

Holy humbug

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There is something about archaeological quests, ancient religious relics and mystical iconography that can turn the average bombs and bullets story into a real magical mystery tour.

So a novel that begins with the bizarre murder of a Louvre curator, the successor to Leonardo da Vinci and Isaac Newton as the head of a secret society dedicated to concealing the Holy Grail and the truth about Christ, raises the hairs on the back of

the neck and almost inspires faith in the publisher's hype.

But the title of Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code ought to be a warning, evoking the infamous formula of Robert Ludlum: definite article and ordinary word, with an exotic epithet interposed.

From The Scarlatti Inheritance, via The Matarese Circle to his final The Prometheus Deception, Ludlum turned out a string of extravagant plots acted out by cardboard characters uttering ludicrous dialogue.

Dan Brown, I am afraid, is his worthy successor.

This is without doubt, the silliest, most inaccurate, ill-informed, stereotype- driven, cloth-eared, cardboard-cutout-populated piece of pulp fiction that I have read. And that's saying something.

It would be bad enough that Brown has gone into New Age overdrive by trying to draw together the Grail, Mary Magdalene, the Knights Templar, the Priory of Sion, Rosicrucianism, Fibonacci numbers, the Isis cult and the Age of Aquarius. But he has done it so sloppily. Early on there is a hint, when Sophie, the French police cryptography expert heroine, reveals that her grandfather told her "an astounding 62" other words could be made out of the English "planets".

"Sophie spent three days with an English dictionary until she found them all."

I am no cryptographer, but, including plurals, I managed to notch up 86 in 30 minutes.

No surprise, then, when Sophie and her American symbologist companion are flummoxed by a strange written text that they suspect

may be a form of ancient Semitic. It turns out to be longhand English mirror-writing (which is exactly what it looks like).

These might be minor niggles were it not for the fact that the plot is essentially a treasure hunt involving precisely such clues. It takes them an unconscionably long time to figure out that her name is a form of "sofia", meaning "wisdom".

Maybe that is not so strange after all. Apart from the "puzzles", the book is littered with misconceptions, howlers and location descriptions that come straight out of tourist guide books.

Brown obviously believes it is hard for French mobile phones to call "transatlantic", that Interpol records each night who is sleeping in which Paris hotel room, that someone in Scotland Yard answers the phone with "This is the London police," that

English is a language that has no Latin roots and England a country where it always rains (OK, so he may be right there).

Inevitably, the dodgy British character is an upper-class Gielgudesque parody, called Sir Leigh Teabing, whose test to let them through his security gates is to ask how they take their tea. The right answer -oddly -is Earl Grey with milk and lemon.

The mystery's solution is wholly unsatisfactory and the assumed bad guys, Opus Dei and the Vatican, are let off the hook, presumably for fear of American lawsuits.

Brown's publishers have drummed up a handful of glowing comments from American thriller writers just bubbling under the first division. I can only assume the reason for their fulsome praise was because this

makes their own work look like masterpieces in comparison. ...

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