

Treasure-hunting books were a popular genre of the Eighties

Merry Firschein

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Byline: MERRY FIRSCHEIN, STAFF WRITER

In 1979, a slender book named "Masquerade" set off a publishing storm.

Filled with intricately painted pictures and verses on each of its 32 pages, all offering clues to lead treasure hunters to a golden hare buried "somewhere in the British Isles," the book was marketed worldwide to children and adults.

The book's beauty made it an instant collector's item. The lure of treasure made it a bestseller: More than 1 million copies were sold, and scores of people, from as far as Australia, descended upon Britain and dug up public gardens. Author Kit Williams received about 30,000 letters with possible solutions.

"Masquerade" also launched a wildly, if briefly, popular new genre. In the 1980s, more than 20 "armchair treasure hunt" books were published. One of them was "The Secret - A Treasure Hunt," which editor Byron Preiss said sold 28,000 copies and was "a modest success."

Preiss, who now runs the e-book Web site www.ibooks.net, said he buried all the treasures in 1982. He also made up the verses, which he thought would be easily unraveled. "I made it as hard as I could," he said. "I thought it would be found in a week."

He was wrong. Ten of the 12 casques Preiss buried 22 years ago remain hidden. One was found in Chicago the year after "The Secret" was published. This spring, Saddle Brook attorney Brian Zinn unearthed a second treasure in Cleveland. So "The Secret" still offers treasure hunters plenty of challenges.

Not so for "Masquerade." In 1982, the golden hare - worth \$5,400 - was dug up in Bedfordshire, north of London, near a statue of Catherine of Aragon.

Six years later, it was revealed that the hare's finder had collaborated with the author's former girlfriend, who knew where the treasure was buried. Fans of the book were crushed, especially because two legitimate treasure hunters had solved the puzzle the right way, using the book's clues, but Williams read their solution only after the cheater had been declared the winner.

The old way of sleuthing in libraries has changed with the Internet, whose Web sites link aficionados and whose search engines can help untangle obscure clues in seconds.

Among Web sites devoted to armchair treasure hunters:

* www.quest4treasure.co.uk, a British site with sections for assorted hunts, including one devoted to "The Secret."

* www.treasureclub.net, the site of the Armchair Treasure Hunt Club, an English group founded in 1992 by a puzzle author.

*<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/mparry/treasure/>, a personal site of puzzler Mark Parry. It lists many links to hunts.

*www.armchair-treasure-hunt.com/, the Armchair Treasure Hunt Resource site. This British site lists all current armchair treasure hunts plus background information on the genre.

In February, a new treasure-hunt book surfaced, "The Whistle Pig," written under the pseudonym Duck Miller. Its 10 short stories give clues to an "unmistakable key hidden on accessible public property" somewhere in the United States. The book has a Web site: www.thewhistlepig.net.

By MERRY FIRSCHEIN, STAFF WRITER

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