

Short Talk

The Lost Symbol released as Freemasons prepare for the "Rosslyn Effect"

On September 15 Dan Brown's new novel 'the Lost Symbol' was released. The author and publisher have been very tightlipped as to the contents and the plot. For those of the brethren present who have not heard of Dan Brown, he is the author of the Di Vinci Code and Angels and Demons.

Dan Brown's 'The Di Vinci Code' sold about 81 million copies worldwide and has been translated into about 20 or more languages. So what has all this got to do with Freemasons you ask? Well his new work of historical fiction focuses squarely on Freemasonry, to be more specific, Scottish Rite Freemasonry of the Southern jurisdiction. OK, so what you may ask. There have been a lot of books about Freemasonry written over the years and no big deal right. Well I would beg to differ.

If you had asked a group of people what they thought of the Catholic group, Opus Dei before the Di Vinci Code was released, most would have said "what, who?"

But ask those same people what they think of the same group after reading this book or seeing the subsequent movie starring Tom Hanks and you will begin to see what I mean. Here are some brief statistics about that.

Out of 1000 respondents, more than 70% never even heard of Opus Dei before reading the Di Vinci code.

Out of the 30% that had heard of the group their opinion was favorable or weren't sure.

After reading the book (or seeing the movie) that same 30% opinions of Opus Dei became negative. And remember this is a work of fiction.

Now let's say Mr. Brown's new book really stinks on ice and only sells half as well as his first book. That's still 40 million copies in print. 6.5 million are already printed and ready its release, the largest single printing in the history of Random House Publishers.

So what has that to do with us? Plenty! In the subtitle of this short talk I mention the Rosslyn Effect. Before the Di Vinci Code Rosslyn Chapel had about 40,000 visitors per year, in the years since, that number has ballooned to over 149,000 visitors per year and the same can be said for other sites mentioned in the novel. So some may say well, that's great, it boosted tourism. Well the directors at Rosslyn Chapel would beg to differ with you. Many of the 'visitors' were amateur treasure hunters thinking that they could find the real truth about the mystery presented in the book. One group even bought the land adjacent to the chapel and began to drill diagonally down into the foundation and crypts beneath the chapel. Now this is the extreme in what has been going on. While I don't expect a group of conspiracy nuts to start drilling holes in our collation room walls looking for some secret document or buried treasure, it is more likely than not that we, we as Freemasons, may be asked some awkward questions depending on how Freemasonry is depicted.

Some view this as an opportunity to boost membership, not unlike the effect that the National Treasure films had on membership nationwide. National statistics show a 7% rise in petitions directly following the release of National Treasure in 2004. Although much of the scrutiny will focus on Washington D.C. and the founding fathers, namely George Washington himself, some prominent Masonic scholars and authors have put forth the idea that we should seize the moment and be more prepared for the inevitable questions and have our 5 minute elevator speeches in order. I would tend to agree having read about the effect that novels and/or the media in general has had on the under 45 crowd in this country.

Since I have not read the book yet I cannot report on the content, but from the hints and the cover art that have been released, it seems to me that Freemasonry will once again be in the spotlight. Hopefully it will be in a more positive light than in previous years. If you are not an 'E-Mason' as much as I am, you may not have seen the resurgence of Anti-Masonic rhetoric in the last few months on the internet building a head of steam on an old time locomotive. I can assure you the Anti's are talking and jumping up and down anticipating this new novel's release. So this can either be a boon or another black eye for the Fraternity depending on how it's handled on a local level.

So what do we do next? The following is excerpted from Bro. Christopher Hodapp's, author of *Freemasons for Dummies* and several other publications about Freemasonry, website.

The next step is to make a plan of action. Start by figuring out your elevator speech about what Freemasonry is. Here is mine:

"Freemasonry is the world's largest, oldest, and best-known gentleman's fraternal organization. Mythically descended from the builders of King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, Freemasonry is believed to have developed from the craft guilds of European stonemasons who built castles and cathedrals during the Middle Ages. Modern Masonry uses the tools, symbols and terminology of the medieval masons as an allegory for building temples in the hearts of men."

Next, start getting your lodge ready.

- Read Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol* quickly after it is released. Be armed with the knowledge of what's in it.
- Know what to say when someone asks you who and what the Freemasons are. Remember that YOU are someone's image of Freemasonry. And for heaven's sake, *"Don't tell them what a Shriner is when they ask you who the Masons are."*

- Begin now to paint, clean, repair and redecorate your lodge. If it is a tumbledown disgrace, no one will knock on your door.
- Make sure your lodge has a website, and that it is up to date. Announcing your 1998 roast beef supper and bingo night will have exactly the opposite effect of what you are probably hoping for.
- Likewise, make sure there is signage on your lodge building directing people either to your website or to a phone contact, along with stating the nights and times of your regular meetings. How can a man ask to join if he doesn't know who to ask?
- Be sure to have someone in your lodge who can communicate well designated as your lodge spokesman, should the press come calling. It doesn't HAVE to be your WM or Secretary. He will be the public face of your lodge, so make sure he can speak well, think on their feet, and communicate accurate information. Newspapers and local TV stations will be calling lodges looking for their comments on *The Lost Symbol*, Freemasonry in general and possibly on anti-Masonic topics. If your lodge doesn't have someone to fit the bill, tell the press to contact grand lodge.
- Avoid cute answers like, "We have no secrets except a few funny handshakes." We DO have secrets, which can only be discovered by each individual as they progress through the degrees. We DO have secrets involving methods of recognition that allow one brother to recognize another in the darkness as well as the light. It's okay to keep the Craft mysterious. It is not a bad thing to say "I can't tell you that."
- Men of all ages will be seeking truthful information, and in many cases will know more about the fraternity than many of our own members. Direct them to factual books and most important, tell them the truth, within the bounds of your obligation.

- Avoid canned sloganeering like "We make good men better ones" or "2B1ASK1." Avoid canned statistics like "Freemasons give \$3 million a day to charity." No we don't. (The bulk of that figure, \$2.5 million a day, is income generated for the Shrine by its existing foundation, in case you ever wondered.) We are not a charity or a religion—we encourage men to be charitable and true to their own faith. We are not a community service group—we encourage men to be better servants to their communities. We're not a business network—we are a band of brothers.

Every single lodge is going to have an increase in petitioners as a result of "The Lost Symbol." Be aware of the ramifications of this increase.

- Investigate each and every petitioner thoroughly. That does not mean asking "Does he have a pulse?" or "Did his check cash?" It DOES mean asking serious questions as to why he wants to join. The investigation committee is his first contact with your lodge. Handle it professionally. Be sure you know why he's joining, what he expects, and answer his questions as well. Do not let him be misled as to what Freemasonry is.
- There is no rule that says every man who knocks on the door of your lodge should become a Mason, or a Mason at your lodge. If he's not suitable, turn him away. However, if he just isn't a good fit for your lodge, make it your job to find a lodge he would be happy in. Giving a man a bad experience before he joins or after he's a member creates a man who will badmouth the fraternity the rest of his life.
- Haven't had much degree work lately? You will now! Start making sure NOW that your lodge is capable of putting on the very best ritual work possible. Don't like the idea of sending candidates to one day classes? NOBODY DOES. There's only one way to end one day classes. Find a way to put on the degrees PROPERLY in your own lodge. If you can't, band together with lodges in your area and create a degree team. HELP EACH

OTHER. Visit back and forth, and form strong bonds with other lodges. It's a part of that brotherhood thing.

In conclusion; nobody knows what effect this novel will have on Freemasonry or more specifically local lodges. It stands to reason that any attention that may be brought about due to this novel could be made to work to our advantage. The following references are for furthering your knowledge on these subjects and maybe in answering questions of others you just may learn a thing or two yourself, and that's what it's really all about, isn't it? More light!

Update: Some early reviews on the book are in. It seems Freemasonry will be depicted in a positive light. Here is one such review:

Just finished the book tonight. It is literally a gushing 500 page love letter to Freemasonry. I do not exaggerate.

Brown does have fun with Masonic internet claims (map in the street of DC, Star of David on the dollar that spells "MASON"), and the GW Masonic Memorial has a brief cameo. He also ridicules the wildest claims commonly made by anti-Masons. In fact (and I do not want to spoil anything here), one of the principal fears in the story involves the negative perception the ignorant public might get by misinterpreting Masonic ritual.

The shame is his "thriller" part of the story degenerates into a sort of *Red Dragon* meets *Dr. Phibes*. And then its climax happens 35 pages before the end of the book. However, the surprising aspect is how intelligent the last chapters of the book are, with a fascinating philosophical conclusion that explains Masonic philosophy concerning faith better than many Masonic books you've read. And he gives a twist to the meaning of "The Lost Word."

As an added bonus, Brown will make you want to visit Washington.

Bro. Chris Hodapp

Websites:

<http://www.freemasonlostsymbol.com> - A joint project by The Masonic Society, The Masonic Service Association of North America (MSANA) and the George Washington Masonic Memorial in Alexandria, Virginia.

This website has a wealth of information and suggested reading lists for Masons and non-masons alike looking for more information about the Craft. It will be updated regularly after the book is available and as questions about it arise.