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Commentary: The Da Vinci Code

Author doesn't know Latin, needs to be schooled in French

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It's nothing short of the Second Coming. Dan Brown's spectacularly successful mystery novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, a book so relentlessly stupid that it makes owl dung seem wise, has made the leap to movie theaters throughout Christendom at last.

Millions of geese are about to be gratified anew by this patchwork piece of borrowed flapdoodle, this robustly awful novel, which makes the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes in the Bible look pale.



SIMON MEIN/HO

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Church officials asked the Italian Interior Ministry to remove a poster promoting *The Da Vinci Code* from the front of St. Pantaleo's in Rome's historic district. They complied.

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Brown's achievement is almost without precedent. Not since Mao Zedong's 1966 *Little Red Book* have so many people been so thoroughly hornswoggled by a literary production so intrinsically idiotic. The Chinese, at least, had the excuse that reading Mao was obligatory. We

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do not. We've swallowed this hokum whole, of our own free will.

It is hard to know what to marvel over more: the mooncalf author, or the 46 million mooncalf readers, who have actually forked over \$24.95 to

buy the hardback and

\$7.99 for the paperback of this stinkeroo (a signed first edition is going for \$4,228.50 on www.abebooks.com).

Brown, a former songwriter with a gift for English prose that would be the envy of many a high school freshman, has a mind that seeks out and fixates on the false, the spurious, the absurd, the ridiculous and the incredible as surely as a water-witch's divining rod seeks out bogus, buried springs.

After fossicking and pickaxing around the spoil heaps of beach literature with scant success, the shy, turtlenecked auteur finally struck gold in Mary Magdalene, the enigmatic fallen woman of the New Testament.

Mary Magdalene was (nudge, nudge, wink, wink) Mrs. Jesus, you see. After doing a Houdini and escaping from the Cross on Golgotha, J.C. and his new bride took the obvious course: They emigrated to France where, presumably, two Aramaic-speaking Jews would be welcomed by pagan Gauls. There, the happy couple lived in genteel obscurity, begetting a royal bloodline that survives to this day.

And in one of the most spectacularly limp denouements in modern fiction, Mary Magdalene's bones end up (figuratively) underneath the glass pyramid in front of the Louvre Museum in Paris, which was designed by a Chinese-born American architect, I.M. Pei.

Oh, well: One must admit that "The Da Vinci Code" is a snappier title than "The I.M. Pei Code."

Plagued by plagiarism in a London court

But enough of this idle badinage and persiflage. Up until now we have but lightly examined the intrinsic absurdity of Brown's plot. It is time we allowed a real person to speak, someone who actually has come face-to-face with Dan Brown.

Michael Baigent, 57, is a New Zealand religious scholar with several degrees and seven books to his credit, who, with Richard Leigh, wrote the book, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, 25 years ago and who recently unsuccessfully sued Brown for plagiarism in a London court.

Brown used a lot of Baigent's and Leigh's research, and had the gall to put Baigent in *The Da Vinci Code* as Sir Leigh Teabing (Teabing is an anagram of Baigent; Leigh is short for Richard Leigh), a Grail scholar who provides much of the background and basis for the whole novel.

At one point "Teabing" actually pulls a copy of Baigent's book off his library shelf and recommends it as a good introduction to Grail studies!

There is no better time to approach a poor, struggling UK author than just after he has lost an expensive lawsuit against an unbelievably rich and famous American. Baigent has a new book out, *The Jesus Papers*, and he's doing the usual Gethsemane-round of interviews, trying to pay his legal bills and stave off poverty and ruin.

So he sang like a thrush when it came to discussing the court case over *The Da Vinci Code*.

"I'm not reeling at all," he said in an interview from New York. "We always knew we would either win or lose. We factored that in. It was expensive to lose, but I'd already psychologically prepared myself, so it was not a major shock.

"The curiosity is that the judge (Peter Smith) agreed that Brown had taken it, but he still ruled it wasn't plagiarism. The whole thing was very distracting. Personally, it was incredibly stressing to be a part of it. I was unprepared for the levels of personal abuse that went on, and the amount of negative press.

"But I don't have any personal animosity against Dan Brown. If he had asked our permission, we would have given it. I did exchange a few words with him at the trial. He seems like a very simple guy. I don't think he's even been to half the places he describes in the book.

"He just doesn't seem to realize he did anything wrong. He doesn't realize that if you take something from somebody, you're supposed to acknowledge where you got it from. All of us writers are scratching around, I don't know many rich writers, but we generally do observe certain simple courtesies.

"Well, good luck to him. I'm ready to draw a line under it and move on."

Reminded that Brown apparently excogitated parts of his book by hanging upside down in gravity boots, to speed the flow of blood to his cerebellum, Baigent laughed. "Yes. I've heard that bats behave in similar fashion," he said.

While it could be convincingly argued that *The Da Vinci Code* is the intellectual equivalent of ipecac, it would be well, in all fairness, to bring some evidence to the table.

Where to begin, in this den of skulch?

At the beginning:

"Renowned curator Jacques Sauniere staggered through the vaulted archway of the museum's Grand Gallery . . ." Brown leads off. The time is 10:46 p.m. Sauniere is borrowed from Beranger Sauniere, a French priest prominent in Baignet's and Leigh's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. Sauniere the curator is dying, murdered. He takes off his clothes and arranges his bleeding body in the attitude of Leonardo Da Vinci's anatomical drawing, "Vitruvian Man."

The murder, we later learn, has been committed by the sinister Church-within-the-Church, Opus Dei, a sort of lay-priesthood founded in Spain in the 1920s. A huge albino monk named Silas goes lumbering around like a latter-day Golem, wiping out anyone with knowledge that the Holy Grail is really Mary Magdalene's pelvis. The real Opus Dei has strenuously objected to Brown's smearing their organization and the Vatican has taken issue with the whole book.

But let us not cavil. Let us instead note the time: 10:46 p.m. For the next 354 pages, the book happens on *one single night*.

Huge speeches, frantic car chases, pistol-wavings, a bank heist, the oral history of the Crusades and the Knights Templar, a desperate private jet plane flight to England, all occur within an impossible time trajectory: About five or six hours' worth of prose so tooth-grindingly awful that these samples can convey only a faint image of its banal horror:

"Face down on the parquet floor with his arms and legs spread wide, Langdon found little humor in the irony of his position . . ."

"You're a Harvard historian for God's sake, not a pop schlockmeister looking for a quick buck!"

"You are a Grail virgin, my dear. And trust me, you will never forget your first time."

"The historian's mirthful air faded. 'I'm not sure. It's puzzling. We will need to examine each of the ten tombs carefully. With luck, one of them will have a conspicuously absent orb.' "

"Silas' soul thundered with remorse and rage . . ."

Quick! The dramamine!

Boxes, keys, The Holy Grail and the Hardy Boys

Mercy and decency ought to admonish us that enough is enough; Brown is, after all, a mere mortal. All he did was write a Limburger-ripe, oafishly dimwitted, omnium-gatherum of errors that would be blasphemous if anybody took it seriously. But many people do take it seriously, and Brown is flourishing, financially.

So let me grind his bones to make my bread.

Much of the book is about boxes and chests and keys and anagrams, real Hardy Boys stuff, right out of Franklin W. Dixon. There are also ample borrowings from Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, an erudite mystery about the Knights Templar.

Beyond that it's mainly one big car chase, with Sauniere's granddaughter, Sophie, racing around with the bumbling help of Brown's hero, Robert Langdon, surely the most analphabetic scholar in modern fiction. For starters, he proudly wears a Mickey Mouse watch.

Langdon is a "symbologist" from Harvard ("symbology" being an academic discipline that does not exist). Langdon is supposed to know French. He doesn't, as the book shows. He is supposed to know Latin. He doesn't, because Brown doesn't. (Brown's wife apparently did most of the book research for *Code*.)

One of the most screamingly ludicrous episodes in the novel occurs on page 323 when Langdon and Teabing come across a specimen of Leonardo's writing.

"Leigh, I just can't seem to place it," Langdon says, perplexed.

It's backward writing, mirror-writing. Any 12-year-old who has read a life of Leonardo Da Vinci knows that Leonardo often wrote backward. But these two world-class scholars and alleged experts on Leonardo da Vinci are completely fozzled. Fortunately, they "solve" the mystery a few pages later, and we all sense a momentary pang of relief.

Awakening from a coma must feel like this.

Brown drives his plot with a whole slew of anagrams. An anagram is a rearrangement of letters in a word or phrase that yields a seeming meaning, read superficially, but has a real meaning underneath, once you unscramble the letters.

So the French curator Sauniere, dying, wanting to reveal the great Holy Grail Mystery, decides to scrawl a bunch of English anagrams all over the Mona Lisa room of the Louvre for his French grand-daughter to decipher: Really tough stuff like: SO DARK THE CON OF MAN, which is "Madonna of the Rocks" garbled.

This leads to the discovery of a key, which leads to a safe-deposit box, which leads to a carved wooden box, which holds a cylinder that can be opened only with a code, which holds another cylinder with another code, and so on.

Wait a minute: Why would a dying Frenchman write *English* anagrams to his *French* granddaughter? Answer: Brown doesn't know enough French to write French anagrams, or he would know that "con" is an obscenity in French.

Brown asserts the Romans loved to toy with anagrams and even called them the "Ars Magna," the great art. This struck me as odd, as I majored in Latin, studied the language for 10 years, have two degrees in it, and could not think of a single Roman anagram.

So I went to the topmost source: Prof. Alan Cameron, Anthon Professor of Latin at Columbia University, who wrote an article about ancient anagrams in the *American Journal of Philology* (Fall 1995; Vol. 116; No. 3).

"Odd you should ask me that precise question, because about 10 years ago I published an article arguing that Romans do not, in fact, seem to have liked anagrams. I can't say that I conducted a protracted search, but I couldn't find what we would nowadays call a true anagram," Cameron said.

So where did all the "Ars Magna" piffle come from? A Google search yielded up the truth. It appears in an erroneous entry in Wikipedia, the do-it-yourself encyclopedia online.

Though the book is cobwebbed with a lot of pseudo-antiquity, the amazing thing about it is how much of it comes from modern movies.

Thus the albino Silas is the heir of the white-haired assassin Grant in *From Russia With Love*, the killer replicant in *Blade Runner* and the albino mafioso in *The Firm*.

When Silas uses a heavy candelabrum to split the marble floor in the church of St. Sulpice, he's doing exactly what Harrison Ford did in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, to a chapel floor in Venice. And Indiana Jones is searching for . . . the Holy Grail!

The profusion of anagrams is filched from *The Silence of the Lambs*, in which the evil Dr. Hannibal Lecter teases FBI agent Clarice Starling with clues hidden in anagrams. "Your anagrams are showing, doctor!" she finally says impatiently.







One could go on and on. Brown certainly plans to. He has a sequel in the works and it will be interesting to see how far the limits of human gullibility can be pushed, just how deeply the human intellect can be dishonored.

All this recalls the old joke about the two goats, munching trash in a dump in Hollywood.

"How'd you like the movie?" asks one goat.

"I thought the book was better," answers the other.

Except this time the godawful, rubbishy book *is* the movie, even before the movie was made. It is its own sequel, a mess of regurgitated cinema.

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