# THE SECRET

## Treasure of the Fair People - Waiting to be Discovered

### By Scott Eyman

As a kid, Byron Preiss went to summer camps, where he thought the neatest thing in the world was to devise treasure hunts. He would lead counselors and kids on a merry chase through the forests in search of a buried prize of incalculable value — an old Frankie Valli album — wrapped in a shell of pearl-like beauty — a Lay's potato chip bag.

Preiss, co-author of "Dragonworld," a best selling trade paperback of 1981, author of the authorized biography of the Beach Boys and a writer of children's books, has now found a way to continue his love of the hunt into adulthood.

His new project, which he conceived, co-wrote and produced (a euphemism for someone who packages and sells a book to a publisher) is "The Secret," which is the first followup to "Masquerade," Kit Williams' mystifying challenge to readers the world over (500,000 copies sold) to find the location of a gold *objet d'art* he had made and buried.

The 12 color paintings in "The Secret" that serve as a compendium of visual clues were done by Cleveland artist John Jude Palencar, whose work has been seen occasionally in the Plain Dealer Magazine as well as in Ohio Magazine.

The talent the 29-year-old Preiss enlisted for "The Secret" worked on speculation for a year until the project was sold to Bantam Books. Besides Palencar, Preiss hired Sean Kelly and Ted Mann of the National Lampoon to write two-thirds of the book, sculptress Jo Ellen Trilling, two other illustrators and a photographer, nine people working for two years on a project that is, in several senses of the word, speculative.

Briefly, "The Secret" posits the existence of the Fair People, another of those ubiquitous tribes of fairies and elves that have so freely spawned between covers and on film and TV screens since the rediscovery of J.R.R. Tolkien.

The Fair People migrated to this continent more than 300 years ago and then went into hiding when the territory got too crowded. Before they disappeared, they buried their treasure, 12 hand-painted chests which unaccountably look like something you might win for 150 skee-ball tickets. Each chest is buried in a different location — 11 in America, one in Canada. Each chest is sealed in a lucite box, buried not deeper than 3½ feet and each contains only a key. The key represents jewels which will be sent to whoever deciphers the clues in Palencar's paintings and Preiss' verses and finds a chest. The aggregate value of the jewels is $10,000.

Luck is not involved; the logic in determining the locations of the chests is not random. There is, according to Preiss, an interlocking set of patterns.

The treasure seekers who win the prizes get to keep the jewels; their photos and the story of how they analyzed the location of "The Secret" will appear in the book's next edition.

Preiss buried the chests a year ago. Ostensibly, he's the only one who knows everything, although Palencar gets an odd gleam in his eyes when the talk turns to treasure locations. If only from picking up hints during the brainstorming sessions — Preiss flying to Cleveland, the two of them dreaming up the Fair People over coffee at Denny's — Palencar may very well know *almost* everything.

"I am sincerely worried that the puzzle might be cracked too easily," Preiss says. "If all the chests are found a month from now, the book is in big trouble."

For John Palencar, there are fewer worries. Even if the book is not a smash success (Bantam Books reports that break-even for the $9.95 paperback will be about 50,000 copies) it represents a commercial breakthrough for the 25-year-old artist who sleeps during the day and works all night.

Palencar's work combines the vivid colors and mystical, other-wordly beauty of Maxfield Parrish with the inconographic muscularity of N.C. Wyeth or Howard Pyle. Byron Preiss first saw Palencar's work at a gallery in New York three years ago, and says that, while there are a few artists in England who could have done "The Secret," Palencar was the only American with the requisite light touch.

"I liked the subject matter of the book," says the bearded, chain-smoking Palencar. "And I liked the opportunity for some national exposure. And I *really* liked the challenge of the project, the devious aspects of puzzle-making. First, you have to match the right verse with the right picture. Where the verse leaves off, the painting may begin.

"What was nice about it was that I could do it without apology. I'm one of those people whose heart has to be in what they're doing. I just can't do paintings of tractors or bars of soap, and it's not that I didn't try. I worked in an agency for a while and it just about drove me nuts.

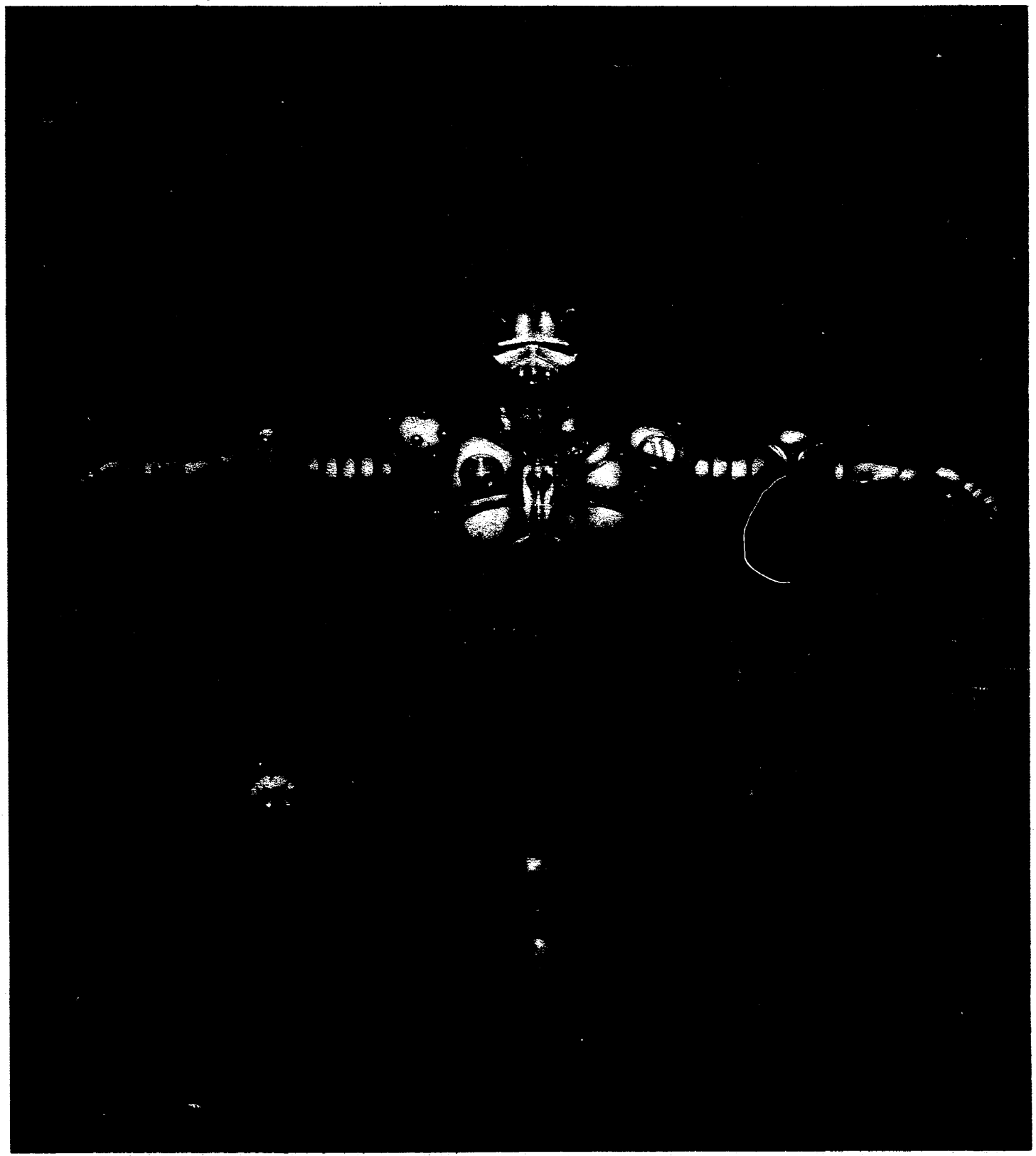
"Working on the book was not unlike working on a top-secret movie set. I only had full knowledge of my particular area, and even then I was constantly having to put things into the paintings that I didn't know the meaning of."

"The Secret" may be the first intentionally schizophrenic trade paperback, the schizophrenia a function of its structure. The first third of the book is a straight telling of the saga of the Fair People, and the clues to their treasure, with all the laborious whimsy that people evidently expect from elves and fairies.

Mercifully, the last two-thirds of the book is a field-spotter's guide to the descendants of the Fair People, who turn out to be all the people who make life irritating.

"I felt," says Preiss, "that we had to tell the story straight at the beginning, but that the book as a whole would be easier to swallow if it was funny."

It's funny, all right. There is, for instance, the Maitre D'eamon, the loathsome headwaiter, the man whose highest calling is to give his victims an evening they will never forget. The Maitre D'eamon is the one who first insists that you have to wait at the bar with three drunken salesmen for an hour before he finds you your table ... by the kitchen door. He sees to it that when your meal finally arrives, it looks and tastes like something not even a carp would ▶



One of the treasure clue illustrations by John Jude Palencar in "The Secret."

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touch. Of course, the restaurant does not take credit cards and certainly not cash. Krugerrands, however, are just fine.

Then there's the Screaming Mimi, a squalling brat masquerading as a baby who infests any public occasion with her shrieks. "Although hideously audible . . . the Screaming Mimi appears to members of its own family as a sweet chirping cherub."

There are others, not the least of them the Post Monster General ("When a pizza store owner in California receives a personal note of condolence from Isadora Duncan . . . you can be sure that the Post Monster General has been on his self-appointed rounds"). Nor can you overlook the Job Goblin, the patron poltergeist of the blue collar worker who has given him an incurable case of sloth and an unending desire for terrible country music. Attention also should be paid to the Tupperwerewolves, who cause us to be boring.

But of all the dreaded manifestations of the Fair People's descendants, the most insidious are unquestionably the Hounds of News. These sadly degenerate creatures hunt in packs and their sensitive noses are not merely attuned to locker rooms, wire terminals or easy-to-rewrite stories in rival publications, but to any free lunch. They can be spotted at waterholes by their giveaway whines, conversation that is invariably more succinct than anything they might happen to write: "Hemingway — what a blowhard! John McPhee? That phony nature boy . . . Rather? Can't write a word . . . "

Sean Kelly and Ted Mann's field guide functions on several levels. It's good, sharp satire, and it also serves as a healthy anodyne to the processed sentimentality of what precedes it.

"I was concerned about that section because I didn't want it to read like a Lampoon article," admits Preiss. "I tried to tone down the outrageousness, the vulgarity, and keep it more social and accessible. I mean, *everybody* has been tormented by somebody else's bawling baby, right?"

In a sense, "The Secret" is a conscious attempt at a book that offers something for everyone. Laughs, fine art, a simulacrum of a minor media event that was a genuine reflection of one man's eccentric creativity. It's a reader-active book that functions as an off-shoot of computer games. You don't just sit there and read it and think about what you have read. You are invited to contribute "your own sightings of Fair People" for a later edition. You play the thing, and if you solve the mystery, you become part of the Secret, become part of the saga. It's not a book so much as it is a pretentious "Highlights for Children."

Win, lose or draw with "The Secret," Preiss already is off on his next several projects: a book version of Richard Attenborough's new film on the life of Gandhi, and a project with John Palencar entitled "The Illustrated Fritz Leiber."

While he's waiting for the contracts on the latter, Palencar is doing cover art for science fiction paperbacks, living with his parents and saving money for the inevitable move east.

"It'll be tough," muses Palencar. "I'm a pretty organic personality; I keep a messy studio and all that. So I'll need a fairly decent sized apartment. I mean, who wants to sleep in the same room where they work? What's got me worried is the rental prices. Have you checked out New York rentals lately? Outrageous, man, just outrageous!" ■

Photo by Ben Asen

Photo by Tom Simon

Clevelander John Jude Palencar did 12 color paintings for "The Secret." Inset photo: Byron Preiss co-wrote and produced the trade paperback.