

Exposing “The Da Vinci Code”

From the Book to the Movie, an Industry Thrives on Deception

by **Edmondo Lupieri**



It should be clear to everybody that a writer of fiction is free to invent whatever he or she may please, and even to rewrite history.

I personally have no problem with reading a story in which a serial killer is an albino monk who is a member of Opus Dei (although Opus Dei has pointed out that it has no monks). Just as I have no problem with reading a novel that talks about the sex life of Jesus of Nazareth (there have been more than a few, one that even claims that he was gay, and that John the Evangelist was his favorite). As long as the author has the courtesy to admit that what he has written is indeed fiction and not a work with serious claims to uncovering a secret that has been hidden for centuries.

It matters little that in recent interviews, Dan Brown has said that his “The Da Vinci Code” should be read as fiction. At the opening of the book, before the narrative proper even begins, he inserts a page with the heading, “Fact,” in which he proposes his first fib to the reader: that a secret religious association, the “Priory of Sion,” really does exist, and that it has helped a haggard group of unjustly persecuted heroes (belonging to a church selected at random: the Roman Catholic church) to protect the Truth. But if the author considers the Priory of Sion a “fact,” it only follows that the reader is authorized to believe in the truth of all the other tall tales related in the novel, often by characters who would be rather dull university professors. In particular, the great secret feared by the Church is supposedly that Jesus Christ married Mary Magdalene and with her had a baby girl (who ended up in France, where she would start the dynasty of French kings known as the Merovingians). Now the film is about to come out, and the trailer is already proclaiming, “Seek the Truth.”

What we are dealing with here is a huge commercial operation, based on scandal-seeking advertising that exploits people’s ignorance of religious history.



Tom Hanks and Audrey Tautou in a scene from “The Da Vinci Code.”

The machinery has worked perfectly, so well that few people ask themselves whether the novel has any literary worth. Various websites post letters from readers claiming that “The Da Vinci Code” “opened their eyes,” or “changed their life,” by revealing the great cover-up orchestrated to keep humanity in the dark. This phenomenon means not so much that our society is secularized, but rather that there is a great religious curiosity because of this widespread ignorance. It also means that our research and our teaching have not reached ordinary people.

Now bishops and cardinals are calling for a boycott of the film. Albino associations are protesting the negative stereotypes used to depict the albino character. In Jordan, there have been petitions to ban the film (in the Koran, the figure of Jesus, son of the Virgin Mary and the last great prophet before Muhammad, is very positive, and Dan Brown’s story is considered blasphemous). At this point, however, given the worldwide popularity of the novel and the probable triumph of the film, protesters risk being seen as

elements of the notorious cover-up, interested in defending some nefarious interests. Indeed, in all probability any *fatwa* that condemns the film or the book, or any judgment critical of its contents, will ultimately become free advertising that helps to make the film even more popular. The author, producers, and distributors are evidently counting on this. They would like nothing better than a nice controversy that whets people’s curiosity.

So how should we respond? I will tell you what I plan to do, or rather, what I plan not to do. I will not contribute one cent of my hard-earned dollars to fattening the coffers of someone who has already made millions by consciously deceiving his readers. If the film, regardless of its treatment of history, turns out to be good, then I’ll borrow the DVD from the library and take a look at it, a year down the road, once the storm has passed.

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