

The Da Vinci Code, novel and film, and ‘countercultural’ myth

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Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, New York, Anchor Books 2006 [first published by Doubleday in 2003], 489 pages.

The Da Vinci Code, directed by Ron Howard, screenplay by Akiva Goldsman, based on the novel by Dan Brown

Of a book by Edgar Wallace, a best-selling author of another era, Leon Trotsky wrote in his diary in 1935, “It is hard to imagine anything more mediocre, contemptible, and crude. Not a shade of perception, talent, or imagination. The adventures are piled on without any art at all, like police records laid one on top of the other. Not for a single moment did I feel any excitement, interest, or even simple curiosity. While reading the book you have a feeling as if out of boredom, for lack of anything better to do, you were drumming your fingers on a fly-specked windowpane.”

Dan Brown’s thriller, *The Da Vinci Code*, which has sold tens of millions of copies worldwide since its publication in 2003, does not quite rise, or sink, to that level, but it is not very good at all. Nor is its film treatment, at the hands of screenwriter Akiva Goldsman and director Ron Howard, any kind of an improvement.

Both book and film follow the ultimately successful efforts of a Harvard professor of ‘symbolology’ and a French code-breaker, on the run from the police, to uncover secrets that might undermine orthodox Christianity—all in the course of a busy 24 hours or so.

Professor Robert Langdon (in the film played by Tom Hanks) and Sophie Neveu (Audrey Tautou) of the French Judicial Police, after the murder of her grandfather—a curator at the Louvre museum in Paris—in which Langdon becomes a suspect, go in search of clues as to the location of the Holy Grail (and, at the same time, attempt to avoid capture by the authorities). An ancient secret society, of which Neveu’s grandfather was a leading figure, is somehow involved. The clues to their quest lie in a series of puzzles.

This grandiose scavenger hunt takes Langdon and Neveu to a formidable Swiss bank, a chateau outside Paris, London’s Westminster Abbey and, finally, an ancient chapel in Scotland. Their antagonists include a determined French police captain, a murderous albino monk and an archbishop from the Catholic Church’s *Opus Dei* sect and “The Teacher,” a shadowy figure who seems to know a great deal about everyone’s affairs.

Howard-Goldsman’s film tries to remain faithful to the book, with unfortunate results. While overburdened with episodes, the novel at least can treat them in a somewhat more leisurely fashion over the course of its almost 500 pages. It can pause occasionally for conversation. Although they have been pared down, the events in the film version, even at two and a half hours, come all too fast and furiously at the spectator. Too much occurs that is confusingly explained or hardly explained at all. The astounding revelation about Neveu’s identity comes with virtually no proof or context whatsoever. The final two sequences simply come out of the blue. It is never clear, at least to me, in the film version why we are still in Great Britain.

In any event, the principal themes of the novel are conveyed in lecture

form by Langdon and another Grail enthusiast, billionaire-scholar Sir Leigh Teabing, while Langdon and Neveu are sheltered in Teabing’s “sprawling 185-acre estate,” Château Villette. The same format is more or less adhered to in the film. Brown, through his protagonists, offers up a kind of neo-pagan feminism as an alternative to official Christian theology. Jesus was not a divine creature, according to Langdon and Teabing (Ian McKellen in the film), but a thoroughly mortal, albeit “great and powerful,” man. He married Mary Magdalene and they had a daughter. (Considerately, according to Teabing, Mary kept a diary!)

Moreover, Christ intended that Mary should lead the church founded on his teachings, not Peter, his disciple. As for the ‘Holy Grail,’ Mary Magdalene *herself* was “the Holy Vessel. She was the chalice that bore the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ” and centuries later became the victim of a “smear campaign launched by the early Church. The Church needed to defame Mary Magdalene in order to cover up her dangerous secret—her role as the Holy Grail.”

The early Church suppressed the true facts, a process codified by the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, presided over by Emperor Constantine, “the greatest cover-up in human history,” Teabing claims. “The Church’s version of the Christ story is inaccurate, and ... the greatest story ever told is, in fact, the greatest story ever *sold*.”

The Holy Grail represents “the sacred feminine and the goddess, which of course has now been lost, virtually eliminated by the Church. The power of the female and her ability to produce life was once very sacred, but it posed a threat to the rise of the predominantly male Church, and so the sacred feminine was demonized and called unclean. ... Woman, once the sacred giver of life, was now the enemy.”

A secret society, the Priory of Sion, has been charged with protecting the truth about Christ and Mary Magdalene and their ‘royal bloodline’ for many centuries. Neveu’s grandfather was murdered because of his leading role in this society.

Langdon and his companion persevere in their efforts to locate the remains of Mary Magdalene, in the course of which remarkable facts about Neveu’s family and heritage come to light. In short, the silliness continues until the very end of the novel and film.

Brown, a former teacher at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire and unsuccessful composer in Hollywood, writes in ‘best-seller’ English, a functional language without genuine depth or texture. In an interview, Brown explains that in 1994 while on vacation he found an old copy of a book by trash novelist Sidney Sheldon, “and thought, ‘Hey, I can do that.’” His first novel, *Digital Fortress*, appeared in 1996.

Such ‘texture’ as does exist in *The Da Vinci Code* arises from a striving for a veneer of culture, but the striving is the most noticeable result. Even the title of the novel is peculiar, as numerous commentators have pointed out—as though “da Vinci” were Leonardo’s surname, as opposed to simply an indication of the town from which his father came.

Brown’s effort to be literary stands out, sometimes embarrassingly. A police captain is described as “stocky and dark, almost Neanderthal.” At

the Château Villette, “the air inside smelled antediluvian, regal somehow,” whatever that might mean precisely. The menacing, hulking albino monk (no less!), drawing near the *Opus Dei* center in London, “felt a rising sense of refuge and asylum.” This is language seeking to be meaningful, and failing.

People look and act very much as we would expect them to do in a best-seller. Langdon, a Harvard lecturer in an obscure (in fact, non-existent) field, has nonetheless been listed by a popular magazine in Boston as “one of that city’s top ten most intriguing people.” Physically? “A dark stubble was shrouding his strong jaw and dimpled chin. Around his temples, the gray highlights were advancing, making their way deeper into his thicket of coarse black hair.”

Sophie Neveu, when we first meet her, “was moving down the corridor toward them with long, fluid strides ... a haunting certainty to her gait.” What is a ‘haunting certainty’? In any event, Brown continues, “Her thick burgundy hair fell unstyled to her shoulders, framing the warmth of her face. Unlike the waifish, cookie-cutter blondes that adorned Harvard dorm room walls [?], this woman was healthy with an unembellished beauty and genuineness that radiated a striking personal confidence.”

Conveniently enough, people even speak as they ought to. On hearing Teabing’s voice for the first time in the novel, “Langdon grinned, recognizing the thick British accent.” Moments later, Teabing’s servant greets our hero and heroine, “‘Sir Leigh will be down presently,’ he declared, his accent thick French.” In Scotland, we meet “a handsome young man, with a Scottish brogue and strawberry blonde hair.” And so on, in a thoroughly lazy manner.

Certain passages, in a book supposedly devoted to the most profound moral and theological issues, are wildly and laughably inappropriate. For example, “Asking Jacques Saunière [the Louvre curator] to endorse a manuscript on goddess worship was as obvious as asking Tiger Woods to endorse a book on golf.”

Or consider Langdon’s discussion of the ‘sacred feminine’ as it appears in the work of ... Walt Disney!

“Langdon held up his Mickey Mouse watch and told her that Walt Disney had made it his quiet life’s work to pass on the Grail story to future generations. Throughout his entire life, Disney had been hailed as ‘the Modern-Day Leonardo da Vinci.’ ... Like Leonardo, Walt Disney loved infusing hidden messages and symbolism in his art. For the trained symbologist, watching an early Disney movie was like being barraged by an avalanche of allusion and metaphor.” Wonderful stuff!

A dullness pervades, in spite, or because of, the book’s many twists and turns. The perfunctory dialogue serves primarily as a bridge between the various “stunning surprises.” Despite the supposedly momentous goings-on, no significant changes take place in the protagonists, not even in their banter. It’s the contrast between the earthshaking events, including the revelation of the identity of Jesus and Mary Magdalene’s living descendants, and the often offhand tone of the lead characters’ conversations, from one end of the novel to the other, that is perhaps most preposterous. The author has not taken his own conceit seriously, so why should we?

We will be told that is ‘only a thriller’ and not to be judged too critically. But in any literary genre, the author has the responsibility to render his characters and situation believable, to maintain some proportion between the intensity of the action and the response of the human participants. Eric Ambler, in his pre-World War II novels of intrigue (*Background to Danger*, *Cause for Alarm*, *A Coffin for Dimitrios* and *Journey Into Fear*), and John Le Carré, in certain of his Cold War efforts, managed it, along with others.

Langdon and Neveu make the most mind-boggling discoveries about a central figure in the history of Western Civilization, and, for all the depth of their reactions, they might as well be exposing nepotism in their local Parent-Teacher Organization. As they prepare to part after a day of

shocking tragedy and astonishing revelation, Neveu tritely coos, “When can I see you again?”

In regard to the filming of his work, Brown has no grounds for complaint. In Howard and Goldsman (screenwriter of *A Beautiful Mind*, *I, Robot*, *Cinderella Man*), he has found his cinematic and intellectual equivalents, more or less. Howard is a profoundly mediocre director—well-meaning, but without a single film or theme of enduring importance to his credit. While his films hazily champion the common man, in the words of a *New York Times* review of *Cinderella Man*, the story of a Depression-era boxer, Howard’s social outlook “hews close to an idealized American middle ground.”

We suggested in response that perhaps a “fantasized” middle ground might be more accurate. “In Howard’s film,” we commented, “Hollywood imagines America of the 1930s as a quaintly and picturesquely impoverished land peopled for the most part by gutsy underdogs and their devoted supporters.”

The filmmaker cedes nothing to Brown in regard to artistic triteness either. “Generally in a Howard film (*Backdraft*, *Far and Away*, *Apollo 13*, *Ransom*, *A Beautiful Mind*) the spectator has to have his hands over his eyes, or be lying face-down on the cinema floor, not to see what’s coming next,” we wrote about *Cinderella Man*. And the same applies here.

The Da Vinci Code jumps from remarkable location to remarkable location without generating memorable images or dramatic moments in a single one of them. It all becomes a blur. The actors do their best, within rather stereotyped limits—but, again, the gap between the ostensible subject matter here, revelations that will result in the overthrow of two millennia of Church teachings and the hackneyed human responses on screen, is so great that the spectator begins to drift off. The image of drumming one’s fingers on a windowpane comes to mind. Certain oddities bring one back. At the moment when the ‘only living descendant of Christ’ facetiously places one foot on water to see if it will bear her weight (a Goldsman contribution), *The Da Vinci Code* simply transforms itself into an object of ridicule.

Critical to the novel’s outlook, and perhaps a justification for devoting so much time to discussing it, is its flippancy about the truth or non-truth of its conjectures. Here Dan Brown turns ‘post-modernist’ with a vengeance.

When she’s told that “a complete genealogy of the early descendants of Christ” exists among the documents she and her companion seek, Neveu observes that even if that were true historians could not possibly confirm its authenticity. Teabing replies, “No more so than they can confirm the authenticity of the Bible.” “Meaning?” “Meaning that history is always written by the winners. When two cultures clash, the loser is obliterated, and the winner writes the history books—books which glorify their own cause and disparage the conquered foe. As Napoleon once said, ‘What is history, but a fable agreed upon?’ ... The Sangreal documents [those substantiating the claims about Mary Magdalene] simply tell the *other* side of the Christ story. In the end, which side of the story you believe becomes a matter of faith and personal exploration.”

This scene is somewhat crudely ‘paraphrased’ in the film version, when, toward the conclusion, Langdon-Hanks tells Neveu-Tautou that all that really matters, in relation to the Mary Magdalene story, is what she believes to be true.

To what extent Dan Brown subscribes to the theories proposed in his book remains unclear. This is an author in search of a best-seller, specifically, as he explained in an interview, “in the genre of big-concept, international thrillers,” and, given the present cultural circumstances, what could be a bigger concept than fictionally upsetting established views of Christ. He borrowed from a number of works, added his own interpretations and writing formula and hit the jackpot. The attacks by the Catholic hierarchy and Christian fundamentalists will probably only help book and ticket sales.

In any event, Brown is not on any kind of anti-clerical crusade. On his official web site, in a section devoted to 'Common questions,' the author responds to "Are you a Christian?" with "Yes. Interestingly, if you ask three people what it means to be Christian, you will get three different answers. ... I consider myself a student of many religions. The more I learn, the more questions I have. For me, the spiritual quest will be a life-long work in progress." Entirely predictable and conformist.

Brown has thrown everything but the kitchen sink into his novel—New Age gibberish, 'feel-good' feminism, conspiracy theories, a lurking Anglophilism, cheap anti-Catholic stereotypes of dubious provenance, King Arthur and his knights, Leonardo's paintings, ancient Egyptian religious practices, Tarot cards and more. On his web site, he writes evasively, "While it is my belief that some of the theories discussed by these characters may have merit, each individual reader must explore these characters' viewpoints and come to his or her own interpretations. My hope in writing this novel was that the story would serve as a catalyst and a springboard for people to discuss the important topics of faith, religion, and history."

And farther on: "Two thousand years ago, we lived in a world of Gods and Goddesses. Today, we live in a world solely of Gods. Women in most cultures have been stripped of their spiritual power. The novel touches on questions of how and why this shift occurred ... and on what lessons we might learn from it regarding our future."

Brown's conception of the ancient world and the transition to the modern one is ahistorical nonsense. It is particularly noteworthy that in discussing the Gospels and early Christianity the social element is entirely absent. Where is the Christ, with Mary Magdalene by his side or not, who chased the moneylenders out of the temple? Or the Christ who proclaimed that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? As Engels noted many years ago, "Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome." All this is absent, and not surprisingly in a novel about scholars flying about on private jets. The orientation has been shifted entirely toward gender, fittingly enough.

Brown, as his characters make clear, is not primarily concerned with the facts of Christ's life or the early Christian church, but in establishing a myth, a myth of the 'sacred feminine' cast aside by male ecclesiastics, which has a social and political value in present conditions. Whether Brown's version of things holds water historically or not hardly matters to his many admirers.

For example, Laura-Lea Cannon and David Tresemer, who have apparently taken it upon themselves to promote the cause of Mary Magdalene, write approvingly of "Brown's revisionist mythmaking." They observe: "Although his story is a mix of fact and fiction, it is important to remember that so are important works such as *Paradise Lost* that use the Bible to subjugate women to the constrictions of the patriarchy. By creating a best selling novel that revises patriarchal myths, Dan Brown is working to counter hundreds of years of misogynistic propaganda." The puerility of this argument hardly needs to be stressed: "They made up things for centuries, so now we will too."

Harvey Wasserman on *CounterPunch*, a left web site, is even more explicit: "Questions about Christ's love life will dominate debate over the release of *The Da Vinci Code* this weekend. The answers do matter. But what really counts is the story's pagan/feminist core, and its role in the Culture War. ... What's at stake is not the fine points of documentation and detail. Rather it's the contention that male-dominated Christian/Catholic fundamentalism as a repressive dictatorship that has thrown sexuality out of balance. Fiction it may be. But with 45 million copies in print, Dan Brown's *Da Vinci* is a force of nature. ... The documentation around which it's constructed is as inventive as it is

irrelevant. For the book's spiritual core—and popular appeal—rests on its invocation and adoration of feminist spirituality and pagan naturalism."

In other words, anything goes in a supposedly good cause. The argument that facts and historical truth are far less valuable than myth in motivating the population has an unsavory pedigree. It is attributed in the modern era to Georges Sorel (1847-1922), initially involved in the syndicalist movement, but whose "passion for revolutionary activity in place of rational discourse," in the words of one extreme right-wing commentator, "made him most influential in shaping the direction of fascism, especially in Mussolini's Italy." Myths, Sorel wrote, are "not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act." A myth "cannot be refuted, since it is, at bottom, identical with the conviction of a group."

The American film industry, of course, has engaged in its own debased mythmaking since its establishment. It is not entirely inappropriate that Ron Howard, who grew up in a Hollywood cocoon and is most closely identified as a child and teenage performer in television and film with three mythologized locations—an idealized Southern town, a facetiously, nostalgically recreated America of the late 1950s, and a California town in a supposed age of innocence—should find himself directing the film version of *The Da Vinci Code*.

The argument that popular conviction is "what really counts," not rational argumentation, is pernicious. 'Countercultural' myth is not preferable to right-wing myth. Brown's followers simply engage in wishful thinking: 'This is how we wish things were, so let's invent a fable that comforts us.' It is rather pathetic. This approach encourages self-indulgence and laziness, and blocks anyone from a genuine understanding of history as a law-governed process.

It is entirely in keeping, however, with the degraded state of significant portions of the academic and literary world, in which an interest in objective truth and verifying the actual course of historical events is largely lacking or even derided as futile. Brown may be an unfashionable figure in 'higher' left intellectual circles, but his method is not qualitatively different from their own.



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