

[HOME](#) > [NEWS](#) > [NATION](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



David Somers and, at left, the diamond-encrusted beetle.

Scientific sleuth cracks code to \$54,000 treasure

The Boston Globe

BU professor makes sparkling discovery

By Carey Goldberg, Globe Staff | September 22, 2005

Once there was a brain scientist whose knowledge was transformed into glittering diamonds.

This is no fairy tale. The scientist's name is David Somers, and he is a psychology professor at Boston University. Helped by his background in psychology research, he recently solved a puzzle that -- according to an official announcement scheduled for today -- yielded him a diamond-encrusted beetle worth \$54,000.

He also got to have the kind of treasure-hunting, tree-climbing adventure in South Dakota's Badlands that many 40-year-olds have long since stopped dreaming about. And with his best friend, to boot.

The story begins with a puzzle book called "A Treasure's Trove," which has sold more than half a million copies since it was published last November. Part of a genre known as armchair treasure hunting, its fairy-filled narrative contained clues leading to 12 real-life jewels, together worth more than \$1 million, donated by the author.

Somers, who lives in Arlington, bought the book last winter to share with his three daughters -- Juliana, 10, Anika, 8, and Ellie, 6 -- and they spent hours trying to crack the codes hidden in the text and lavish illustrations. The family had a lot of company among the book's other fans, many of whom shared their progress in forums online.

ARTICLE TOOLS

- [PRINTER FRIENDLY](#)
- [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)
- [NATION RSS FEED](#)
- [MOST E-MAILED](#)

MORE:

[Globe Nation stories](#)
[Latest national news](#)

LATEST NATIONAL NEWS

- ▶ [Reserve supplies said helped Rita response](#)
- ▶ [FEMA budget so complex it defies consensus](#)
- ▶ [N.Z. lawmaker streaks to keep election vow](#)
- ▶ [Minor earthquake shakes northern Maine](#)
- ▶ [War supporters to follow anti-war rallies](#)
- ▶ [More national news](#)

BOSTON.COM'S MOST E-MAILED

- ▶ [Filene's Basement spree is evacuee's 'dream come true'](#)
- ▶ [Puppy swallows 13-inch knife, survives](#)
- ▶ [Global warming? You better believe it](#)
- ▶ [Top 50 Science Fiction Television Shows of All Time](#)
- ▶ [Church critic resigns pastorate](#)
- ▶ [See full list of most e-mailed](#)

SEARCH THE ARCHIVES

- ☐ Today (free)
- ☐ Past 30 days
- ☐ Yesterday (free)
- ☐ Last 12 months
- ▶ [Advanced search](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

[Start saving on every call with Vonage.](#)

Sign up now and get 1 FREE month of phone service!
www.vonage.com

By this spring, puzzlers began finding the gold tokens that could be redeemed for the jewels. One by one the tokens were tracked down, all discovered in tree knotholes in public parks around the country, until only one jewel was left: a diamond-encrusted beetle.

On a July weekend when he was also completing his tenure application, Somers focused on the puzzle in his spare time and tried to draw strategy from the basic psychology class that he teaches each year.

"The trick is often just figuring out what the right problem to solve is," he said. And in this case, he said, it was: "How do you approach this puzzle and get inside the head of the puzzler? What could I do to simplify?"

The solution came to him after a night's sleep and a morning's coffee -- which bears out another of his course's teachings: that sleep may not provide inspiration, but it often offers a fresh start.

Like the clues to other jewels, the clues to the beetle's location lay hidden in a picture -- this one of children's alphabet blocks. Here, Somers said, his background in research on vision and the mind came in very handy.

That image of blocks happened to bear a striking resemblance to one devised by Somers's academic mentor. Another advantage: Somers was accustomed to transforming a two-dimensional picture into three dimensions in his mind -- a common skill among perception researchers like himself.

That dramatic day in July, he saw the picture in a slightly different three-dimensional way than he had before. The key, he realized, lay in the wood-grain patterns on the blocks, which -- looked at in the right way -- could be transformed from eight two-dimensional patterns into five three-dimensional ones. Using a computer program he had created, and a code key the online community knew had worked for the other puzzles in the book, he generated a list of 480 possible strings of letters.

Scanning them slowly, looking for meaning, he found one string that read BADLANDSWROVRLK.

Bingo. It took just a few minutes of Google-ing to figure out that in the Badlands National Park in South Dakota, there was a place called White River Overlook.

By midnight the following night, Somers and his best friend, Mark Moeglein, who had traveled 1,800 miles from his home in Oregon, were heading into the Badlands. They found a tree in just the location depicted in a map in "A Treasure's Trove"; each of the jewels had three cryptic clues in the book: the coded location, a map, and a picture of a tree. But no knothole was to be seen. So Moeglein climbed the tree, and there, about 9 feet off the ground, was a knothole. He looked into it.

Somers, who will share his bounty with his best friend, recalled the low-key moment that ended the search: "Oh," Moeglein said. "There it is."

Along with the beetle, Somers has netted new, real-life fodder for his psychology students. "I'm planning to spice up my section on problem-solving with this," he said.

But Michael Stadther, the author and illustrator of "A Treasure's Trove," said Somers's scientific approach was one way to tackle the problem. "He could have done it with a pencil and paper -- and I'm not even sure he needed the pencil and paper," Stadther said.

"That was one of the themes" of the book, he added: "The hard-headed, handsome woodcarver doesn't see things that are right in front of him."

Carey Goldberg is reachable at goldberg@globe.com. ■

© Copyright 2005 Globe Newspaper Company.

MORE:

[Globe Nation stories](#) | [Latest national news](#) | [Globe front page](#) | [Boston.com](#)

SIGN UP FOR: [Globe Headlines e-mail](#) | [Breaking News Alerts](#)



PRINTER FRIENDLY



E-MAIL TO A FRIEND



AVAILABLE RSS FEEDS



MOST E-MAILED



REPRINTS/PERMISSIONS



[Search 100's of B&B's, inns, hotels and resorts](#)



[Unlimited Phone Calls to US & Canada \\$24.99/mo](#)



[Protect Your Vehicle with LoJack. Click Here](#)



[Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Massachusetts](#)



[Protect your data on the go with HP notebooks.](#)

[feedback form](#) | [help](#) | [site map](#) | [globe archives](#) | [rss](#)

© 2005 The New York Times Company

[Home delivery for as little as \\$1.75 a week!](#)



[click here](#)