

# Book Review - The Da Vinci Code

## The Da Vinci Code

Dan Brown

Doubleday (Random House, Inc., 1745 Broadway, New York, NY: April, 2003, 454 pages (hardcover) (fiction/spiritual thriller). List \$24.95; amazon.com \$14.97. ISBN: 0-385-50420-9.

Reviewed by: Joseph P. Szymhart

When I purchased this book after the New Year arrived in 2004, I was aware that it was a best seller in 2003 and that millions of people had read it. Until then, I had ignored the reviews and had little idea of the content. Some reviewers early on had said that author Dan Brown's research was "impeccable." Brown's editor continues to stand by his man, saying that Brown made nothing up save the fictional, contemporary story wrapped around sensational religious controversy. Ahem! Pardon me while I clear my throat. After I browsed through the story initially, I realized what I was in for, and why all the ensuing critical flack from art historians, religious scholars, and Catholic apologists. I was about to go on another the-Catholic-Church-has-it-all-wrong, New Age ride. Once upon a time, I would read books like this with curiosity and excitement, wondering what new arcane knowledge the author revealed that the academy, the government, or the Church had kept from the masses and me, the poor lumpen proletariat. As a result, I can still identify with those who find inspiration from The Da Vinci Code, which relates the following tale.

At night in the Louvre Museum in Paris, an albino monk dressed in a hooded cloak shoots a curator in the stomach. The monk, Silas, is a radical numerology member of the ultra-conservative Opus Dei sect of the Catholic Church. He wears a cilice, a thong that cuts flesh, around his thigh, and he flagellates himself bloody as part of a self-purification cult, in accordance with Opus Dei guidelines. Silas works for someone he knows only as "the Teacher," a wealthy Briton who we later find out is obsessed with finding the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend. The curator happened to be the leader of a secret sect (the Priory of Sion) that hides and protects the Grail and a cache of ancient manuscripts that could prove Jesus Christ had fathered a child, Sarah, with Mary Magdalene. According to a fringe legend, Mary and her followers, as the true Christians, fled to France and perhaps England to avoid persecution from Peter and the Apostles. Their "secret" and the Jesus bloodline were protected through the centuries via other sects like the Templars. In the novel, a conservative Pope (guess who) has died, and a new, liberal leadership in the Vatican emerges, one that would rescind Opus Dei's significant status as a prelature. The Teacher, identified at the end as Leigh Teabing, the wealthy Briton, finds a way to manipulate the Vatican and Opus Dei to get his hands on the Holy Grail.

Sir (he is a Knight) 'money is no object' Teabing utilizes the latest in surveillance equipment and extensive research to pin down that the secret about the Grail should have been unveiled, but he does not want to be exposed as the one who forces the secret from the Priory. So he devises an elaborate scheme. He convinces the Opus leader that the Grail secret will indeed be revealed, thus creating a catastrophe for Roman Catholicism and wiping out Opus Dei's reason for being. The Opus leader, a bishop, has a secret meeting with Vatican officials who now know about the potentially devastating Grail revelation, and they strike a deal. The Vatican pays the Opus leader 20 million euros in Vatican bonds to find the Grail and destroy the evidence. In return, Opus would retain its standing, and the Church could survive. Teabing, however, plans to get the Grail for himself in the end.

Enter Robert Langdon, a well-known Harvard professor of religious studies who specializes in symbolism and arcane wisdom. Langdon is a bachelor described as early middle aged with slightly graying hair, and he wears a tweed jacket. He was in Paris and was to meet with the curator. Langdon had written a manuscript that inadvertently revealed the secret that the curator and only four others held. The elderly and bleeding curator somehow managed to strip off his clothes, then arrange his body according to a famous Leonardo Da Vinci drawing of a naked man in a circle, "the Vitruvian Man." The curator, Sauniere, also managed to write some symbols in visible and invisible ink and in his blood on and around his body before he expired on the museum floor near the Mona Lisa. Enter Sophie Neveu, a French criminal investigator and code cracker, along with Bezu Fache, the lead French crime investigator. Sophie happens to be the curator's estranged granddaughter. As a result of the curator's codes and mysterious anagrams created at the crime scene, Sophie and Robert are drawn in (so to speak) to solve the murder and, later, the Grail mystery (and they fall in love in the end).

Brown chooses character names with symbolic (hidden from the naïve) meaning to add literary spice to his wildly intriguing narrative that moves from Paris and France to the United Kingdom. Other reviewers have revealed most of these, so to repeat all that would be trivial. But I will say that his choice of Sophie Neveu is only too coy—Sophia is not only the Biblical and Greek Wisdom, but also carries weight in Gnostic myth as the goddess who sent/birthed the Christ to us to reveal true Gnosis. Brown's Sophie ends up as a true daughter of the royal line of Magdalene and Jesus, as the renewed Sophia. I hope I'm not revealing too much in case any of my readers wants only to enjoy this pulp-fiction thriller—a good joke works only when one does not know the punch line.

So, if this is mere fiction, why all the fuss? The book inspired a one-hour, ABC TV news special and rounds of debates, as well as reviews that range from praise to vitriol. I think all the response is because Brown appears to take his thesis seriously: History would be very different had Constantine in 325 CE and the subsequent Roman Church not excluded certain sex rites, equality for females, and Gnostic texts from the Christian canon. Brown's novel simplistically claims that, under Constantine and the Council of Nicea, at a single stroke Jesus was made divine, and Arius, who argued for Jesus as a human prophet, anathematized. The reality is that the divinity of Christ was never in question among earliest Christians, despite the fringe sects that derived new meanings and wrote contrary texts. Brown takes the premise seriously enough to have done considerable research to bolster the facts that make it appear that the Church really did destroy almost all evidence of the truth about Jesus. Brown's primary characters explain to Sophie how the Churchmen executed more than 5 million witches (pagans) and suppressed the sacred feminine principle purportedly valued by Leonardo and other initiates of a goddess-based or sun-worshipping pagan cult. Brown does claim at the beginning of the book that "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate." Derivative would have been more accurate than accurate.

We do not have to search far to find some of Brown's sources as he mentions them within the didactic or preachy segments in the plot. I'll mention a few that stand out: The highly speculative Holy Blood and Holy Grail, by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln; The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ, by Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince; and The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail, by Margaret Starbird, who publishes under Bear & Co. That Brown would mention these sources tells me he expects to be preaching to choirs that sing either in the superficial feminist wing of the New Age movement or to a secular audience that might believe anything about a Church plagued by controversy anyway. Scholars have found insurmountable flaws in all the books mentioned above. A book not mentioned, Daughter of God, by Lewis Perdue (2000), is close enough in plot and content that there has been some accusation of plagiarism against Brown by Perdue: See <http://www.daughter-of-god.com/daughter-davinci.html>.

The Perdue book presents a religious professor as the hero, he has a plot that involves arts in Europe and a mysterious, ancient document and shroud that prove there was a female messiah, Sophia, who was murdered around 310 CE by supporters of the Church and King Constantine. Again, if the truth leaks, the Goddess religion will be restored, and the patriarchal Catholic Church and Western civilization as we know it would fall. Perdue documents nearly 30 elements in The Da Vinci Code, including whole speeches that appear to be clearly ripped off from his Daughter of God.

Sandra Miesel, a medievalist, is one of the Catholic critics who, in her article "Dismantling The Da Vinci Code" for Crisis Magazine, September 1, 2003, "dismantles" Brown and his hero Langdon as a scholar. Miesel states, "So error laden is The Da Vinci Code that the educated reader actually applauds those rare occasions where Brown stumbles (despite himself) into the truth." I will not list the errors she and others have found because you can go search the Worldwide Web anytime. I'll merely concentrate on a few aspects, including one that intrigued me as an artist who is familiar with Leonardo Da Vinci.

Because the title features this renowned genius, let us see just what Brown claims Leonardo included, albeit secretly, in his paintings and drawings. In Brown's book, the Mona Lisa is far more esoteric than merely the fine, idealized portrait of the lady La Gioconda. Brown's character loads androgynous symbolism derived from an interpretation of seeming inconsistencies in the landscape behind the figure. In effect, Brown creates a mockery of Leonardo's intent as an experimental artist. A pentagram (or star) that appears on the dead curator (drawn in his own blood) indicates to Langdon, the symbolist, that Sophie's grandfather knew a code Leonardo had used to indicate the sacred feminine eschewed by the Roman Church. Leonardo allegedly inserted, as a kind of subtext, subliminal signals about the "goddess" and the female principle, about sun worship and pagan truths. In my view, Leonardo's aesthetic use of geometry transcended any mere reference to goddess worship—his was a scientific as well as an aesthetic approach to beauty, not a devious one. Leonardo may not have been the ideal Catholic (Brown's book relates that he was homosexual), but he certainly was not the conniving occultist described by Brown. According to biographers Antonina Vallentin and Vasari, at the end of his life Leonardo was reconciled with the Catholic Church, took communion, and lamented that "he had offended against God and men by failing to practice his art as he should have done." In any case, the novel pivots on the pentagram as a feminist marker, and our heroes are off on a whirlwind detective excursion while running for their lives. The French police initially target Langdon as the prime suspect. During their flight from Fache and the police, Langdon and Sophie meet with Leigh Teabing, apparently an ally, at his sumptuous villa, where he shows them a large reproduction of Leonardo's famous mural, The Last Supper. Wrongly, the novel wants us to believe that the mural represents the moment that Jesus instituted the Eucharist rite, but Leonardo's work illustrates John 13:21 when Jesus warns, "One of you will betray me."

Teabing, the Grail expert, points to the lack of a central chalice in the design as proof that the Grail is not a material cup. He goes on, with Langdon's acquiescence, to point to a "V" shape between an Apostle to Jesus' right, and Jesus as a symbol of the female. He identifies that apostle as Mary Magdalene, not the Apostle John, who art historians see. Indeed, Leonardo painted John as young and effeminate, but this was a convention that developed before and during the Renaissance. And one has to ask, if that is Mary, where is John? There are only thirteen figures. Teabing also claims that there is a disembodied hand with a knife (next to Judas) while St. Peter is posed with his left hand in a cutting gesture at the purported Mary's throat. He says that Leonardo wanted to indicate that the Church had cut off Mary Magdalene as the chosen leader of Christ's church. A transfixed Sophie can only think, "This is the woman who singlehandedly could crumble the Church?" Mary with her bloodline is the Holy Grail, the womb that held the seed of Jesus.

What I see is that Judas obscures Peter in Leonardo's composition, so that Peter's right hand appears awkwardly with the knife, but his left is merely resting as a caution on St. John's shoulder as John leans an ear toward Peter. The composition rests on two "W" shapes that contain four sets of Apostles, with Jesus in a pivotal, central pose. If you want to find feminine V shapes, you can find many, but you can find one [nary? I looked up "nee" in several reference locations, and it doesn't seem to fit this usage at all... sh] a Mary. Unfortunately, this may be the novel's weakest lecture, yet it contains the key to the Magdalene/Jesus union around which the entire quest revolves. Brown interprets the evidence in The Last Supper much like an astrologer interprets a horoscope for a client. I once studied astrology and could cast a horoscope in any of several systems. Astrology as a science is to a fault completely baseless and unreliable for character analysis, but astrologers, like good salesmen, can be very convincing, especially if you show interest in their product. Invariably, most folks who want a reading are easily impressed because the astrologer's product is the client's character and fate. We are all interested in ourselves, and most of us will find many "hits" or accurate statements in almost any reading (unless you happen to be an informed skeptic like me). Sophie is very impressed with her experts, Langdon and Teabing, she is in unfamiliar territory, and she has an emotional need to support her dead grandfather. Naturally, she comes up with an affirmative response. Brown's novel wants us to believe that Leonardo played occult tricks such as this on the Church through his many, many lucrative Church commissions, when he had only one, which was not even completed.

The novel claims that Leonardo Da Vinci was a Grand Master of the secretive Priory of Sion, as were Victor Hugo and the twentieth-century French artist Jean Cocteau. There is no evidence that they or Leonardo were members. The Priory of Sion is essentially a new religious movement that appeared after World War II, having announced its existence in 1962 after formally establishing itself in 1956. This new Priory has no connection to the Order or Abbey of Sion of the Middle Ages, as the book claims as "Fact" on the opening page. The Abbey group was dissolved by King Louis XIII of France by 1619, with the premises turned over to the Jesuits. According to a TimeWatch BBC (1996) program, "The History of a Mystery," the Order of Sion disappeared from history. Brown states that the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris "discovered parchments known as Les Dossiers Secrets, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo and Leonardo...." as one of his "Facts." A fact Brown does not mention is that the new Priory sect leader (Plantard), along with an accomplice, deposited the Dossiers Secrets into the Bibliothèque. As exposed on the same BBC program mentioned above, the parchments were fakes all along.

As for Jean Cocteau, I have a translation of an interesting autobiographical book by him called Opium, the Diary of a Cure. Cocteau wrote the journal account, liberally illustrated in his surrealist style, in 1929 while in treatment for "opium poisoning" at an asylum in France. In the text, page 125, Cocteau, at the end of his "cure" at the clinic, says, "And I was wondering, shall I take opium or not? It is useless to put on a carefree air, dear poet. I will take it if my work wants me to ... And if Opium helps me to." He was a brilliant if radical writer and filmmaker who had a creative and highly productive life (1889 to 1963). He rubbed shoulders with the likes of Picasso and Diaghilev. I recall seeing two of his most famous films, Beauty and the Beast and Orphée. There is no evidence that I could find that he was a grandmaster of any group, but, if he were one, one can only wonder what kind of cult this opium-addicted surrealist might have created. In any case, The Da Vinci Code states on page 327 that Jean Cocteau was Grand Master of the Priory of Sion from 1918 to 1963. The Brown book also claims that Victor Hugo was States Master from 1844 to 1885. Cocteau in Opium says, "Victor Hugo was a madman who believed himself to be Victor Hugo." Awkward for Dan Brown, is all I can say.

A few final words about mistakes: Opus Dei has no official monks who wear monk's robes. Brown's albino, Silas, apparently sees very well without lenses—highly unusual for someone with albinism. Brown's hero, Langdon, states, "Originally, Tarot had been devised as a secret means to pass along ideologies banned by the Church" (p. 92). Tarot playing cards (and they were playing cards, not magical texts used by initiates) arrived in Europe from the Middle East in the fifteenth century. Many varieties developed, but the occult Tarot, the progenitor of the Tarot decks found in today's New Age/occult sections of bookstores, appeared and developed singularly in France during the hundred years between 1780 and 1880. There is nothing ancient about the occult Tarot, and they hid nothing from the churchmen who understood very well what they were about (see A Wicked Pack of Cards: The Origins of the Occult Tarot, by R. Decker, T. DePaulis, and M. Dummett, 1996).

The number of poor souls condemned and executed by the Catholic Inquisitors is not 5 million, as Brown's book claims. Scholars today set the number between 30 thousand and 90 thousand, with most splitting the difference. And to drive one last stake into Brown's grail myth, the Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln claim that "holy blood" means "holy grail" originates with Sir Thomas Mallory's misspelling in his fifteenth-century Le Morte D'Arthur. Holy Grail should have been le saint graal and not Sang real. Unfortunately, Brown has his "Teacher" proclaim on page 250, "The word Sangreal derives from San Graal—or Holy Grail." And "Sang Real literally meant Royal Blood."

The Da Vinci Code is a decent thriller if the reader is either unaware of or manages to suspend the reality that undermines the story. In the spiritual-thriller genre, Brown's book mimics its earlier Catholic-bashing, New Age cousin, The Celestine Prophecy, but it has similar flaws in fact and character development. In that regard, Brown does not come close to Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose. Speaking of Eco, his raucous ride through the occult in the 500-plus pages Foucault's Pendulum (1988) takes the wind out of most other books with occult themes as he covers just about everything imaginable in that murky, mysterious world. Almost all of Brown's themes, including Magdalene as Grail, conspiracies to protect hidden scriptures, and Disney cartoons that hide occult wisdom, are woven into Eco's book already in 1988.

Eco, however, writes with incredible wit and a common-sense resolve at the story's core. His character Lia is a voice of reason throughout, warning her companion, an editor and the novel's narrator, to "be careful. They'll make you sick." The narrator responds, "Now don't exaggerate. They're the sick ones, not I. You don't go crazy because you work in an asylum." Lia quips, "That remains to be seen." We are halfway through the novel at that stage. The narrator indeed becomes enmeshed in layer below layer of the surreal, despite her warning. In the end, Lia has his baby, and the narrator finds simple truth except for one flaw. Those pursuing him believe he has the Map, or data that can take them to the truth, the powerful secret of being, like a philosopher's stone or Holy Grail. Of course, he has no Map because there never was one. The lesson again is that the "grail" remains in the elegance and morality of the quest. The prize (wisdom/enlightenment/salvation) in the end is not something found; it is a gift already given along the Way. [For readers familiar with Eco's book, this paragraph undoubtedly would have relevance to those reading this review. But as a reader who hasn't read Eco's book, the highlighted material seems to me more tangential than clarifying or informative at this point. Consider deleting this para, and beginning the following with "And like Eco's book, Brown's novel has the quest theme, but, ..." sh]

Brown's novel also has this quest theme, but, just as with Redfield's The Celestine Prophecy, the implication is that there is some literal thing (a manuscript, a lineage, a casket of bones) that reveals the secret. Brown, like Redfield, titillates the reader with purported facts about the Church, government, established science—whatever is in power—that prove that some conspiracy abounds to keep the masses in ignorance and under control. This belies a quality of paranoia in the authors, and they also butcher history and fact to arrive at a conclusion. As a result, even though The Da Vinci Code is fiction, it fails. Brown's Langdon criticizes those poor, brainwashed Catholics and Christians who would take things "literally" (the virgin birth, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus). Yet, in the end, we find Langdon kneeling in awe at the Louvre at the entry pyramid. He finally "knows" where the bones of Mary Magdalene are buried—and, perhaps, with the cache of secret manuscripts that would crumble the Christian Church. Talk about literal.

Langdon lectures Sophie (and the reader) that "Every faith in the world is based on fabrication. That is the definition of faith—acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove. Every religion describes God through metaphor, allegory, and exaggeration.... Metaphors are a way to help our minds process the unprocessable. The problems arise when we begin to believe literally in our own metaphors." Langdon argues that he would not "wave the flag" of evidence in the faces of the millions of deluded souls who believe that Buddha was born of a lotus blossom, or Jesus of a literal virgin. "Those who truly understand their faiths understand the stories are metaphorical." He would not expose the truth because "Religious allegory has become a part of the fabric of reality. And living in that reality helps millions of people cope and be better people." There's more to his argument, but the gist of it is that we should spare the sleeping dogs lie—and I mean that as a pun, too—and not throw them any Magdalene bones.

So here we have a noble man who would spare the common believer the angst of revelation. As descending as that might sound to the common believer, Brown also attempts to not offend Opus Dei, despite his exposure of some of its more radical practices. "Many call Opus Dei a brainwashing cult," reporters often challenged. "Others call you an ultraconservative Christian secret society. Which are you?"

"Opus Dei is neither," the bishop (Aringarosa in the novel) would patiently reply. "We are a Catholic Church. We are a congregation of Catholics who have chosen as our priority to follow Catholic doctrine as rigorously as we can in our own daily lives."

"Does God's Work (Opus Dei, translated) necessarily include vows of chastity, tithing, and atonement for sins through self-flagellation and the cilice?"

"You are describing only a small portion of the Opus Dei population," Aringarosa said. "These choices are personal, but everyone in Opus Dei shares the goal of bettering the world by doing the Work of God." The book does mention ODAN [Opus Dei Awareness Network] and its popular website [www.odan.org](http://www.odan.org)—in keeping with Brown's effort to make the story as real as possible. I doubt that Opus Dei or its critics are happy about Brown's book because the sensationalizes the cult aspect while minimizing any real activity the group promotes. What he did get right is that Opus Dei remains controversial, but that is another story that will continue to have repercussions within the Holy See, especially if a more "liberal" regime enters the Papacy.

I'll end with a quote that Eco used in Foucault's Pendulum as a comment on the occult quest, no matter what technique, magic, doctrine, theosophy or bones you might have: "Our cause is a secret within a secret, a secret that only another secret can explain; it is a secret about a secret that is veiled by a secret." Ja' far as-Sadiq, sixth Imam.

[Add the following to author bio section if appropriate?] Joseph P. Szymhart is an artist and a cult-information specialist with 20 years' experience in exit counseling. He lives in Douglassville, PA. [jpz@fast.net](mailto:jpz@fast.net); <http://www.users.fast.net/~szymhart>

[Contact Us \(mailto:icsmail.com\)](mailto:Contact Us (mailto:icsmail.com))   [Copyright](#)   [Why ICSA does not maintain a list of "bad groups"](#)   [Calendar](#)

**Views expressed on ICSA Websites or in ICSA's publications or events are those of the document's author(s) or speaker(s) and are not necessarily shared, endorsed, or recommended by ICSA or any of its directors, staff, or advisers.**