

Until I started working, I was like "Jeff" Jefferies, the James Stewart character from Rear Window; I would peek at **Alfred Hitchcock** through the lens of newspaper articles and the Empire magazines which father would bring home from the British Council library.

They provided a window into the world of Hitchcock, a purveyor of thrilling and mysterious fare. I warmed to him immediately. But even though I saw and saw through the windows, I had never actually met him: that is, I had never seen a Hitchcock film (As fate would have it, one day on flipping through channels I saw a shadow with a knife on Zee Studio and instinctively knew at once that at last our orbits had collided). I was always on the outside, looking in. This being the 90s, my only sources of movies were the theatre and television (specifically DD1 and DD2 till the twelfth standard).

It was **The Three Investigators (T3I)** series and Alfred Hitchcock Anthologies (AHA) which filled the void...

Or so I thought the story went.

Memory is an unreliable narrator. My childhood associate, the brother, reckons we hadn't heard of

Hitchcock until the T3I and AHA waltzed into our lives. You could have knocked me over with a feather, so stunned was I by the revelation. Did it mean that all along, they didn't merely bridge the gap between the articles and the films; they also drew up the blueprints and commissioned the bridge? Were they the springboard that launched me onto the Hitchcock wagon? AHA indeed!

Well, springboard or not, it was thrilling to read of Hitchcock as a character in a story all the same.

A bit of introduction is in order. The T3I series is about three teenage detectives residing in Rocky Beach, California:

Jupiter Jones: First Investigator

Peter Crenshaw: Second Investigator

Bob Andrews: Records and Research

For quite a while as a child, I labored under the assumption that the T3I books were penned by Hitchcock himself. For, Hitchcock's name would loom large on the covers as "ALFRED HITCHCOCK and The Three Investigators", well above the actual book title.

There was also the singular absence of any mention of an author on the jackets. Inside, a single line in wee letters modestly claiming “Text by Robert Arthur” was the only clue about the creator. That single unassuming line belied the staggeringly vast career of **Robert “Bob” Arthur**. If one were to recite every title of his oeuvre, towering piles of bananas and giant water pitchers would have to be called in to sustain the noble enterprise.

Robert Arthur excelled in diverse mediums of writing. He contributed hundreds of stories to pulp magazines which were all the rage in the 1930s and 1940s. He helmed and wrote for radio shows, chief among them **The Mysterious Traveler** which featured tales of macabre, mystery, sci-fi and speculative fiction [1].

In 1957, he edited his first *AHA: Stories They Wouldn't Let Me Do on TV*. This was a revival of a series which had enjoyed a successful run from 1945-1949 [2]. The Alfred Hitchcock anthologies were collections of short stories under various themes including mystery, ghosts, spies and thrillers.

In the 1960s, Arthur wrote stories and teleplays for the long-running T.V. series **Alfred Hitchcock Presents** and **The Alfred Hitchcock Hour**. Because of the Hitchcock connection, **Random House**

approached him to edit a string of AHAs for adults and younger readers alike [1]. They sold like hot cakes. Encouraged by their popularity, Robert Arthur hit upon the idea of creating his own mystery series catering to a younger audience, with Hitchcock as a character [1]. He thus went on to write ten of the first eleven T3I books until his death in 1969.

**“I seem to be constantly introducing something...
Now I find myself introducing a trio of lads...”**

Alfred Hitchcock inaugurates the T3I series with this gripe. It’s a cheeky reference to Hitchcock’s kooky appearances as a host in the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* TV series, to his deadpan cameos in his movie trailers, and to his introductions in the anthologies. But Hitchcock’s mirror may as well have been reflecting Arthur. For, Robert Arthur himself wrote the Hitchcock introductions in his anthologies and the ten T3I books (As you may well have guessed by now, Hitchcock’s involvement only extended to lending his name to the literary enterprises).

In the anthologies, Arthur would sometimes peek from behind the mask with the inscription "The

editor gratefully acknowledges the invaluable assistance of Robert Arthur in the preparation of this volume" [2]. The T3I introductions were written in the fine tradition of reverse psychology of which Lemony Snicket has made such an art; "Hitchcock" always introduces the trio reluctantly, imploring the reader to, if possible, keep away*.

The Secret of Terror Castle (1964), the first entry in the T3I series is a terrific opener with a splendid mystery at its heart. Robert Arthur particularly focuses on Jupiter in the introduction and rightly so. For, Juve is the driving force behind T3I. Robert Arthur paints such an intriguing portrait of Juve in the introduction that immediately one is piqued.

It's also interesting that Bob is the first word of the entire series (if you discount the introduction). Robert Arthur identified with Bob the most, their shared names sealing the bond [1]. At one point in *Terror Castle* Juve says "We will have our cases written up by the father of our other partner, Bob Andrews. He works for a newspaper". Robert Arthur had completed an MA in journalism and worked for a newspaper briefly. Given that his name appeared so modestly inside the books, these nods and winks were apt.

The story is simple enough. Jupiter wants to get the T3I into business and creates their first case himself; Hitchcock is hunting for a haunted house for his next film and Jupiter decides that the T3I will dig up a genuine one for him. Jupe zeroes in on Terror Castle, nestled in the hills near Hollywood. Formerly the abode of a silent movie star Stephen Terrill, it now lies in ruins. Rumors swirl around the castle of people being unable to spend even a night there due to some unknown terror. In gathering evidence to prove it is genuinely haunted, the T3I uncover the secret of Terror Castle.

Now Hitchcock directed no film with supernatural elements though *Rebecca* (1940) and *The Birds* (1963) come quite close. Robert Arthur most likely wrote *Terror Castle* in the 1960s. Nevertheless it's quite tempting to think of Hitchcock in the T3I universe searching for *Manderley*, that eerie mansion where *Rebecca's* ghost-like presence hangs heavily in the air. What's more, the mystery of *Terror Castle* is unraveled by Jupe when an apparent attack on the boys by a chatter of parakeets occurs - an oblique nod to *The Birds*?

Robert Arthur finely straddles the twin ropes of world

building and writing an intelligent mystery. Besides the T3I, we are introduced to Jupe's formidable Aunt Mathilda, eccentric Uncle Titus Jones and the Jones Salvage Yard.

The Salvage Yard is a veritable paradise. It overflows with forsaken bric-a-bacs, and any curios which happen to catch Uncle Titus's fancy. It is surrounded by a fence, a canvas for local painters who bring it alive with vivid scenes. If this were not enough, the T3I house their workshop and headquarters amid the mounds of jumble, hidden from the world. Almost all of T3I's detective equipment (periscope, walkie-talkies, microphones etc) are sourced from the bounteous Salvage Yard. Like alchemists, the lads transform old, broken-down devices, unearthed from the depths of the yard, into detective gold.

They even have three secret entrances labeled Green Gate One, Tunnel Two and Easy Gate Three to slip into Headquarters - an old mobile trailer - unseen. Such an original, resourceful, practical and fantastic hide-out is as inventive a landscape as Hogwarts or The Land of Oz. This world-within-a-world also captures the childhood fantasy of inhabiting a universe separate from that of the grown-ups. The mobile trailer acts as refuge, away from the prying eyes of the adult world.

The Famous Five books by Enid Blyton are filled with adventures set in English castles studded with secret passages, hidden panels and underground tunnels. Robert Arthur took the mobile trailer, whose history is closely intertwined with America since the end of World War 1, and made it the equivalent of the English castle, with the home-made entrances standing in for secret passages.

Although Walter Retan, editor at Random House, thought that three secret entrances were excessive for a first book, Robert Arthur firmly batted for their inclusion. "I want this milieu to come alive to the readers as it has for me, and so I visualize these entrances in concrete terms," he explained [3]. He wisely convinced Retan to invest in the entrances by outlining a future story (which went on to become *The Mystery of the Vanishing Treasure*) in which a plot point pays off all the groundwork.

Other important characters introduced include the loyal allies Worthington - a British chauffeur - and Hans and Konrad, two Bavarian brothers who help around in the Salvage Yard. Worthington commandeers a gold-plated Rolls Royce, the use of which the boys win in a local competition for 30 days of 24 hours each.

The Rolls Royce is a character in its own right. It comes equipped with its very own refreshment compartment and a gold-plated telephone. Worthington and RR bail out the T3I from many a tight spot. To think of the boys dashing all over Rocky Beach and beyond in that glamorous car, their Batmobile if you will, with the dignified Worthington behind the wheels! It's an instantly winning idea that appeals to kids and adults alike. Trust Robert Arthur though to have a practical reason for introducing the car. In an interview with rocky-beach.com, his daughter Elizabeth Arthur revealed that her father, used to New York City's trains, chafed at the poor public transport scene in California [4]. Possibly he felt readers could justifiably question how the T3I got around over distances more than a bike ride away and thus the creative solution.

There are three elements I vividly remember, which made The Secret of Terror Castle my favorite of all T3I. One, it has a bagful of rib-tickling one-liners, most of them doled out by Pete ("As far as I am concerned, it's [Terror Castle] headquarters for the Union of Ghosts"). He is a bundle of nerves and quips, which put me in mind of Shaggy from the Scooby Doo series

(which incidentally released five years later in 1969). Pete voices what most of us would have felt in his place, faced with the prospect of investigating a haunted castle. Although I most certainly am a Bob Andrews, the book made me wish I were a Pete Crenshaw: athletic and funny.

Secondly most of the action takes place in Terror Castle, practically a funhouse in the best tradition of a Scooby Doo adventure; there's a painting with eyes that follow you, eerie music, scary echoes, a blue phantom, a fog of fear, mysterious apparitions and a beheaded suit of armor.

The back-story of the former occupant of the mansion, Stephen Terrill, is riveting as well. A silent film actor and a master at scaring the audiences, he becomes an object of ridicule when sound arrives; he has a lisp which doesn't quite gel with his fearsome image. Hurt and upset, he shuts himself up in his castle, isolated from the world. It is his ghost which is rumored to haunt the halls of the castle after an accident leads to his car toppling into the sea.

Terrill is clearly modeled on the American silent actor Lon Chaney. They share similar nicknames: Terrill is known as "The Man with a Million Faces" while Chaney went by the epithet "The Man of a Thousand

Faces”. Like his fictional counterpart, Chaney donned an astonishing array of looks in his films. He acted in only one talkie, *The Unholy Three*, which released just months before his death. But he suffered no such fate as Terrill in talkies, for he displayed a remarkable range voicing five characters in the film.

“He didn’t guess, he figured it out”, Bob explained.

Robert Arthur intended the T3I series to be the more cerebral alternative to the hugely popular Hardy Boys mysteries [3] [4]. The Hardy Boys stories tended largely towards action and focused less on actual mystery solving. By placing Jupe -a stickler to rational, analytical, deductive thinking- as the natural leader of the trio, Robert Arthur sought to achieve his stated aim.

Before we even meet Jupe, we are regaled with stories of his thinking prowess. He helps find Bob’s mother’s lost ring by retracing her movements on the day she lost it. He wins the use of the Rolls Royce in a contest which involves guessing the number of beans filled in a jar. Jupe approaches the problem in a scientific way instead of taking random guesses.

Even in situations of extreme peril, Jupe never stops exercising his grey cells. Jupe's qualities, remarkable for a teenager, are also given a credible reason. Annoyed at being laughed at as a child star artiste known as Baby Fatso, he decides to cram in as much knowledge as possible by reading furiously. A stocky boy with a preference for long and unusual words, Jupe was quite unlike the well-built and dashing Hardy Boys.

Naturally, Jupe's strong personality is evident in the T3I's style of detecting. They tackle Terror Castle by gathering proper evidence. They carry a camera and tape recorder to this end. They also research extensively in libraries or newspaper morgues for their cases. Jupe is open-minded towards the possibility of Terror Castle being haunted. This quality is reflected in the T3I's motto: "We Investigate Anything".

The idea of teenage boys starting their own investigative outfit was quite alien to me as a kid; childhood meant only study or play. Even the Famous Five or the Five Find-Outers solved a mystery for the sake of it or found themselves unexpectedly thrust into it. The American spirit of enterprise shown by the boys was quite novel for me.

They even have a darkroom and a printing press in their workshop. The printing of business cards displays a strong professional sense. Jupe's idea of depicting three question marks on them to kindle interest and provoke a response from clients (a running gag throughout the series), is an extension of his logical and creative thinking (Hitchcock's response: "Do they indicate a doubt in your own ability?"). Jupe recognizes the need for publicity (something Hitchcock excelled at). Securing Hitchcock as their first client by creating a case out of nothing shows Jupe is resolute and inventive in equal measure.

If you fancy unusual, trivia-filled, intelligent mysteries with plenty of heart and humour thrown in for good measure, step under the threshold of Terror Castle and strap yourselves in for the joyride that is T3I. If you don't fancy, I will leave you with this quote by Sherlock Holmes: "Watson. Come at once if convenient. If inconvenient, come all the same."

Footnote:

* Hector Sebastian, a fictional character, who took over Hitchcock's role after the demise of the director in 1980, is more amenable to the boys.

References:

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2. Casual Debris, "[Casual Debris Presents: An Introduction to the Alfred Hitchcock Anthologies](#)", Casual Debris, (22 November 2010).
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4. rocky-beach.com, "[Interview with Elizabeth Arthur](#)", rocky-beach.com, (February 2007).