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Veni, vidi, da Vinci

Dan Brown's thriller came in print, it saw film potential, it will conquer (again)

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The Da Vinci Code, the cinematic Second Coming, is on its way. Next week, the movie version of Dan Brown's fast-paced thriller The Da Vinci Code, starring Tom Hanks and Audrey Tautou, will premiere at Cannes two days before being unleashed upon North America. Las Vegas bookies are taking bets on the money it will rake in on its first

weekend. Since most of us who have read the book will want to see the movie, odds are good that box office receipts will break a record.

In the movie, Hanks plays Robert Langdon, a U.S. symbologist who teams up with French cryptologist Sophie Neveu (Tautou) to investigate the murder of her grandfather. Paul Bettany plays a mad albino monk who belongs to the conservative Catholic lay organization Opus Dei, which is supposedly involved in the Vatican's attempt to guard the 2,000-year-old secret that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus Christ and had his child - a bloodline, we are told, that survives.

Brown's novel, on which the movie is based, skyrocketed to the top of bestseller lists in 2003 - and stayed there. Three years later, according to its New York publisher, the tally of copies in print is 60.5 million - in 44

languages, including all formats. The French version has hit the 3 million mark worldwide, of which 250,000 copies have been sold in Quebec.

While most readers take *The Da Vinci Code* with a grain of salt, a recent National Geographic Channel survey conducted by Decima Research Inc. said that of the one in five Canadians who have read *The Da Vinci Code*, 32 per cent believe Dan Brown's historical theories to be true, especially the one about the secret Jesus bloodline. Another recent survey revealed that a startling 24 per cent of adults in France actually swallow the book's historical details as fact.

But in Montreal, it's tough to find anyone who's losing sleep over the imminent cinematic arrival of this "heretical" work, which begins with the murder at the Louvre in Paris. More typical is Father Peter

Laviolette of Ascension Parish in Westmount, an avid reader of detective novels. "I loved the book and I can't wait to see the movie," he said. "It's fiction." And if disturbing questions are raised by The Da Vinci Code, "it's good for people to have their faith shaken up once in a while," he noted.

"No one should be insulted, " said Rabbi Leigh Lerner of Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, who also is eager to see the movie version of the book. "It's a novel. If it's truth you're looking for, it's not there. But if it's entertainment, it's fantastic."

At least one protestant Quebec clergyman, Claude Houde, pastor of l'Eglise Nouvelle Vie de Longueuil, has responded in kind, publishing a book titled Les mensonges du Code da Vinci, following a "debunking The Code" trend in the U.S. that has produced dozens of books along the

lines of religious scholar Bart D. Ehrman's Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code.

Still, no matter how easy it is to dismiss the writing (clever fluff) of The Da Vinci Code, or disdain the shallow and misinformed research (more holes than Swiss cheese), you have to admire the hype and the merchandising behind this pop culture, multi-platform juggernaut. The Da Vinci Code is everywhere. You can purchase the hardcover, the trade paperback, the audio book (abridged and unabridged), the illustrated hard cover, the video game, the Fodor's Travel Guide and, as of next week, the illustrated film script. That's only the tip of the iceberg.

Those searching for a "why" to the success of The Da Vinci Code often cite religious ignorance in a secular age.

Forty years after a Time Magazine cover story declared that God was dead, spiritual education has waned to the point that many North Americans are as ignorant of the Bible as they are of the Torah, the Quran, the Upanishads or the Complete Works of William Shakespeare. Add to that the forces of globalization, the unprecedented disseminating power of the Internet, the mortality jolt delivered by the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, a number of very public sex scandals involving Roman Catholic clergy and the childish thrill of playing spy in a house of secrets. (Shh! The bogeyman is coming! And he's a monk!). Conspiracy theory never had it so good. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown got away with writing "almost everything our fathers taught us about Christianity is false."

Back in 1966, John Lennon set off a firestorm of controversy when he

flippantly remarked that the Beatles had become more popular than Jesus. American Christian protesters burned record albums, boycotted concerts.

The easily offended appear less inclined to take to the streets this time around, perhaps having learned their lesson from failed attempts to suppress Martin Scor-sese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988 and from Mel Gibson's 2004 *The Passion of the Christ*, which actually rekindled interest in the Greatest Story Ever Told. There has been a bit of grumbling about *The Da Vinci Code* from at least several Catholic cardinals, an Anglican archbishop and a handful of Catholic ones. A movie poster or two has been torn down in Italy, a few ultra-conservatives have protested in Rochester, N.Y., and discussions about banning the movie continue in Jordan, a Muslim country that had

previously banned The Da Vinci Code book (as did Lebanon), as well as in the Philippines. In Mumbai, India, the book was burned. In Paris, they're looking forward to an influx of tourists.

So far, the Pope has stayed out of it all. And the head of Opus Dei in Canada, Msgr. Fred Dolan, thinks he's wise to do so. Dolan is actually looking on the bright side. "We're having a blast, actually," he said, speaking to the Gazette via cellphone from the lobby of the Vancouver Sun, where he was awaiting the arrival of a Global Television crew for his next interview. "That could sound a little bit frivolous," he added, "because the book has damaged the figure of Jesus Christ, the origin of the Church. But at the same time we see it as just a really unique moment in history in which we in Opus Dei suddenly have the world's attention. And also the Church has the world's attention."

He sees it as a chance to encourage people to crack open their dustladen Bibles. "It's a great teaching moment."

Incidental blessings include the fact that Opus Dei was motivated to "vastly improve" its website, just before hits reached "new orders of magnitude." Best of all, a huge international publishing house came calling, with a request for permission to publish Opus Dei founder Josemaria Escriva's seminal book *The Way*. Up until then, publishing the book had been an Opus Dei cottage industry. "Then all of a sudden Doubleday comes along," said Dolan, "And they're not mom and pop. They're the big guys."

Meanwhile, an American evangelical group is getting into the act with a 26-hour, 10-DVD version of the New Testament released May 2, just in time to compete with *The Da Vinci*

Code. It's called the WatchWord Bible.

Sony Pictures, producer of the The Da Vinci Code film, has other worries. Nobody likes Tom Hanks's hairdo. The soundtrack has been declared too scary for children. And director Ron Howard has nixed the idea of adding a disclaimer to the film to appease those with ruffled feathers. As for the movie critics, they're not even on the radar - yet.

The Da Vinci Code is scheduled to open in Montreal theatres Friday.

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Pat Donnelly // The Gazette,
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