

A prize to be treasured forever and ever; Sparkling jewel is glittering payoff for dogged hunters

Merry Firschein

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Full Text:

Byline: MERRY FIRSCHEIN, STAFF WRITER

The treasure hunt is over. Brian Zinn finally got his jewel.

The Saddle Brook attorney had labored for 22 years over clues in a book called "The Secret" to discover where a ceramic casque was buried. In May, Zinn and his buddy, Andy Abrams of Wayne, found the casque in a Cleveland park.

And on Wednesday, after months of waiting, he received the grand prize hinted at in the book's clues - a sparkling aquamarine jewel.

"It was almost like finding the treasure again," Zinn said. "It was the same feeling that I got when I was about to dig for the treasure."

"The Secret," published in 1982, was one of about 20 "armchair treasure hunt" books published in that decade: elaborate stories and drawings and clues that could lead readers to a treasure of some sort buried somewhere in the world. The most famous was 1979's "Masquerade," which sold more than 1 million copies.

But "The Secret" had an extra hook. It had 12 treasures to be found. Hunters had to connect one of 12 mystical paintings with one of 12 verses of clues to figure out where in the United States the casques were buried. Successful treasure hunters could then contact book publisher Byron Preiss and collect their prize.

Zinn had been working on clues hidden in one of the book's paintings since he was in college in 1982. This past spring he connected the painting of a centaur standing on a wall with a verse of clues. He and Abrams drove out to Cleveland and spent five hours digging in the Greek Garden of the Cleveland Cultural Gardens before finding the ceramic casque.

There are 10 treasures based on the clues in "The Secret" still to be found in the United States. One was found in Chicago shortly after the book was published.

To collect the stone, Zinn and Abrams went to the Manhattan office of Preiss, who created "The Secret" when he was a writer for National Lampoon.

Wednesday afternoon, Zinn and Abrams went with Preiss to the bank vault where all the jewels are kept. Preiss dug around in the safety deposit box until he found the right little parcel, a stone wrapped in cotton and paper.

The stone's handoff was anticlimactic, Zinn said. "[Preiss] said, 'Congratulations, here is your jewel.'" he said. "And I shook his hand."

Zinn brought along the ceramic casque that he had dug out of the Cleveland garden. He had

assumed that the casque's paint had been bleached off after more than two decades in the earth.

But Preiss surprised him. "He said, oh no, no, no, the casques are not painted, except for one figure," Zinn said. "So I started counting and there were 12 figures" on the casque, one for each clue.

Zinn said he and Abrams and Preiss talked about the current searches using the clues in "The Secret," including a second one that Zinn and Abrams are working on. Two others are being conducted in other cities. But Preiss was stone-faced, and wouldn't give any hint that any of the treasure hunters were on the right track.

Zinn's going to put the small stone, which he describes as "sparkly and very clear," in either a ring or necklace for his wife, Beverly, he said. He had been hoping to have it in hand in time for their July wedding anniversary.

And though he has the jewel now, Zinn still talks happily of the Cleveland adventure. "I think that it was more thrilling before I even found the treasure, just thinking that I could find it," he said. "I think that the people looking for the jewels are having the best time that you could have in this hunt, trying to solve this puzzle.

"The real thrill is in the hunt."

CAPTION(S):

PHOTO - CARMINE GALASSO / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER - Take a close look. Saddle Brook attorney Brian Zinn holding his prize for finding a buried treasure. He had tried for years to discover where a ceramic casque was buried. In May, Zinn and a friend found the hidden casque. On Wednesday he got the prize - a small but sparkling aquamarine jewel.

By MERRY FIRSCHEIN, STAFF WRITER

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