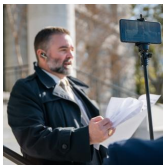




MORE VICE

ADVERTISEMENT

MORE FROM **TRAVEL**



These Right-Wing Californians Are So Pissed Off They Want to Secede



Harry Potter Tourism Is Ruining Edinburgh



Partying with Sumo Wrestlers Almost Killed Me

The 35-Year-Long Hunt to Find a Fantasy Author's Hidden Treasure

The treasures were hidden in 1981 by publisher Byron Preiss, as part of his plan to promote his new book, 'The Secret.' So far, only two of the 12 treasures have been recovered.

SHARE

TWEET

Zach Brooke

May 31 2016, 11:00pm



MORE VICE



Lake Park, Milwaukee, where many believe one of the hidden casques is buried. Photo via Wikimedia Commons

There is a treasure buried somewhere in Milwaukee. Not just in Milwaukee, but in nine other North American locations, including (possibly) New York, San



MORE VICE

The treasures were hidden in 1981 by publisher Byron Preiss, as part of his plan to promote his new book, **The Secret**. Preiss's fantasy paperback (which predated the identically titled self-help book by a quarter of a century) included a series of puzzles in the form of cryptic verses with matching images. If solved, they'd lead readers to a real-life ceramic bin, or "casque," containing a key to a safe-deposit box, which held a gem worth roughly \$1,000.

The contest was inspired by a similar book—*Masquerade* by Kit Williams, published in 1979—which offered a golden rabbit figurine to any reader who could decipher its location from clues in the text. The challenge remained a popular mystery until it was solved in March 1982, less than 90 days after the release of *The Secret*, and helped spawn a literary genre known as "armchair treasure hunts."

While *The Secret* never sold as many copies as *Masquerade*, it did achieve a cult-like status among a dedicated group of puzzle solvers. Within months, 700 people wrote to Preiss claiming to know the location of the bins. It wasn't until the following year that a casque was actually recovered by three teenagers in Chicago's Grant Park.

"We didn't really care who found the treasure, we just wanted to solve the puzzle." — *Brian Zinn*

The next puzzle wasn't solved until 2004, when an attorney named Brian Zinn tracked down a casque in Cleveland from a verse that mentioned Socrates, Pindar, and Apelles (all three names are etched into a pylon at the Cleveland Cultural Gardens). After four hours of digging holes, he found the casque buried next to a wall marking the perimeter of the gardens.



MORE VICE

publication. I don't think he realized how difficult the poems were," said James Renner, an author and filmmaker who's working on a documentary about the book.

ADVERTISEMENT

Preiss died in a 2005 car crash at age 52, and never disclosed the locations of the remaining casques. His publishing house went bankrupt and was acquired by a rival press. Many people viewed the sale as the last chance to redeem the gems, suggesting now, there may only be empty bins.

But 35 years later, people are still searching.



MORE VICE



John 'Michaels' Pivonka, one of the dedicated 'Secret' treasure hunters. Photo by the author

After Zinn's big discovery, an army of armchair treasure hunters began congregating online, mainly on the forum quest4treasure.co.uk. For years, the group worked en masse to tease locations from the vague hints in the pictures and text. Forum members living near potential burial sites delved into local history for insights and, for many, it became an obsession.

"We didn't really care who found the treasure, we just wanted to solve the puzzle," Zinn told VICE. "So we were posting all of our ideas freely on the internet for all of us to see."

Related: The Heyday of Treasure Hunting Might be at Hand

John "Michaels" Pivonka, a Milwaukee-based audio engineer who got involved in the hunt a few years ago, became one of the forum's most active users.



MORE VICE

Pivonka teamed up with another Milwaukee area searcher, Betsy Grueninger, to scout real-world locations. When they felt they were getting close, they scoured the image archives of the Milwaukee Historical Society. Eventually, they even rented a ground-penetrating radar device to scan potential burial sites.



MORE VICE



[MORE VICE](#)

connections to the city: There's a towering building capped by two spires, the outline of which is an exact match for **Milwaukee City Hall**. The foreground depicts a cloaked juggler tossing a millstone, a walking stick, and a key, alleged to be a rebus puzzle spelling out Milwaukee. The unnatural position of the juggler's hands even mimics a prominent bronze relief of Milwaukee's founder, Solomon Juneau.

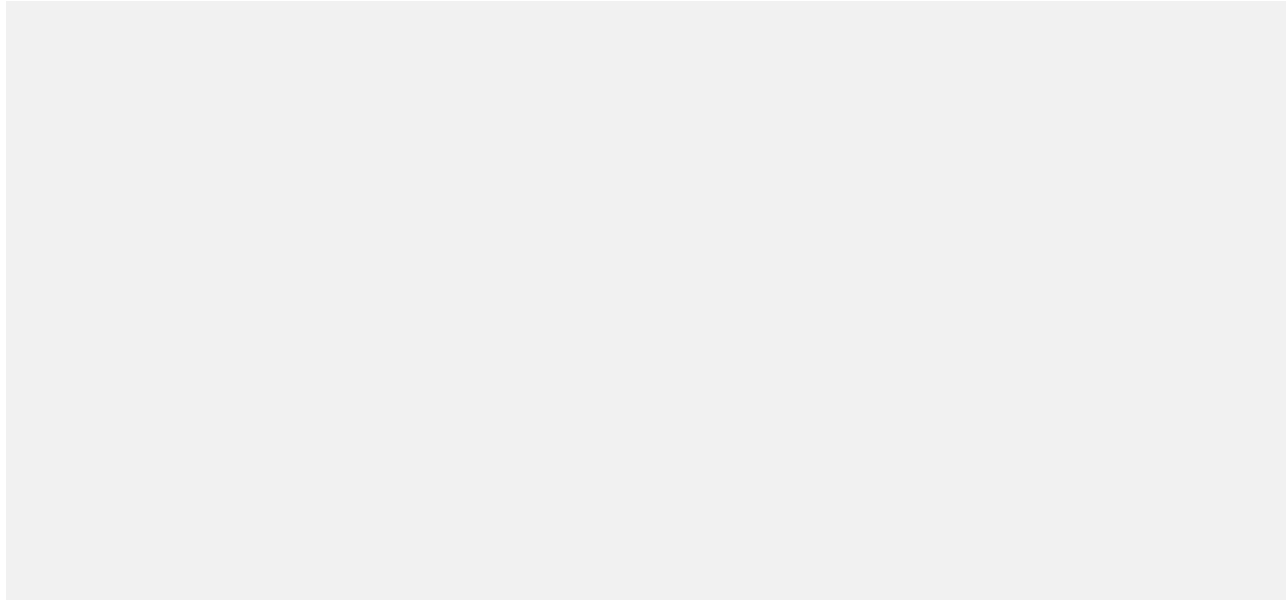
And then there's verse eight, which tells the reader to, "ascend the 92 steps." Most searchers take it as a reference to the **Grand Staircase** in the city's Lake Park area, which has exactly 92 steps.

ADVERTISEMENT

Pivonka's team found a dazzling array of less obvious, circumstantial evidence linking both the juggler image and verse eight to Lake Park, including a map of a park footpath outlined in the juggler's hand and a distinctive three-trunk mulberry tree woven into the folds of the juggler's cape. With Grueninger, Pivonka created and buried a replica casque in order to determine if it could be picked up by metal detectors. It could. But so far, no treasure.



MORE VICE



The replica casque, created by Betsy Grueninger and John 'Michaels' Pivonka. Photo by the author

Part of the problem is the passage of time. It's easy to think of a park as a static space, but the area has undergone a significant transformation since Preiss supposedly buried a casque within its confines. Paths have been rerouted. Ravines have been redeveloped and statues restored. The ecology, too, has changed dramatically: Insects are destroying nearly all the park's elm trees, and the early effects of climate change are altering the range of species that find this area habitable. Part of verse eight refers to a "young birch," which, if referring to a tree, would now be well into maturity, if it still exists at all.

Related: [Searching for Forrest Fenn's Gold](#)

And then there's the question of permission. Pivonka claims he dug a dozen times near the mulberry tree until one day he was stopped by a park official who told him he needed a right of entry permit.

To this day, the local parks department is irritated, if not openly hostile, to attempts to look for the casque, worried that treasure hunters will damage the park in their pursuits.



MORE VICE

"It should never have been buried there in the first place," said Kevin Haley, a landscape architect with the Milwaukee County Department of Parks, in an interview with VICE. Haley is in charge of granting right of entry permits to would-be searchers. He hasn't given out any yet.

That's not to say he wouldn't. He'd rather have the casque found and publicized so people will quit digging without authorization, and he's open to granting a permit to anyone that can convince him he or she has found a good spot to dig. So far, those who've approached have requested wildly different dig locations, which hasn't inspired confidence in him that it will ever be found.

"I'm not convinced that it's even still there," Haley said, suggesting a casque would have been destroyed or removed by one of the park's many renovations over the last 35 years.

Others find the whole thing very annoying. "It's just a gimmick for somebody to play games" said Gil Walters, a member of the community organization Friends of Lake Park, in an interview with VICE. "I don't want a hundred people coming in here with their spades digging around hoping they find something that's very valuable in terms of prestige."

"Out of all the things I've done, nothing in the last ten years has got me as excited or as involved personally as this." — John

[MORE VICE](#)

Despite the many obstacles blocking the expedition and recovery of the remaining ten casques, few of the searchers seem ready to give up.

ADVERTISEMENT

"Believe me, there are so many times where I've thrown this thing down and I said, 'I'm never going to do this,'" Pivonka told VICE. "And then a couple weeks later, a team member says, 'Oh, hey, we found this.' And you're right back in it."

"I think part of the fun of it, at least from Byron Preiss's point of view, is he knows that people would have to sneak around to dig up these things, sort of like an Indiana Jones-type of thing," Zinn said. "Unfortunately, we live in a different world today. I don't know if I can make a case as to why we should be allowed to dig because I don't know if that case really exists."

As for the gems, which were believed to be confiscated in bankruptcy proceeding after Preiss's death, Preiss's widow Sandi Mendelson told VICE they're safely in her possession and will be available to the first people to recover the remaining casques.

"If somebody would find something, yes," said Mendelson. "I haven't done anything with them, so they're still around."

Follow Zach Brooke on [Twitter](#).



SHARE

TWEET

TAGGED: [VICE US](#), [BOOKS](#), [LIFESTYLE](#), [ODDITIES](#), [EVERGREEN](#), [TREASURE](#), [THE SECRET](#), [LITERATURE](#), [TREASURE HUNTER](#), [VICE BLOG](#), [ATRAVEL](#), [AEXPLORE](#), [BURIED TREASURE](#), [BYRON PREISS](#), [ARMCHAIR TREASURE HUNT](#)