

## Case of Finders Keepers

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Full Text:

BURIED treasure, sparkling jewels, flying dogs and fairies were all part of the fantasy. It was like a child's dream -- to create a fanciful fairy tale with elaborate drawings and hidden clues, and then invite everyone to look for gold coins hidden all over the country.

It was a dream Michael Stadther had harbored for decades until he decided recently to make it come true. He wrote and illustrated a 100-page book in which the clues to the treasures are hidden in its drawings and whimsical text. Once a reader uncovers the clues, he said, the obfuscated locations will become clear. He has hidden 12 18-karat gold coins, which can be redeemed for jewels, in public areas across the United States.

He met with a handful of publishers, but found no takers. Now, Mr. Stadther, a 50-year-old retired software engineer, is publishing the book himself and starting what he hopes will become a national treasure hunt.

If all goes according to plan, his book will be a hit with families, with children eager to find the clues and parents eager to find the booty. "It could be a national pastime," he said, sitting in an alcove of his sprawling home here. "It really has the ability to bring an entire family in on this together. It could be flying off the shelves."

These are high hopes, certainly, but Mr. Stadther retains a modicum of modesty.

"I'll consider it a success," he said, "if I don't do anything to embarrass myself."

The book, called "A Treasure's Trove" is a complicated tale of good and evil, where the Pook, a dog with wings, is called on to help save 12 forest creatures from being frozen by an evil fairy. Pook, the story's hero, is based on Mr. Stadther's own wingless dog, Misty.

The complexity of the book is a point of pride for the first-time author. With its story arc, fake conclusion and various subplots, it has everything a best-selling Stephen King novel would have, Mr. Stadther proudly asserts.

"I didn't dumb it down for kids," he said. "If they come across a word they don't know, they can go and get the dictionary to look it up."

Although Mr. Stadther has no children, he has never lost his own childlike fascination with painting, drawing and storytelling. As a student at Tulane University, he majored in mathematics and fine arts. As he used his math skills to push his career forward, his passion for art was mostly shelved.

After selling a banking software company in 1996, Mr. Stadther decided to move forward with the idea he had toyed with for decades. He used his connections to arrange meetings with publishers, but generated nothing more than a few raised eyebrows.

"It couldn't be explained in a few seconds and they just couldn't get it," Mr. Stadther said, but he added that he understood their hesitancy. "I'm there saying, 'I'm unpublished, inexperienced, but I

have this really cool idea.' It didn't make sense to them."

By the fourth or fifth attempt to get a publisher's attention, he gave in. Why look for someone to explain it to, he thought, when he could set up a publishing company for himself? So he did. He hired a couple of editors, an artistic assistant and a marketing expert, gave himself a budget and a deadline and got busy. Each watercolor painting took him hundreds of hours to complete, he said, adding up to about three years.

Earlier this year, Mr. Stadther flew to California where he filmed a half-hour infomercial to advertise the \$29.95 book with its package of a collection of puzzles, poster-size illustrations, the recorded version of the story and a stuffed Pook doll.

The commercial will be broadcast nationally in the coming week, mostly on cable stations in the wee hours of the night and early morning. That, combined with Web sites and word of mouth, Mr. Stadther hopes, should be enough to have the book selling on Amazon in no time. He is also going to local schools to read the book in an effort to get children excited about the project.

Mr. Stadther has sunk \$2 million into the project so far and doesn't expect to make any money from it. If there is any profit, he plans to give it to charity.

Much of the money he has spent has gone to pay for the treasure -- gems that are anything but child's play. Each of the dozen creatures featured in the book are replicated, made with precious stones, including diamonds. Most are worth at least several thousands of dollars, Mr. Stadther said. A spider with a body made of garnet and legs encrusted with diamonds totaling 4.01 carats has been appraised at \$450,000, he said.

"The magnitude of this project was just too fantastic to believe," said Robert Underhill, who owns Jewelry Designs in Danbury, Conn., and designed most of the pieces. "It was a dream -- something for the czars and the kings." Mr. Stadther's request was the largest and most elaborate commission the store has received, Mr. Underhill said. Mr. Stadther had the jewels appraised by an independent gemologist and hired a law firm to take any calls from people who may claim to find the coins.

Mr. Stadther isn't the first treasure master to create such a scheme. In 1979, the British author Kit Williams published "Masquerade," which had clues hidden in the pictures and words of its 32 pages leading to a golden hare "somewhere in the British Isles." The book sold more than 1 million copies and set off a storm of "armchair treasure hunt books." More than 20 such books were published in the 1980's. and there are still several Web sites devoted to the treasure hunters.

In May, a lawyer from Saddle Brook, N.J., found one of the treasures hinted at in "The Secret -- A Treasure Hunt," by Sean Kelly and Ted Mann, (Byron Preiss Visual Publications, 1982) The lawyer, Brian Zinn, had bought the book as a college student in 1982, and held onto it until he figured out the clues more than two decades later.

The mystery of Mr. Stadther's book will be far more short-lived: he plans to reveal the location of all the jewels by the end of 2007. "People will be waiting," he said. "I want some resolution to this."

Anyone who finds any of Mr. Stadther's jewels can choose to receive a cash prize of about one-third of the value of the jewel. That same cash equivalent will be donated to charity for all the coins that are not found in the next three years, he said.

Until then, Mr. Stadther would like to imagine, cocktail parties and playgrounds will be filled with treasure-hunting chatter.

**CAPTION(S):**

Photos: Michael Stadther, with his dog Misty, that was the inspiration for the hero in Mr. Stadther's book, "A Treasure's Trove." The book serves as a map to find coins hidden across the country that will be redeemed for gems, like the jeweled spider, insert. (Photographs by Chris Maynard for The New York Times)

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