

The Mystery of the Invisible Dog

by Mary Virginia Carey

1975

A review by Ray Stout

It's a shame any of the original T3I books were ever denied their original wraparound cover art, not least Book No. 23. It's arguably one of the most gripping covers of the entire original series. Yet even with only its front face adorned, the tale within is a classic.

Alfred Hitchcock and The Three Investigators in The Mystery of the Invisible Dog takes hold of the reader pronto, wrapping them in its plot as immersively as the overcoat in the endpapers illustration (oh, that those had endured to the end of the series) envelops The Master of Suspense himself.

This was the first to be deprived of that decoration. But the spirit of that scene — the three boys marching dutifully into a dark graveyard, with the silhouette of Hitch looming in the foreground yet seeming to be watching them from a distance — remains as potent as ever in this superfantastic tale.

"I am being haunted," their client, Fenton Prentice, confides to the boys early on. He has been seeing a human silhouette passing through the walls of his Bel Air apartment, he tells them.

It's in that apartment's living room where the divulgence occurs, and that apartment complex is the central setting of the story. Strange things continue. It's easy to catch the tension Prentice feels in this riddle that, with its cast of characters, takes on the character of an Agatha Christie thriller. Others in the picture include the bumptious Mrs. Bortz and the enigmatic Sonny Elmquist, who reside in the complex, while Father McGovern of the nearby St. Jude Church seems to bear a tolerance toward human nature that serves as a subtle foil to the supernatural matters the book's author, Mary Virginia Carey, is so masterly at conveying.

Soon, the haunting presence spoken of by Mr. Prentice is seen by no less credible a witness than the ultra-rational Jupiter Jones. Things get no easier for the boys when a valuable sculpture disappears from another tenant's apartment.

Though easily overshadowed in the 2013 reader survey by the titles of the series creator, Robert Arthur — his 10 titles drew the highest concentration of votes — this book made a more-than-respectable showing. Of the 33 that followed Arthur's, it was the second highest among reader favorites. You might consider *Invisible Dog* a dark horse.

This is Carey at her T3I finest. Once again she has imbued a story with strong characterization, and this one is catalyzed as well by a legend of a vicious canine in long-ago eastern Europe. There's nothing like historical context to enhance a mystery, and that this story has in eerie measure.

It's her fifth book in the series, and it comes amid what may be the series peak, a span running from No. 17, *The Mystery of the Singing Serpent*, to 28, *The Mystery of the Deadly Double*. If that be the case, thank in no small part this author, who shared these credits — and bookended this amazing run of all-time best-readers — with Dennis Lynds (pseudonym William Arden) as the two of them (and, to a lesser extent, Kin Platt, pseudonym Nick West) brought Arthur's ingenious brainchildren, already immortalized, to maturity.

In this case, one manifestation of the Hitchcockian presence is the setting. In that light the

apartment calls to mind his movie *Rear Window*, which, coincidentally, emerged when his directing career, like Carey's T3I, had arrived at its apex.

For the illustrations — compelling and timely placed throughout the story, as in all the books — we owe the hat-tip this time to Jack Hearne, who also painted the fascinating cover. (Also enticing is Robert Adragna's external remake for the 1981 paperback issue. It's one fine successor, just like all his others for the series.) The internal drawings mark his sixth T3I, the outer his fourth. A cover is no proof of internal shine, of course, but here it seizes with powerful purchase and delivers on its promise, complementing the writing within with powerhouse images as viewer ensnared becomes reader enthralled.

Yet, it's one of the illustrations that gives the story one of its few drawbacks. That sketch, riveting as it is, perhaps is too giveaway in its otherwise perfect crafting and timing. It seems a greater surprise element could have been preserved with a just a minimal augmenting of the cast of characters.

The story has a satisfying finish: The reader was likely wrong but is glad to have been wrong, inspired by the unexpected.

Being the first in the series to feature the blank endpapers, *Invisible Dog*'s inside covers are an anticlimax to the spellbinding depictions that graced the first 22. The internals would last only through five more books, and Hitchcock just seven. But in this one, they are both at peak performance.

As in all the T3Is, his shadow is felt throughout. One can almost see him watching every particular scene of this case like a director off-camera, intently scrutinizing every actor, prop, and utterance on the set.

Perhaps the most spectacular scene in the entire canon occurs in this book. It's a pivotal one, yet low-key. Danger is imminent but not immediate. There's a hold-your-breath discovery, irradiated by a superb work of Hearne, that features an almost imperceptible ripple but one that could reverberate across all 43 (original series) cases these boys have confronted. Its message: This is *The Three Investigators*, investigating anything, disentangling every time.

It may be something like the effect of the shower scene in Hitch's *Psycho* that, once you've beheld it, screams within his entire filmography.

A hallmark of a good story is raising issues, intentionally or not, that linger long after the final page, even into perpetuity. Why both good and bad exist in such an invisible symbiosis is not the kind of anything pursued by these boys. But there's a beauty in being mystified by things that will remain doggedly “? ? ?.”

Maybe omitting part of a wraparound cover is a good way to leave more to the imagination.