

## Book Review

# The Da Vinci Code

By Dan Brown

Doubleday

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### “So We Meet Yet Again”: Re-make, Re-model, Re-hash

In 1983, the English translation of Umberto Eco's first novel, *The Name of the Rose*, was published. Its narrative revolved around a closed medieval society, a monastery in which a series of monks were being murdered. The hero who investigates the conspiracy, a learned Franciscan called William of Baskerville, attempts to solve the mystery by pursuing the labyrinthine world of signs, meaning, and allusion. With its potent mix of early modern lore, history, suspense, and an intimacy with a world now lost, *The Name of the Rose* became not only a bestseller but a major publishing and cultural event. Within two years of its publication in English a film based on the novel and directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud became a box office hit. Since its publication, the novel has become one of the most cited texts in contemporary literary study and, for many semioticians, its informed discussion of signs has made it an emblem and example of sign study.

In 2003, Doubleday published Dan Brown's fourth novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. Its narrative revolved around a closed society, the most outstanding signs of which come from the medieval period and which have given rise to a series of murders. The hero who investigates the conspiracy, a learned Harvard scholar called Robert Langdon, attempts to solve the mystery by pursuing the labyrinthine world of “symbology.” With its potent mix of hidden lore, art history, suspense, and nods to a world now lost, *The Da Vinci Code* became not only a bestseller but a publishing and cultural event. Within two years of its publication a film based on the novel and directed by Ron Howard was slated for release. Since its publication it continues to be cited in diverse places.

Will *The Da Vinci Code*'s focus on the world of signs make it a classic for semioticians, though? It takes only a small knowledge of semiotics—and not necessarily any knowledge of academic trend projection—to answer, emphatically, “No.”

*The Da Vinci Code* is, at least in one sense, the airport novel par excellence. Like the first Robert Langdon novel (*Angels and Demons*, 2000) and Brown's other two novels (*Digital Fortress*, 1998, and *Deception Point*, 2001), it has a particular feature that has gone largely unremarked by its many reviewers despite the fact that it is the most skillful and engaging aspect of the entire novel. Both the Langdon books are what might be called "real time thrillers"; they at least adhere to one of Aristotle's unities, that of time. There is no summary of time's more extended passage in the narratives; rather, the story events unfold mimetically over a space of hours, not days or weeks. The events that are narrated are those that involve Langdon and the conspiracy as it develops during the period of Langdon's involvement. Brown's achievement, here, should not be underestimated, especially as his first three novels were published well before *24* hit U.S. television screens. In this aspect, the novel is perfect for a long-haul flight (possibly to Europe, where the action takes place).

Everything else about the novel is significantly less auspicious. Although it has been the subject of an unprecedented public relations campaign mounted by Random House, a campaign that has been successful enough to keep the novel's media profile high and its standing at the top of the bestseller lists over a year after publication, the celebration of this novel has not been an indulgence of quality. Rather, it has been a well-calculated assessment of the American reading public and how to reach it, an assessment that is both puzzling and pessimistic to any reader with a critical eye. On the grounds of the novel's substandard qualities alone, there are a number of reasons for querying the phenomenon that its marketing has generated.

The plot of the novel, contrary to what many commentaries would have you believe, is straightforward to the point of being dull. Plot details will be given away in what follows, but rather than offering the usual disclaimer here about skipping these passages of exposition, the reader is asked not to be concerned about the "revelations" in this article, simply because the plot is so hackneyed, telegraphed, and derivative. Nothing much will be given away on this basis. At the beginning of the novel, the curator of the Louvre, Jacques Saunière, is found murdered in the Grand Gallery. Evidently, just before his death, he has managed to scratch out a coded message, part of which involves numbers in the Fibonacci sequence. This is done, presumably, in the knowledge that his scheduled meeting that evening with Robert Langdon, the famed Harvard "symbologist," will necessarily embroil Langdon in the viewing of his body. Langdon, with his skill and knowledge, will be able to decipher the code. When Langdon is inevitably confronted with the body, he recognizes that something mysterious beyond the mere fact of the murder is at play. However, the Paris police's investigating officer, Captain Bezu Fache, seems to suspect Langdon and is equally perturbed by the arrival of a young woman, Sophie Neveu, from the police's "Department of Cryptography," who has been sent to the investigation. It also transpires—in a move that is so excruciatingly obvious to all but Langdon and the narrator—that Sophie is Saunière's granddaughter.

Langdon and Neveu manage to escape from the watchful gaze of Fache and go on the run, primarily to the residence of an informed colleague of Langdon's, the "British Royal Historian," Sir Leigh Teabing, who is a researcher into esoteric matter, particularly the Grail legend. The three try to uncover the mystery deriving from Saunière's murder and the code left behind while the police and the murderer of Saunière are in pursuit. The latter, it becomes clear, is a devotee of Opus Dei, an albino assassin controlled by a mysterious "Teacher" who dictates his every move. Unfolding in "real time," as has been previously noted, the decoding of the various clues attendant on Saunière's death and his message, the pursuit and the flight proceed to the United Kingdom, the climax—such as it is—taking place in Westminster Abbey.

The trail of signs that Langdon and company pursue while themselves being pursued involves the Holy Grail legend; messages supposedly left by key figures in the institutionalized history of art, plus other elite figures in the history of science; a sprinkling of gnostic myth; references to Freemasonry; and a conspiracy generated primarily by the hermetic nature of Opus Dei. The gnostic and Grail references, drawing on some myths about Mary Magdalene, are liberally dosed with half-baked essentialist feminism. Throughout, these plot elements are cemented by means of various codes that are to be unraveled, a key feature of *Angels and Demons*, as well as Brown's non-Langdon novel, *Digital Fortress* (1998), which deal with more modern forms of encryption, and *Deception Point* (2001), which is more strictly concerned with data verification. For some, this array of reference points will seem nicely balanced; for others, it will represent an absurd hodge-podge.

Yet, while the plot is a potpourri of conspiracy theories, its reliance on one key source for its central idea—that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married and came to France, where their children founded the Merovingian line of descent dedicated to preserving holy secrets—is blatant. Anyone who has read *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (1982) will recognize *The Da Vinci Code*'s borrowings. In fact, it is easy to imagine that some will see the novel as a direct rip-off. Brown, himself, is cagey. On his personal Web site there are some "frequently asked questions," among which is "where did you get the idea for *The Da Vinci Code*?" His response?

This particular story kept knocking on my door until I answered. I first learned of the mysteries hidden in Da Vinci's paintings while I was studying art history at the University of Seville in Spain. Years later, while researching *Angels & Demons* and the Vatican Secret Archives, I encountered the Da Vinci enigma yet again. I arranged a trip to the Louvre Museum where I was fortunate enough to view the originals of some of Da Vinci's most famous works as well as discuss them with an art historian who helped me better understand the mystery behind their surprising anomalies. From then on, I was captivated. I spent a year doing research before writing *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown 2004).

The reader should judge for himself or herself whether this is dissembling (and whether real art historians refer to the painter of the Mona Lisa as "Le-

onardo” or “Da Vinci”). What is perhaps more important is that the central thesis of *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* are one and the same. Furthermore, it is questionable whether that thesis, in 2003, should be considered in any way controversial and new. If it is controversial now, why was it not controversial when *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was published—that is, twenty-one years before *The Da Vinci Code* appeared?<sup>1</sup>

It may be true that *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* did not have the profile in North America that it did in Europe during the 1980s (it has been republished in the U.S. in 2004 as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*), but it is difficult to believe that it was so unknown in the United States that its central premise, rehased in an inept thriller, could provoke controversy all these years later. Published in the United Kingdom in 1982, the book was authored by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln and became a particular kind of publishing landmark. This was partly because of commercial success on its own terms, but also because it rejuvenated that area of bookselling that had become moribund on general realization that the question “Was God an astronaut?” was a nonstarter. Usually filed under “Mysteries” in the U.K. (not to be confused with the same designation for crime/thriller fiction in the U.S.), *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* could be found near or within the “New Age” or “Mind, Body, Spirit” or “Esoteric” section of bookshops. The volume’s success totally renewed this sector of publishing, spawning a whole series of supposedly research-led tomes on the true import of Jesus’s tomb; the real meaning of the pyramids of Egypt and South America; the secrets of the Knights Templar; the mysterious conspiracies of Freemasonry; the location of the Ark of the Covenant; the hidden code in the Bible; and so on and so forth.<sup>2</sup> For many, Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln’s volume remained the ur-text of the genre, largely because it contained a modicum of credible research, although little of this research corresponded with what is to be found in real academic historical methodology. It is surprising that so many of the readers of *The Da Vinci Code* treat the novel’s theses as profound and new, then, when they are part and parcel of a major 1980s publishing trend which brought occult interests into the mainstream. In contrast with the details on his Web site, Brown slyly credits *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* by giving two of the authors’ names to one of his novel’s main characters: Leigh Teabing (the unrealistic surname being an anagram of Baigent, needless to say). Perhaps Brown is more cynical than most in his assessment of whether many of the readers of *The Da Vinci Code* have been to libraries or bookshops before.

Yet, even if *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* is discounted, one wonders why the (admittedly oblique and confusing) references to Gnosticism in the novel should be considered so explosive. Clearly, the responses to *The Da Vinci Code* on a plethora of Catholic Web sites and elsewhere in the media have played a part in blowing up the “controversy” to proportions which must have delighted Random House. The curious circumstance of the Catholic bureaucracy and public relations machine in the United States constituted fertile grounds for the planting of below-the-line publicity seeds (see, for example, Falsani 2004, Hansen 2003; Hitchcock 2003, Tintera et

al. 2004). Indeed, the novel has encouraged some publishers to rush out refutations of its claims (e.g., Bock 2004; Kellmeyer 2004; Miesel & Olson 2004; Welborn 2004; see also Duin 2004).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the status of the Gnostic gospels and the burgeoning scholarship devoted to them is old news. The key scholar of Gnosticism is a prominent American, the Harvard scholar, Elaine Pagels. Her bestselling popular introduction to the Gnostic gospels remains in print despite the fact that it was published in 1979 and details of her tragic personal life and her relationship to faith are almost as well known as the outstanding nature of her scholarship (Pagels 1982, 2004, Remnick 1997).

It remains difficult, especially for the European observer, to see where the controversy about this novel comes from. The potential counter-argument to this incredulity about controversy, though, might be the one cited in many reviews of the novel which suggest “It’s well-written, it’s intelligent, and best of all, it’s fun” (Greer 2003). Regrettably, of course, it is none of these and its treatment of signs is disgraceful, to boot. Why, though, might it have gained the reputation for being “intelligent” and “fun” and how is this wrapped up in its discussion of signs? The novel’s own signs are labored and appeal to the lowest common denominator. One must hesitate in the analysis of popular fiction when using this latter phrase because any text that becomes vastly popular must have a *breadth* of appeal rather than a narrowness. However, in the case of *The Da Vinci Code*, it does appeal to the narrowest of ideals in most of its key themes. The radical possibilities of some of the topics the narrative touches upon are significantly ignored. On the “frequently asked questions” section of Brown’s personal Web site, there appears the following question: “This novel is very empowering to women. Can you comment?” Presumably, “empowering,” here, simply means “some women like it”—it is absurd to imagine that a work of fiction “empowers” anybody, especially not in the way that equity of wages and access to all occupations, for example, might. Tellingly, Brown provides an answer which is almost as meaningless as the question:

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 2004).

So, the implication is that if we had goddesses in the contemporary world, it would even up the gender balance simultaneously. Even if I was not a committed atheist, I would find this offensive. There are plenty of fringe religions in the present that do have goddesses and some ancient societies, such as in Greece, also had them. It is by no means clear what difference the invention of goddesses made to the gender balance in ancient societies. Certainly, though, by writing about them, the only change Brown has made is to his bank balance.

Nevertheless, it is clear that *The Da Vinci Code* does tap into a lowest-commitment feminism. Karen King, who is actually a history professor at Harvard University’s Divinity School argues that “As a feminist, I’m cer-

tainly delighted and intrigued by the idea of a gospel attributed to a woman” (quoted in Lovgren 2004), and one can see why. The rediscovery of the role of women in the early Christian church, as Pagels’s work demonstrates, causes us to reconsider those “hidden from history” and to, perhaps, consider the power mechanisms in the present by which some people are represented and others are not. It is fairly clear, though, that Brown’s ambitions are not that far-reaching. In an early ill-advised review of the novel in the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin asserts that “Even if he had not contrived this entire story as a hunt for the Lost Sacred Feminine essence, women in particular would love Mr. Brown” (Maslin 2003). What Maslin is unwittingly indicating here concerns the dual problem of *The Da Vinci Code*’s supposed “empowerment” of women. First, the whole premise of the novel is based on an *essence* of woman embodied in a goddess (or Magdalene), which pays no attention to material relations and is a nice hook for lazy thinking, doing nobody any favors in the process. Secondly, even that “sacred” essence is cheapened by its own epiphenomenon: further essentialism in the realm of the novel’s character and plot. The main characters in Brown’s novels tend to be described as though they are actors in a daytime American soap opera: beautiful in a sickly, cloying way. And, of course, the function of Sophie Neveu in the novel is simply to provide the frisson of romance. Those new to the Langdon books may throw up their hands and assert that a romance does not develop between her and Langdon and that she is there because she is an important and intelligent cryptographer. However, as will be seen, she is even more stupid than the laudatory reviewers of this novel, and is only ruled out of a romance with Langdon by virtue of the fact that Brown over-egged the pudding of the first Langdon narrative, *Angels and Demons*, and thrust his hero into a made-in-heaven relationship with Vittoria Vetra. The prominence of the “feminine” in *The Da Vinci Code*, then, is cheap and essentialist. It is a complacent means to critique Christianity and to garner favor with one section of the reading public who have had a momentary lapse of thought. It is a little like that brand of work-shy “feminism” which is used in a casual way to criticize thinkers like Freud (“he was a chauvinist”) or even that brand found in statements such as “all men are bastards.” Unsurprisingly in this context, it self-appoints a Langdon-like handsome knightly hero to save the woman from a vague oppression.

Another area of “fun” supposedly found in *The Da Vinci Code* revolves around the use of codes. Among the many adulatory reviews to be found on Brown’s Web site is an article from *Wired* suggesting that “Where *The Da Vinci Code* does shine—brilliantly—is in its exploration of cryptology, particularly the encoding methods developed by Leonardo da Vinci, whose art and manuscripts are packed with mystifying symbolism and quirky codes” (Delio 2003). This is a prime example of the most astounding feature of the entire phenomenon of *The Da Vinci Code*: that is, the extent to which seemingly trusted organs and writers have lauded what is manifestly substandard fare. Given Brown’s interest in codes as evident from his previous novels, plus the fact that his Web site has now set up a public competition or “quest” based on code-breaking, one would have imagined that the codes in *The Da Vinci Code* would be quite sophisticated and testing. However, they

are uniformly crap. Although Neveu does indicate that the code found in the numbers Saunière has scrawled is “simplistic,” the novel takes until page 91 to get round to offering the decoding. It takes her a further 164 pages to work out that it is an “anagram” of the number to his safety-deposit box. As a product of the most underprivileged section of the British state school system, which allowed me to scrape a pass in the lowest level mathematics examination paper twenty-five years ago, I’m not sure whether I should feel proud to have recognized the scrambled Fibonacci sequence as soon as it was presented to Langdon on the parquet floor on page 69 and to have guessed that a safe combination was involved. Certainly, I seemed to have already sussed all the codes in the novel dozens of pages before any of the three protagonists, all of whom are supposed to be “experts.”

At the kindest, then, Brown’s writing is either hideously drawn out or the codes are, in fact, pretty puerile. More worrying, still, might be that the reading public and, certainly, the reviewers, all checked in their brains before reading the volume. Most of the quest element of the novel is too obvious to be fun. In one of the most measured and penetrating of reviews from a Catholic magazine, Sandra Miesler notes the telegraphed use of names in *The Da Vinci Code*:

Brown’s lack of seriousness shows in the games he plays with his character names—Robert Langdon, “bright fame long don” (distinguished and virile); Sophie Neveu, “wisdom New Eve”; the irascible taurine detective Bezu Fache, “zebu anger.” The servant who leads the police to them is Legaludec, “legal duce.” The murdered curator takes his surname, Saunière, from a real Catholic priest whose occult antics sparked interest in the Grail secret. As an inside joke, Brown even writes in his real-life editor (Faukman is Kaufman) (Miesel 2003).

Surprisingly, though, Miesler, like all other American reviewers I have read, manages to overlook the most piss-poor coded name of the lot, the ridiculous “Teabing” (Baigent).<sup>4</sup>

The issue of the codes in the novel, then, is one that runs into that of the novel’s “intelligence.” If one were a conspiracy theorist, it would certainly be tempting to assert that Random House had not only ghost-written all the laudatory reviews of the novel, touting its learned bearing, but had also intervened in the editing of the Catholic refutations (save for Miesler’s) to make them sound like mere dogmatic counter-attacks.<sup>5</sup> Brown’s Web site is a great source for short-sighted commendations of his “intelligent” scholarship, as are the covers of his books, littered with the acclaim of well-known rent-a-quotes such as Robert Crais, Nelson DeMille, and Harlen Coben. The New York *Daily News* claims that the scholarship is “impeccable.” If you did not distrust the news agenda of the *Daily News* before, here is reason to start. Meanwhile, Janet Maslin, in a review that lit the touch paper of the subsequent uncritical celebration, set the tone so successfully that one might have thought she had written a press release for Doubleday. According to her, the novel is “gleefully erudite” (Maslin 2003). The proliferation of such statements elsewhere might have been precipitated partly by the precedent Maslin set, but it is also likely that the oft-noted “Fact” page at

the front of the novel stating that Opus Dei and the Priory of Sion exist, had something to do with it. The “Fact” page adds that “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” Big deal. This is a little like writing a novel about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and finding out—to the American public’s amazement—that there are conspiracy theories about the shooting. To clinch your assertion that a second gunman was operating in Dallas on that fateful day in November 1963, you need merely assert as “fact” that “JFK was really assassinated. All descriptions of the Zapruder footage, the grassy knoll, and conversations between the President and the First Lady are accurate.” (You might even want to make one of the protagonists an “American Federal Historian.”)

If *The Da Vinci Code* was really a product of scholarship then it would evince knowledge of the way that academic research proceeds. Alas, for Brown, any university academic reading this novel would need a heart of stone to avoid being moved to laughter at Brown’s descriptions of the research process. A few examples of this might suffice. Langdon recalls a conversation with his editor about his new manuscript on the Grail legend. His editor—obviously inexperienced in the receipt of speculative crackpot theses—is dumbfounded and asks Langdon whether he can, in fact, be serious. Langdon replies that he is “Serious enough to have spent a year researching it” (p. 224). Wow, as much as a year? Gee, that is a long time. To compound matters, Brown has Langdon pass to the editor a page of his resources: “The page had a bibliography of over fifty titles” (p. 224). Gosh, what a lot of books to have read. Talking of the same manuscript, earlier, when he finds out that Sophie had “played Tarot”<sup>6</sup> as a child with her grandfather, “Langdon felt a chill. *They played Tarot*. The medieval Italian card game was so replete with hidden heretical symbolism that Langdon had dedicated an entire chapter in his new manuscript to the Tarot” (p. 129). An entire chapter in a book? My, it must be important. If this was not bad enough, Brown’s accounts of Langdon’s classes (for example, pp. 13–135) make monkeys out of both the students and the tutor. To say that they lack veracity is to understate matters. (I would love to see Langdon try to avoid a nervous breakdown while trying to teach a first year course on research methods at my university). One cannot help thinking that Brown, like many members of the general public, is absolutely fascinated by the existence of a secret society whose workings are such a mystery that they are the focus of all manner of juvenile fantasies. He would love to know more about the workings of this society but, for now, in lieu of that knowledge, he will simply make the details up. Unfortunately, the mysterious, almost unfathomable, secret society in the Langdon narratives is not the Illuminati, Opus Dei, the Merovingians or the Freemasons. It’s academia.<sup>7</sup>

That academia is the key subject in Brown’s murder of verisimilitude should be obvious from the outset.<sup>8</sup> Langdon is a “symbologist” employed by Harvard. He is supposedly an expert in religious symbols and icons, art history and occult lore, a mish-mash of disciplines that makes much more sense in the conspiratorial world of the thriller than in the modern university. Langdon is concerned with how signs work. In terms of the latter, then,

he is really a semiotician. “Symbology,” of course, does not exist. But one can only speculate as to why Brown eschews the term “semiotician”: It is maybe that, as has been seen, he is so ill-informed about contemporary academic life in general that he has never heard of semiotics; on the other hand, he may be shrewd enough to know that there is not, nor is there likely to be in the near future, any official semiotics at Harvard. But, then again, nor is there likely to be any “symbology.” The question is, how does Brown manage to get away with such flagrant inaccuracy? (Or, viewed from another angle, how does he manage to target so many willing dupes among the reading and reviewing public?) One has to smile, for example, when he authoritatively describes Teabing as “a British Royal Historian” (p. 225). For poor North Americans, I imagine the upper case must be quite intimidating. This is probably true if readers have to be told that Langdon originally met Teabing at “the British Broadcasting Corporation [sic]. Teabing had approached the BBC with a proposal for a historical documentary in which he would expose the explosive history of the Holy Grail to a mainstream television audience” (p. 294). But the upper case is somewhat misplaced: There is no such thing as an “official historian of royalty,” nor is there a “historian who is royal.” The epithet “Royal” is either an indication of Brown’s stupidity or is inserted for the benefit of the most scantily educated of the novel’s readers who need to be told that Britain is the place where the Queen and all the other strange-talking aristocrats live. (I can confirm the pin-point accuracy of this assertion since I, myself, live there, talk exactly like the Queen, and wear a crown.)

The other reason that Teabing is clumsily delineated as a British aristocrat is so obvious that I will not be giving anything away here when I say that he turns out to be the ultimate villain of the piece, the Teacher. Any fool knows that the British character in a low-quality American narrative is the villain. And for those who imagine that this is a heroic throwback to the American Revolution, Paul Revere, 1776, and all that, you are fooling yourself. The drearily predictable British villain is a product of political correctness from the late 1980s onward. Black, Oriental, or Hispanic villains are a real no-no. They could spell commercial disaster in certain sections of the market, particularly politically liberal ones. However, British villains are acceptable: They are foreign and, happily, in the Hollywood imagination, they are WASPs. No obvious racism, there, then, and no need to try to create home-grown villains. Murderous American terrorists like Timothy McVeigh and Ted Kaczynski? That would be unimaginable.

Clearly, then, one reason why Brown’s ridiculous formulations can just about be digested by the reading public is that they are served up with ready-cooked myths. Rather than being “intelligent,” it seems that the lowest level of thinking is being encouraged. The lowest level of reasoning is certainly on display in the narrative. If one reads enough of the material from the “occult” or “New Age” section of the book stores, this reasoning becomes fairly transparent. Where rigorous academic history does not fit the story in such literature, then it is guilty of a cover-up; and where alternative, occult histories are uncovered, this is because of a wealth of unconsidered sources. Langdon covers both issues—and, possibly, attempts to head off

charges that the novel is derivative—when he says “Magdalene’s story has been shouted from the rooftops for centuries in all kinds of metaphors and languages. Her story is everywhere once you open your eyes” (p. 336). What this boils down to, however, is an injunction to print the legend rather than the truth. For those whose imagination is challenged, the latter can sometimes be simply too mundane.

Nowhere is the mundane hard work of analysis more traduced and circumvented in the novel than in its discussion of signs. “Symbology” is formulated to resemble magic, to produce instant goals under the wand of the magician. Rather than investigating the factors attendant on the production of signification among signs, as semiotics does, Langdon goes for results which are, at the same time, quick, meretricious and obvious. For example, he throws in banality after banality about how signs work: “A white Ku Klux Klan headpiece conjured images of hatred in the United States, and yet the same costume carried a meaning of religious faith in Spain” (p. 60). Or, “Langdon paused. ‘Unfortunately, the United States military has also perverted the pentacle; it’s now our foremost symbol of war’” (p. 62). It is easy to understand why, for students, the ability to deconstruct sign systems and show the logic of their mechanisms might seem like magic. The truth of the matter, however, as many readers of this journal will know, is that it is the result of greater experience, plus some rigorous hardwork. It is not a mythological capacity. So, on the one hand, the reader is told that, “As a codebreaker, Sophie made her living extracting meaning from seemingly senseless data” (p. 115). Yet, on the other, the reader is asked to accept that she is astonished by the superior, “magical” faculty of Langdon when he asks whether the letters “P.S.” she has seen on one of her uncle’s possessions were combined with a fleur-de-lis (indicating membership of a brotherhood): “Sophie felt herself staggering backward in amazement. ‘But ... how could you possibly know that?’” (p. 157).

For those women who are allegedly “empowered” by the novel, it is a pity that Sophie Neveu has to act as the stooge for Langdon’s somewhat egregious acumen in the realm of signs. The poor woman is even surprised when Teabing argues that history is often a one-sided account, frequently an agreed fable and usually written by the victors, despite having a university education, “Sophie had never thought of it in that way” (p. 343).<sup>9</sup> One of the most ridiculous examples of sign analysis in the novel also takes Sophie as its credulous Watson and demonstrates an approach to signification that died an early death at the beginning of the seventies with Wilson Brian Key:

Langdon held up his Mickey Mouse watch and told her that Walt Disney had made it his life’s work to pass on the Grail story to future generations. Throughout his entire life, Disney has been hailed as “the Modern-Day Leonardo da Vinci.” Both men were generations ahead of their times, uniquely gifted artists, members of secret societies and, most notably, avid pranksters. Like Leonardo, Walt Disney loved implanting 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 (p. 349).

Without even accounting for the fact that any hidden messages in early Disney movies are more likely to have been planted there by Disney's disgruntled, nonunionized, and exploited workers, Langdon goes on to blithely tell of the class where a student of his paused a video of the *Lion King* (made well after Walt Disney's death) to show the word "SEX" (p. 350). If studying signs were like this—at once so full of mysteries and yet so easy—what a wonderful life it would be. As the narrator suggests earlier in the novel, when Langdon overinterprets a Swiss cross, "A career hazard of symbologists was a tendency to extract hidden meaning from situations that had none" (p. 235). The dual trouble with Langdon, regrettably, is the simultaneous extraction of both *too much* meaning and *not enough*.

Whereas the centrality of sign study to *The Name of the Rose* reflected well on semiotics, the chances of *The Da Vinci Code* doing favors for semiotics are somewhat limited. Indeed, there may be a concern that it will actually harm the credibility of an ambitious, interdisciplinary, and rigorous subject area. That *The Da Vinci Code* can be taken seriously by so many people and even become a phenomenon on the basis of such a paucity of literary, generic, and inventive qualities might constitute cause for concern. Of course, it can be argued that the publisher's publicity machine has helped; as have the preponderance of blog appreciations, the Web booksellers' appreciations,<sup>10</sup> and Web-inflected word-of-mouth publicity. The Catholic backlash has not been a hindrance, either. For many, Catholic comment on the book will be instantly ignored because it will be immediately construed as partisan. Yet, Opus Dei, who are one of the victims of Brown's unhistorical speculations, published a widely syndicated and credible review of the volume by Amy Welborn, which delivers some irrefutable comments, summing up the book nicely:

"The Da Vinci Code" is neither learned nor challenging—except to the reader's patience. Moreover, it's not really suspenseful, and the writing is shockingly banal, even for genre fiction. It's a pretentious, bigoted, tendentious mess, and the uniformly positive press—including a rave in *The New York Times* and a fawning National Public Radio interview with author Dan Brown—should give us serious pause.

[Its] . . . ultimate effect is something like Umberto Eco proudly presented by Fox Network (Welborn 2003).

As Welborn's review points out, apart from anything else, the volume is not a "well-crafted suspense novel":

There is precious little action. Characters stand in a restroom in the Louvre for two chapters explaining things to each other. Then they move to the Bank of Zurich, where they explain some more. And so on. These one-dimensional characters talk their way to Scotland where they spend a few chapters explaining the unsatisfying climax of this most wretched book (Welborn 2003; cf. Welborn 2004).

In truth, Brown's novels are reminiscent of a cross between Alistair MacLean's adventure stories (especially the group of protagonists betrayed by

one of their number) and the output of Dennis Wheatley, both of which I used to devour as a preteen. Indeed, *Angels and Demons* is almost a direct replay of MacLean's *The Satan Bug* (1962), although the dreaded chemical of the latter is replaced by anti-matter (the same plot device and substance used as long ago as MacLean's 1975 thriller, *Circus*). Yet where Brown lumbers over 500-plus pages, MacLean wrapped up his narratives in about 200. Long-winded Wheatley, unlike Brown, at least had the humility to indicate where he was being particularly self-indulgent and even advised, through the use of footnotes, that readers could skip specific passages unless they were particularly masochistic.

My objection to *The Da Vinci Code* is not so much that it has generated a tacky phenomenon and set a bandwagon in motion,<sup>11</sup> but that it has done so on such an insubstantial basis. The novel rides high in the British bestseller lists and, possibly because of the strenuous marketing campaign, has a considerable profile in English-speaking and other countries. Yet, possibly because of the familiarity of its source material in Europe, *The Da Vinci Code* has not been the subject of anything like the hysteria that has been called forth in the United States. Nevertheless, a blog by D. Wallis, repeatedly quoted on the Web, demonstrates that it is by no means the case that every American reader of the novel has been taken in; Wallis puts the matter thus:

Cliche ridden prose sketches flimsy characters who perform as mouths for theories cobbled from many other authors. Twisting fiction with bits of fact results in a stupefyingly muddled plot. The most astounding thing about this book is that such marginally mediocre writing has become a cultural phenomenon (quoted in *Mathematical Fiction* 2003).

As with the marginally more despicable Harry Potter phenomenon, *The Da Vinci Code* is just a rehash. Not a postmodern, ironic one which might offer something new, but a recycling of a twenty-year-old publishing fad. It has nothing to say that has not been said before. Moreover, the way it says what has been said before lacks all vestiges of credibility.<sup>12</sup> Absolutely fundamental to the thriller genre is the force of verisimilitude; without that, thrillers tend to get lost (see Cobley 1997, 2000, 2001). This is not to say that narratives about, say, police work, have to be absolutely accurate down to the last detail. Indeed, most of them are not, especially fictional narratives. However, to be totally cavalier with verisimilitude—especially where it concerns the occupation and the discipline that is central to the narrative—is to insult one's audience. Where would Grisham's books be without a grasp of the American legal system? Where would Dennis Lehane's novels be without considerable knowledge of blue-collar Boston? Where would Walter Mosley's fiction be without a convincing sense of postwar racial politics on the West Coast?

Perhaps I am arguing the case from the point of view of avid thriller readers. This is what we look for, although this is probably besides the point in this instance: Perhaps Brown's is the kind of novel which does best among people who don't usually read novels. Maybe such a formulation is the very determinant of its broad commercial success. It could be that signs

and the world of academia are both difficult and mysterious enough to not only attract the lay reader but also to suspend their incredulity through mere upper-case authorial assertion. The response to the book seems to suggest that it is providing its audience with something that audience yearned for already. Ultimately, it may be that *The Da Vinci Code* is, for many, the conclusion of a search at the foot of a rainbow. In that case, it's certainly worth iterating that the novel is a crock. But, equally worth reminding everybody, it is not of gold.

## Notes

1. Indeed, the thesis of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was already recycled on a major scale in 1997 with the appearance of Picknett and Prince's *The Templar Revelation*, another addition to the "mysteries" section of the book stores. The latter volume adds all the Leonardo da Vinci elements to the crackpot mix that Brown later reheats. While Picknett and Prince at least have the nous to refer to the artist by his first name, the foundations for their contentions—commencing with the assertion that Leonardo painted the Turin Shroud as part of an elaborate hoax on orthodox Christianity—are as brittle as those in Brown's novel. Recent printings of the Picknett and Prince volume have the following legend printed on the front: "As featured in the bestseller *The Da Vinci Code*," just in case the reading public are considering the dangerous move of demanding something original.

2. Not only do these issues supersede von Daniken's concerns, they also take over from, and add to, volumes from the von Daniken era on the nature of Stonehenge, the Spear of Destiny, the prescient sophistication of ancient astronomy, and so forth.

3. Kellmeyer's volume, for example, promises to address 72 different issues raised in *The Da Vinci Code* (in 96 pages), including:

- How Paul's Letter to the Galatians proves Jesus did not wed Mary Magdalene,
- How Christians understand the place of pain in the world,
- Correct interpretation of The Last Supper and The Madonna of the Rocks,
- Where the Mona Lisa's name comes from,
- Why pagan symbols have a role in Christian artwork,
- The historical origins of Wicca,
- Why both Christians and non-Christians mistakenly think sex is dirty,
- Why Germany is more important than France to understanding the novel's issues,
- Constantine's role in the early Church,
- The role of the Catholic Church in Renaissance witch trials,
- The role of war in Christian faith,
- How all the Catholics portrayed in the book are actually heretics.

Bock's volume was the subject of an injunction from Random House (see Johnson 2004).

4. As a comparison, in *Digital Fortress* it is difficult to believe that the protagonists, members of a dedicated cryptography agency take so long to realize that NDAKOTA is an anagram of TANKADO. The final, climactic, code in that novel is mind-numbingly obvious, too.

5. Andrew M. Greeley adds, "I can't understand why so many educated people are apparently unable to distinguish between fantasy fiction and history. If the book is a serious threat to Christianity, Christianity must be weaker than I thought it was. All the attention to refuting it is likely to sell more books" (quoted in Mehegan 2004).

6. Anyone who has read even the most prominent modern Tarot scholars, from Waite (1993) to Douglas (1973) will know that the major arcana of the Tarot pack is not principally designed for gaming.

7. It is worth noting that David Becker in the non-Langdon novel, *Digital Fortress*, is also an academic unconvincingly embroiled in skullduggery. Michael Tolland is the academic figure in *Deception Point*, although he is a "TV professor" and also a painfully stereotypical romantic hero—dashing, handsome and harboring a hidden emotional hurt.

8. In a move of palpably Grishamesque proportions, neither of the Langdon books contains swear words. It is easy to forget this when reading Grisham's novels because their narratives are so skillfully constructed and Grisham knows the world of legalese. But the absence of "fucking" and "bastards" in Brown's novels is striking—in my experience of academics, those are two of the most used words, usually in conjunction, and usually in reference to the senior management in universities.

9. *The Guardian* reports that the fact that Sophie Neveu is depicted as having studied at Royal Holloway, as she tells Teabing in the novel (p. 307), has led to a surge in applications to the college in the last year. This is one of the occasions when Brown gets it right: "Royal Holloway really does have an internationally rated cryptography group of academic researchers. The Information Security Group of computer scientists and mathematicians, led by Professor Fred Piper, won the Queen's Anniversary Prize in 1998 and is one of the largest academic security groups in the world" (MacLeod 2003). Nevertheless, it should not reflect well on either Brown or Royal Holloway that Ms. Neveu is such a dim-witted foil.

10. A *New Yorker* article reveals that one of the secrets of the success of the novel was "an advance-copy bombardment of booksellers, authors, and reviewers—ten thousand free books delivered to readers whose opinions supposedly matter enough to stimulate the traffic in editions that are not free." Among the tastemakers to receive a copy was Frank McInerney, an Amazon "plugger," one of Amazon.com's "most prolific generators of customer reviews" (Paumgarten 2003). Brown is sufficiently comfortable about this relationship to have the *New Yorker* article accessible on his Web site.

11. *The Rule of Four* (2004) by Caldwell and Thomason is marketed with the puff from *People* magazine to the effect that "If you loved *The Da Vinci Code* ..." etc.; Robert Finn's *Adept* (2004) is claimed to be "A British variant on *The Da Vinci Code*."

12. The title of this review is actually a quote from Brown's *Angels and Demons*. When Langdon attempts to rescue Vittoria from the Hassassin's clutches for the second time, without irony the latter utters the phrase that was

already deemed hopelessly cliched dialogue for villains in children's cartoon adventure series over thirty years ago (see Brown 2000, 482).

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