory of structural anthropology), but conforms so well that it rises to the level of mythology.

Annotated Bibliography

Frame Text

"The Concept of the Hero." *At Home*. Harvard University. 15 Dec. 2011. Web.
This site gives an excellent, if brief, description of just what constitutes a mythological hero.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Anthropology & Myth: Lectures 1951-1982*. Trans. Roy Willis. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987. Print.
I used this collection of essays to provide greater context for Levi-Strauss's ideas on structuralism and anthropology and how the two join together in mythology.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Myth and Meaning*. New York: Shocken Books, 1979. Print.
This collection of essays focuses entirely on Levi-Strauss's study of various mythologies and thus provided the material I needed to understand structuralism in relation to both linguistics and anthropology.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Trans. Claire Jacobson. New York: Basic Books, 1963. Print.
This is the primary book I used in understanding just how Levi-Strauss applied a literary theory to anthropology, then reversed engineered his new theory back to literature.

Losin, Toomas. "Re: The Three Investigators." *AVManiacs.* Edwin Samuelson, 18 Nov. 2011. Web.
Unfortunately, there are currently no serious critiques written about The Three Investigators. As a result, I have consulted the known Web sites and message boards dealing with the subject to find appropriate academic criticisms of the series. (Since the writing of this essay, Ian Regan has pointed me to one interesting and well-written criticism.)

Smolinske, Seth T. "Help Save The Three Investigators!" *The Three Investigators U.S. Editions Collector Site.* 15 Dec. 2011. Web.
Smolinske's site is, bar none, the greatest site out there (at least, in the English language) for information on The Three Investigators series and includes information about the individual books and stories, various editions, their authors, their artists, and so forth. In doing so, it also provides a great deal of evidence for a structural critique of the series!

Vollenbruch, Astrid. Facebook. *Facebook*, 16 August, 2011. Web.
Astrid Vollenbruch is one of the German writers of the series whose work so well replicates the original American series. As such, her divergence in having Jupiter arrested for burglary, and her subsequent discussion of it here, was an interesting conceptual change of pace and well worth documenting.

Literary Text Being Analyzed

Arthur, Robert. *The Secret of Terror Castle*. New York: Random House, 1964. Print.
The first book in the series, I used this as a reference to help define just who the lead characters are, as well as to define secondary dyadic pairs.

Arthur, Robert. *The Mystery of the Stuttering Parrot*. New York: Random House, 1964. Print.
Because this is the first book in the series to present the dyadic pair of hero/villain, I felt it important to reference. (*The Secret of Terror Castle* does not contain a villain as such.)

Vollenbruch, Astrid. *Black Madonna*. Trans. Marion Charles. Stuttgart, Germany: PONS, 2010. Print.
This is the only book in which The Three Investigators commit a criminal act and are punished for it (to my knowledge; I unfortunately cannot read German and therefore cannot attest to those that have not been translated).

About the Author

In third grade Chris stumbled upon a copy of The Three Investigators book *The Mystery of the Magic Circle*, written by Mary Virginia Carey, in his teacher's classroom. He checked it out but, because of its sinister title, was forced by his mother to return it the next day. Undeterred, he then checked out *The Mystery of Death Trap Mine*. It was on that day that his love affair with writing was born!

After high school Chris went to work for the New Castle-Henry County Public Library, where he quickly rose to Head of Adult Fiction and Audio-Visual Acquisitions. Because of the research experience he gained there, he was hired by The Mazer Corporation, an educational publishing developer, as an art researcher. When an opportunity arose in the editorial department, he jumped on it, moving from assistant editor to editor to supervising editor within a two-year time frame. For the next seven years, Chris worked with such publishers as Harcourt, Houghton-Mifflin, McGraw-Hill, and Scholastic, primarily as a social studies and language arts editor and writer.

During this time he also wrote film and DVD reviews for such horror-oriented magazines as *Scarlet Street* and *Cult Movies*. He has an Associate's Degree in Liberal Arts from Urbana University, where he is currently working on Bachelor's Degrees in English and Communications.