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Freemasons: Fact vs. Fiction

By M.J. STEPHEY Tuesday, Sep. 15, 2009



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Search *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for the word *Freemasons* and an unusual though not entirely unexpected result pops up: the entry for *scapegoats*. The secretive organization that once counted George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Voltaire among its ranks has been a favorite target for conspiracy theorists since the 17th century, when Masonic lodges first spread across Europe. Now best-selling novelist Dan Brown has taken aim at the group's cultlike reputation in his latest book, *The Lost Symbol* — a fact that comes as no surprise to author Jay Kinney. In his own new book, *The Masonic Myth*, Kinney attempts to dispel some of the persistent rumors about the group by explaining how he became a Freemason himself.

(See the top 10 conspiracy theories.)

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TIME: You joined the Freemasons in 2001. What made you want to get involved?

Kinney: I had been interested since the '70s, when I saw a few books about Masonry and had a lot of confusion about it. Around 2000, I said, Why not try it myself?

Masons aren't allowed to recruit people. Why is that?

They don't want you to bring in people against their will. They need to join for their own voluntary reasons.

So what are the basic requirements? Who can join?

You are given an application form to fill out, that's the first thing. You have to be male. The questions include "Do you believe in a supreme being?" It doesn't specify one particular religion, but because of the way the

rituals have evolved, it's assumed a Mason is going to have a non-specific belief in a God or deity. It also asks if you've ever been convicted of a serious crime. That is a deal breaker. The main other thing is they want confirmation that you're self-supporting, that you're not joining the Masons to mooch off the lodge.

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What was your initiation like?

When I showed up, I was put in a little preparation room beforehand that had some clothing that I was supposed to put on, and then they gave me a blindfold. The "obligation," or oath, is done at the altar in the middle of the lodge room. It's basically just a waist-high piece of furniture that has a Bible or whatever sacred text the individual has for their particular religion. Then you're walked around the lodge room, introduced to each of the main officers. You see the assembled brethren and the master of the lodge before you in his top hat. It's very traditional, early-1800s garb. And after the ritual — and this is true of all the Masonic degrees — the master recites a lecture on the group's history and symbols, memorized word for word. Those haven't changed in 200 years.

I imagine that would be a bit difficult to follow.

The language is a bit antiquated. It's almost like time travel. You realize this is almost exactly what was being done 200 years ago.

In the book's introduction, you mention how you omitted certain details.

The consensus seemed to be that the specific means Masons use to recognize each other — handshakes, the specific wording of parts of the ritual — should not be divulged. You don't want some fake Mason coming to your lodge and talking their way into your meetings.

You note that one of the darkest episodes in Masonic history led to the first-ever third U.S. political party, the Anti-Masonic Party. How did that come about?

There was a man named William Morgan who was — and there's some controversy about this — a disaffected Mason who decided to write a book on Masonic degrees. This was in 1826 in upstate New York, the frontier at the time. He was kidnapped and was never heard from after that. It appears that it was a group of Masons who abducted him. And because he was never seen again, it is possible to imagine all sorts of things that might have happened. So the reputation of Masonry took a real beating because [the incident] sort of seemed to prove people's theories — "Masons are going to kill anybody who reveals their secrets."

How did the members of your lodge react when you told them you were writing a book?

I didn't really go out of my way to publicize that I was doing it because I didn't want any undue attention. I didn't want people saying "Write about this" or "Don't write about this." I did discuss the book with a few people from my lodge, and while I was writing it, I had a number of Masons look it over to make sure I wasn't putting my foot in my mouth.

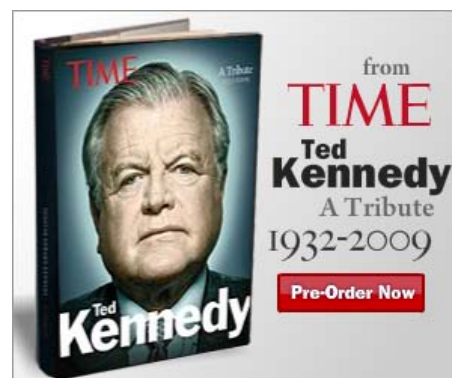
Some of the more persistent rumors about Freemasons include the notion that they're successors to the medieval Knights of Templar, that they're trying to create a New World Order and that they use symbols to communicate ancient wisdom. What was the most surprising thing you found?

That lodges are learning how to get by with fewer members and fewer resources. There was a certain cachet in ages past. But the overall membership has really been aging. There's a real attrition rate now. If it's going to survive at all, it has to turn that around.

So if Freemasons aren't busy running the world, what exactly is it that they do?

The outer mission is to be of service to the greater community, donating to charities and Masonic youth groups, like the Order of DeMolay for boys and Rainbow Girls, which encourage kids to be good citizens and give them social circles that are supervised by adults and are more positive than hanging out on street corners. The organization is also based on a kind of stoic philosophy, to become the master of your own passions — don't fall prey to your emotions, to anger — and to have a sort of balanced perspective on life.

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There's also a set phrase: "We're in the business of taking good men and making them better." I don't particularly care for that slogan. I mean, how do you make them better?

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