This touring troll has a gem of a 'Secret'

Author sends readers on a treasure hunt

By IRA RIFKIN
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If Byron Preiss were a mythological creature of the sort found in his book "The Secret," he might be called the Touring Author Troll.

And in keeping with the format of "The Secret," certain information concerning the range, habits, history and tips for spotting the creature would also be provided about the Touring Author Troll.

The range of the troll, for example, would include seven cities coast-to-coast in an equal number of days or less and the rooms of Beverly Hills' better hotels. To spot this creature, one should keep an eye out for the all-pervasive publicist and the ubiquitous interviewer. As for his history, the troll obviously would be a direct descendant of the Guttenberg Gnome and the Madison Avenue Satyr.

The troll's habits would include being able to talk unceasingly — and seemingly sincerely — about his book for days on end while always being aware of what looks best in print. Pat answers to redundant questions is one of this fellow's prime habits.

"Another of my habits would be to try to put a book under as many pillows as possible every night in the hope they would turn to money in the morning," Preiss adds, self-mockingly.

Preiss was more than willing the other day to make fun of himself during a local stop in the midst of just the sort of whirlwind publisher's publicity tour he joked about. Poking fun at many of the human types, habits and institutions collectively known as Americana is, after all, a large part of what "The Secret" is about.

But the book, as its title makes clear, also has a good deal more to it — something mysterious, something waiting to be discovered.

What the mystery is are the locations of more than $10,000 in precious stones hidden in 12 spots around the country and just waiting to be discovered by readers of "The Secret." That part of the story, Preiss insisted, is for real.

Who supposedly hid the jewels, however, is the fantasy part of the story. The treasures, according to "The Secret," were hidden by the Fair People, the elves, fairies, trolls, nymphs, satyrs, gnomes and other mythological creatures of the Old World.

But there is more. It seems that the descendants of Fair People exist today unbeknownst to most of us. They pop up everywhere and anywhere and in various unlikely guises, such as the Touring Author Troll.

Daily News photo by Lori Valesko

Author Byron Preiss always travels with his soft-sculptured descendants of the Fair People, as depicted in his book "The Secret."

That, Preiss added, is the whimsical aspect of "The Secret," as well as the authors' opportunity to humorously twit those types, habits and institutions they believe are in need of a little needling.

"Mythology always teaches a lesson," said Preiss, who also co-authored the fantasy book "Dragonworld" and recently completed a book on Mahatma Gandhi that will be released in conjunction with the upcoming feature film on the life of the Indian leader.

Preiss views "The Secret" (Bantam Books; $9.95) as not only a book, but also as a game that everyone can play. In fact, he is hoping readers will contribute the ideas that go into the making of a sequel to "The Secret."

"The book was built around the idea of creating an American mythology. Despite Johnny Appleseed and a few others, a full-blown American mythology doesn't exist. There was a Native American mythology here at one time, but that was destroyed," explained the 29-year-old Preiss, who conceived, produced and edited "The Secret."

"The basic idea is, what if the Fair People from all the lands of the Old World fled to the New World because mankind destroyed their habitats? And what if, once here, they intermarried?"

In "The Secret," Preiss and writers Sean Kelly and Ted Mann, both editors at National Lampoon, tell the tale of why and how the Fair People emigrated from the Old World to the New and how their dreams of a natural environment on this side of the Atlantic were destroyed by the same humans that forced them to move in the first place.

In an effort to get mankind to desist destroying the world, the Fair People hid their precious jewels — pearls, opals, diamonds, topaz, amethysts, turquoise, sapphires and the like — and provided clues that, the book notes, only humans who are good, kind and playful will be able to decipher.

In the book, the clues are contained in verses written by Preiss and his co-authors and fanciful paintings by John Palencar.

"The treasures are actually stashed within driving distance of most people in this country,"

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...by the company foster good human relations is not. work things out instead of getting even."

Preiss treasures his 'Secret' fantasy

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Preiss said. "They can be found with patience and wit and by being good. And by that we mean only doing it the way it is supposed to be done, not how you think it should be."

Readers are not required to actually go to the suspected location of a treasure to claim it. Instead, they can win the prize by correctly describing its location on a form contained in "The Secret."

(A few years ago in Great Britain, a similar treasure hunt was prompted by a book titled "Masquerade." In that case, the treasure, which was found, was a jewel-and-gold-encrusted casting of a rabbit.)

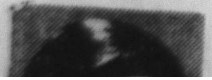
While the locations of the hidden gems may be the most enthralling aspect of "The Secret," perhaps the most beguiling aspect of the book is the descriptions of the descendants of the Fair People.

Included among them are:

- The Ritch Doctor, whose range, the book notes, includes the territory bounded by the first and 19th hole and the vicinity of no-parking signs in front of French restaurants.
- The Job Goblin, whose sacred days are Labor Day, sick days, travel days, pay days and half days, and whose greatest creation is "Joe X, a New Jersey longshoreman who collects workman's compensation in addition to his regular salary for a lower back injury he sustained while lifting the phone to call in sick to a no-show job."
- The Gnome Enclature, the spirit of language "who sees to it that there are sufficient synonyms so that two people may discuss the same topic without understanding one another." This creature can be spotted in the vicinity of speech writers, disc jockeys, game show hosts, doctors, social scientists and grant writing specialists, among others.
- The Filthy Hobbit, whose range includes areas specifically designated as no smoking zones and who may be spotted by listening for a "hollow, bitter laugh that sounds, curiously, not unlike a coughing fit." You can also be sure this hobbit is near when you spot that desperate look in the eyes of a man patting all his pockets, or a waste basket bursting into flames.

In all, there are more than 75 descendants of the Fair People depicted in the book. Some of the descendants appear as illustrations by artists John Pierad and Overton Loyd. Others are are depicted as soft sculptures by artist Jo Ellen Trilling that were placed in habitats as varied as Henny Youngman's den and in front of the Capitol Building in Washington by photographer Ben Asen.

One more thing. If your palms are sweaty, if you already are planning how to spend the money the hidden treasure will bring you and you read all the way to the end of this story in the hope that some key clue to the whereabouts of the gems is included between these lines, watch out — you have fallen prey to that descendant of the Fair People known as the Centaur of Greed.



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