

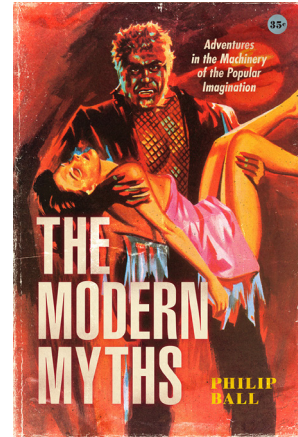
The Modern Myths: Adventures in the Machinery of the Popular Imagination, by Philip Ball



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Philip Ball. *The Modern Myths: Adventures in the Machinery of the Popular Imagination*. Chicago UP, 2021. Hardcover. 426 pg. \$30.00. ISBN 9780226719269.

In *The Modern Myths: Adventures in the Machinery of the Popular Imagination*, Philip Ball argues that “the Western world has, over the past three centuries or so, produced narratives that have as authentic a claim to mythic status as the psychological dramas of Oedipus, Medea, Narcissus, and Midas” (3). These stories, “which everyone knows without having to go to the trouble” of reading them, have “seeped into our consciousness, replete with emblematic visuals, before we reach adulthood” (2). Modern myths—of which Ball identifies seven, starting with Robinson Crusoe and ending with Batman—are not, despite their origins in specific texts, so much singular narratives as “evolving web[s] of many stories—interweaving, interacting, contradicting each other”—but with one thing in common: “a rugged, elemental, irreducible kernel charged with the magical power of *generating versions of the story*” (9). This fecund capacity to produce new narratives is what allows these myths to do their “cultural work”: they “erect a rough-hewn framework on which to hang our anxieties, fears and dreams” (16).



This summary suggests the level of analysis the book sustains: this is not a theoretical study or ideological critique of myth, along the lines of Roland Barthes’s classic *Mythologies* (1957) or the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (critics mentioned only a half-dozen times, mostly in passing). Rather, *The Modern Myths* is an old-fashioned literary anatomy, in the mold of John Cawelti’s classic *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976). What the book lacks in terms of theoretical claims it more than makes up for with its detailed close readings and rich historical contextualizations. Seven long chapters carefully lay out Ball’s mythic archetypes: Crusoe, Frankenstein, Jekyll and Hyde, Dracula, Martian invaders (à la Wells’s *War of the Worlds*), Sherlock Holmes, and Batman. As this list suggests, the coverage is heavy on British, mostly Victorian, exemplars, a bias Ball seems a bit defensive about, though he argues effectively that the “British character of much of the modern mythopoeia” has led to an emphasis in modern pop culture on themes of class and empire (20). Ball’s mythic canon is also exclusively male (though the origin text of the Frankenstein myth was written by a woman), and it is unclear why

he did not select a female archetype to analyze, since pop culture is filled with compelling femmes fatales, such as Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Rider Haggard's *Ayesha*. Perhaps Ball felt that this tradition was too diverse, not focused on a singular figure. In any case, he is quite frank about the biases informing his pantheon, and the individual chapters searchingly explore the cultural implications of the Anglophone and masculinist orientation of these various myths.

Each of the seven chapters devoted to a specific myth takes basically the same form. First, Ball traces the origins of the figure to a particular work of literature (or core collection of stories, as in the case of Sherlock Holmes) that has been abidingly popular. Yet, as he shows, the development of the myth over time has involved a process of adaptation and mutation that leaves the author's intent far behind. A myth, Ball asserts, "is not identical to its founding text"; rather, myths "are the work of a culture" (14). The figures that have proven enduringly resonant are those reducible to key kernels of meaning that can be elaborated and adjusted over and over again. In the case of *Frankenstein*, for example, that kernel is the potential for Promethean overreaching built into the modern scientific enterprise, the possibility that "knowledge injudiciously applied" might "generate an entity too large and unruly to control" (129). Having thus distilled down the original text, Ball then pursues the pop-cultural career of this kernel or theme over decades of cultural production, from direct adaptations (e. g. James Whale's classic 1931 film of *Frankenstein*) to various offshoots and allusions (e. g., stories about rampaging robots and disobedient computers). These seven chapters are marked by extensive primary research and imaginative extrapolation, and Ball writes with an easy grace that is refreshingly free of jargon.

The volume concludes with two chapters that pan back from a focus on specific myths to offer more sweeping speculations about the nature of the "mythic mode" and the possibility of new myths emerging. These final chapters are somewhat less sure-footed, in part because they are so speculative; thus, Ball argues that the zombie may be an emergent myth, the first to be generated by the cinema rather than by a literary text—an assertion that, on the one hand, tends to ignore the literary lineage of the modern zombie (cf. Roger Luckhurst's *Zombies: A Cultural History* [2015]), while on the other hand slighting mythic figures that are even more deeply rooted in a filmic corpus, such as the hardboiled private eye of modern noir. The capping chapter on the "mythic mode" of storytelling is a hodgepodge of tentative conclusions that is too short (barely 10 pages) to offer a synoptic perspective encompassing the diverse archetypes that the earlier chapters have spent so much time exploring (the chapter on *Dracula* alone runs almost 60 pages). It is these seven long chapters that form the core of Ball's book, and they are all solid, well-researched, and unfailingly interesting studies that any student of modern pop culture will have much to learn from.

Jack Durant is a long-time reviewer of SF literature and criticism. He was a stalwart of the late *Fantasy Review* magazine and published a number of reviews in *The Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Review Annual*.