

Unlocking the mystery of a not-so-secret society

Humber Masonic Lodge opens its doors to counter controversy ignited by Dan Brown's latest work of fiction.

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For a 'secret society' of best-selling proportions, the Freemasons sure aren't doing a lot to hide - in fact; they're doing just the opposite in the wake of the release of Dan Brown's latest exposé cum thriller novel.

In *The Lost Symbol*, which sold more than a million copies on its first day, Freemasonry is used as the shrouded backdrop of symbolry and allegory through which hero professor Robert Langdon must navigate in order to find a hidden pyramid and unlock the "Ancient Mysteries" concealed within for the evil Freemason hell-bent on becoming God who kidnapped his good friend.



Grand Master Raymond S. J. Daniels and District Deputy Grand Master Andrew J. Turk of the Humber Masonic Lodge stand by the altar adorned with a "Volume of the Sacred Law" in the Weston Temple.

Stirring much controversy and sending conspiracy theorists worldwide into a frenzy of online attempts to uncover the dark 'secrets' of the society, even the book's release date, Sept. 15 (or 09/15/09), led to widespread speculation as to a secret Masonic meaning, adding up, as the numbers do, to 33 - the highest degree of membership to which Freemasons can honorarily achieve.

But Grand Master Raymond S.J. Daniels, a 33rd degree member himself who oversees more than 50,000 masons in 571 lodges in Ontario's 44 districts, said that much of the recent speculation surrounding the Freemasons is unfounded, especially the contention that they're a secret society. To prove his point, he even went so far as to throw wide open the doors at the Weston Temple at Humber Masonic Lodge to The Guardian news staff for a tour, and some explanations recently.

"The first thing everyone says is that we're a secret society. But I'm here, I invited you here, there's a sign outside indicating what we are, and we're listed in the phone book. If we wanted to be a secret society, we sure aren't going about it in the right way, are we?" he said.

In light of the public relations nightmare created by the closed door mentality of the Catholic Church in the wake of the release of Brown's *The DaVinci Code*, Daniels said the Freemasons - or at least the Canadian ones - wanted to be as open as possible, lest the proliferation of misinformation spread even further.

"After (DaVinci), the Catholic Church made the biggest mistake and closed themselves off. That just made people think 'what are they trying to hide?'" he said, noting that he, unlike the more cautious American Grand Lodge, thus thought of The Lost Symbol's release as an opportunity rather than a threat.

"Misinformation and conspiracy theories sell, but you can't read a novel or watch a movie or go online to learn the truth about us. If you want to know, ask a Mason."

The first question asked of Daniels and Andrew J. Turk, the District Deputy Grand Master of Toronto Humber Valley, is just what the masons are all about.

If one were to take in the symbol-rich surroundings within the double-doored enclave of the Weston Masonic Temple's inner sanctum without proper context, it would be easy to plunge the room into literary darkness and envision the eerie initiation ceremony Brown described in the prologue to The Lost Symbol.

A wooden altar, topped with the "Volume of Sacred Law" (which could be any number of books, from the Torah to the Bible to the Qur'an, depending on the faith background of the initiate), lies in the middle of the room, surrounded on all sides by seating lining the walls. The altar is flanked on three of its corners by pedestals topped with lights from the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian periods, representing wisdom, strength and beauty. A floating "G" hovers from above, standing for both geometry and God. Even the carpet that covers the room's floor is emblazoned with the telltale Masonic Square and Compasses - the stonemason's tools and implements dating back to the building of King Solomon's Temple.

But unlike the initiation ceremony detailed by Brown, both Daniels and Turk contend that nothing bordering on the occult has ever occurred in their presence within a Masonic Temple.

"To preface the book, Brown says that all rituals detailed in the book do exist, but what he fails to mention is that he's taken a bit from here and a bit from there. Take the initiation ritual at the beginning of the book, in this lodge, no one has ever drunk blood-red wine out of a human skull," Daniels said with a laugh, denying the initiation rite described by Brown. "The bottom line is, everything is deeply symbolic...we're not building King Solomon's temple, we're building a temple that is ourselves."

"The rituals are not painful, they're not demeaning. This is a fraternal organization, and our rituals are meant to leave you almost with the same feeling as if you've gone to church," Turk added.

The Weston Masonic Temple, which has been located at 2040 Weston Rd. since 1924, today boasts 125 members with a waiting list of 12 prospective members yet to be initiated - making it one of the top three lodges in Ontario.

Turk said that in recent days he's been touring two prospective initiates a week - men who are drawn, unsolicited, to the Masons for their philosophy over theology approach to spiritualism.

"Our new initiates are telling me they like the idea of spirituality, they like the idea of God and of knowing their creator, but they're not fond of the indoctrination of church. What they're looking for is a level of spirituality you just can't get anywhere else these days - we don't offer salvation, we're teaching our own brand of spirituality," he said.

To join the Mason's, though, is a somewhat rigorous procedure. First of all, no member is ever invited or solicited to join, but must seek out a Mason of his own accord. Then, they are often encouraged to go to their local lodge, to talk to a Mason about what the fraternity is all about. Should they wish to continue, a petition is filled out, promising that the applicant expects no monetary gain from membership. A three-member interview with the man and his family follows, along with an investigation into his past moral conduct (no one with a criminal record need apply) and if the results are favourable, a ballot goes out to every member of the lodge. Only once the initiate has gained the confidence of his brethren, can a man be initiated.

And only then can the true secrets of Freemasonry be revealed, Daniels said, describing the brotherhood as self-development in a five stage process - self examination, self discovery, self analysis, self realization and self fulfillment.

"We initiate 1,300 men a year in Ontario, and many of them are young men who are well-educated and well-informed, but are looking for something they can't find in society today in a time when there's little stability at work or in the home. There are very few trustworthy role models out there who can provide that continuity, stability and spirituality these men want and need. We're not saying we can find that for them, but we can point them in the right direction - the best part of the experience is sharing it," he said.

"We have that bond, and that's the real secret Freemasonry. It can't be put into words. It can't be explained. It must be experienced."

Note: At the time of publishing, this article was available on the web at the following address.

<http://www.insidetoronto.com/news-story/44617-unlocking-the-mystery-of-a-not-so-secret-society/>