

# THE DA VINCI CODE by Dan Brown, and film directed by Ron Howard

(Bantam Press, 2003 and Corgi Books, 2004; film released May 2006)

Book and Film Review by Peter Kirk

“The Da Vinci Code” is one of the best selling novels of all time. Now, as a film, it is a hit but not a record breaker. But it is also notorious, attracting condemnation from historians, literary critics and churches. So, what is all the fuss about?

Firstly, the book is a good example of a very popular type of novel. There is a huge market for mystery thrillers combining action and suspense with touches of history and religion. In “The Da Vinci Code”, as in his earlier “Angels and Demons”, Dan Brown followed this formula very skilfully. He added extra touches like historic locations, famous works of art, and codes to break, and turned his book into a quest for the Holy Grail. It is this which made the novel a record breaker, and ensured the success of a film which is actually a little disappointing. The highbrow literary and film critics like to disparage such works, but they sell far better than any Booker Prize or Cannes Palme d'Or winner.

But, while Dan Brown writes well, his research seems to be weak – or perhaps not. Novels are set in fictional worlds which are usually like our real world but not identical, for they include fictional characters, events and sometimes locations. Dan Brown preferred to use real locations, but his adaptations to fit his story are not accidental. Many authors, even Shakespeare, have made similar changes.



*Detail from The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci:  
Peter speaks to a youthful John, not Mary Magdalene*

Dan Brown has also written into the novel speculative ideas on religion and history, such as that the Church suppressed the feminine side of religion. The most controversial idea is that Jesus Christ was married to Mary Magdalene, and that their descendants are alive today. This is nothing new: it is taken straight from books like “Holy Blood, Holy Grail” (1982, credited in the text), “non-fiction” bestsellers for years for their exposés of supposed conspiracies involving Templars, Freemasons etc.

In the novel these speculations are treated as fact, or at least as being accepted by a reputable Harvard professor. Within a fictional world, this is reasonable. But on an introductory page headed “Fact” Dan Brown gives details from a parchment which scholars consider a forgery. Maybe he has chosen to ignore the scholars, or maybe he has got his facts wrong, but a novel isn’t supposed to be true. He obviously has an anti-clerical message in mind, but this is a long tradition in novels, and the Church is one of the few “politically correct” sources of villains.

The same speculations come up in the film, although the professor is more sceptical. But the anti-clerical message is played down, and there is no claim to be anything more than fiction.

So, I can recommend “The Da Vinci Code” as good light reading, and as an entertaining but rather slow-moving film. But it should not to be taken too seriously. For Dan Brown is no expert on religion, he has simply copied wild speculations from others. As for the Church suppressing the sacred feminine, does Brown really want to bring back an old paganism in which virgins were exploited for ritual orgies? But in the modern Church male dominance is receding, and men and women can increasingly fulfil their individual callings regardless of gender.

So, enjoy the book and the film as fiction, but don't mistake them as fact.

(May 2006, published in Baddow Life, Issue 12, Summer 2006)