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‘Da Vinci’ code for Catholic bashing

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Who says that Catholicism doesn't influence American culture? The number one best-selling fiction title in the nation, "The Da Vinci Code" (Doubleday, \$25) has "Catholic" on practically every page. Granted, the word is usually awfully close to words like "repressive," "patriarchal," and "brutal," but you have to take what you can get.

Or do you?

Since its release in March, the book has surprised many by becoming a best seller. The word on the street is that it's an "intelligent thriller," challenging the reader's mind with a suspenseful plot, but also with lots of culture and learning.

But "The Da Vinci Code" is neither learned nor challenging — except to the reader's patience. Moreover, it's not really suspenseful, and the writing is shockingly banal, even for genre fiction. It's a pretentious, bigoted, tendentious mess, and the uniformly positive press — including a rave in The New York Times and a fawning National Public Radio interview with author Dan Brown — should give us serious pause.

But if you think you might like a book whose ultimate effect is something like Umberto Eco proudly presented by Fox Network, here's the plot, such as it is:

(Be warned, there are “spoilers” ahead. A book this bad deserves to be spoiled, but if you don’t want to know what happens, stop reading now.)

A curator at the Louvre is murdered in a gallery, but before he dies, he manages to leave clues and arrange his body in a significant way. His cryptologist granddaughter, Sophie Neveu, and a visiting American academic, Robert Langdon, whose specialty is religious symbolism, are drawn into the case and discern that Grandpere Saunier was trying to leave a message — not about his killer, but about a Big Secret.

Catholic conspiracy

Saunier was part of an ancient secret society called the Priory of Sion, for centuries charged with protecting the Big Secret. The Big Secret threatens to disrupt Life As We Know It. Naturally, the Catholic

Church has spent the last thousand years making sure that it doesn't get out.

So, what's the Big Secret? Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, who was pregnant when He was crucified. Their child's descendents are still alive, anonymous and protected by the Priory.

The Priory is also the guardian of the real true faith Jesus and Mary Magdalene wanted passed on: the celebration of the "sacred feminine ."

The Da Vinci Code, then, is the story of the big race to reach the Holy Grail – which turns out to be not the chalice of the Last Supper but the remains of Mary Magdalene, mostly.

Sophie and Langdon race against the Church, primarily represented by an albino Opus Dei adherent taking directions from a bishop and mysterious "Teacher."

They race from clue to clue left by Sophie's code-loving Grandfather, puzzles left everywhere from the Bank of Zurich to the Church of Saint-Sulpice to Westminster Abbey to the paintings of Leonardo DaVinci.

Da Vinci, the story goes, portrayed his devotion to the Holy Grail of the sacred feminine into his Last Supper. The figure at Jesus' right is not a male, but Mary Magdalene, who is his partner in the gospel of the sacred feminine.

Same old lies

Hardly any of this background is original. Most of it is derived directly from the fantasy-disguised-as-history work "Holy Blood, Holy Grail," and the rest of it is cobbled from other bits of well-worn and risible nuggets of esoteric and Gnostic conspiracy theories.

Brown's treatment of the Roman Catholic Church is unoriginal as well. He uncritically repeats, among many other lies and distortions, the canard that the Church was responsible for killing five million accused witches during the medieval period.

And, I bet you didn't know the divinity of Jesus Christ thing was invented by the Emperor Constantine as a way of shoring up his power:

"My dear....until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet....a great and powerful man, but a man nevertheless. A mortal.'

"Not the Son of God?'

"Right.' Teabing said. 'Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea.'

‘Hold on. You’re saying Jesus’ divinity was the result of a vote?’”

Whoa, dude!

You get the picture. This is not exactly the learned, intellectually engaging work it’s cracked up to be.

Neither is it a well-crafted suspense novel. There is precious little action. Characters stand in a restroom in the Louvre for two chapters, explaining things to each other. Then they move to the Bank of Zurich, where they explain some more. And so on. These one-dimensional characters talk their way to Scotland where they spend a few chapters explaining the unsatisfying climax of this most wretched book.

Books this bad are usually best ignored, but in addition to being a best seller, Amazon reader reviews show a startling number of people are deeply gratified the book has

taught them some history they didn't know before.

So thanks to "The Da Vinci Code," Catholicism is blipping on the cultural radar, loud and clear, aided by aggressive marketing and generous reviewers of influence, defining Catholic Christianity for scores of gullible readers.

Talk about a conspiracy. ...

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