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Novel Gods: A pair of bestsellers roll their own religion

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The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown
Doubleday, 454 pp., $24.95

The Lovely Bones A Novel by Alice Sebold Little Brown, 288pp., $21.95

NO ONE REALLY EXPECTS a bestseller to be a work of much literary quality these days. A bestseller is largely the product of packaging, merchandizing, and manipulation. But one could never

have expected the level of manipulation found in a pair of religious novels that have been selling prodigiously well this past year.

As it happens, the religion in both "The Da Vinci Code" and "The Lovely Bones" comes across as basically godless. Well, in a manner of speaking. Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code" offers us Mary Magdalene (a nice high-born Jewish virgin, please, not the reformed prostitute known by that name), who marries Jesus, bears him children, and then is appointed his successor in the church for ages to come. In short, we are in for a deeply, profoundly feminist view of the Catholic faith. As for Alice Sebold's "The Lovely Bones," the whole story is told from a feminine point of view and gives us a heaven with no God the Father, let alone his Son seated on His right

hand to judge the quick and the dead.

Both books are clearly aimed at female readers, but then women are thought to be the main buyers of fiction in this country and age. It's hard to imagine many male readers responding to either of these novels unless their feminine sensibilities are of a singular sensitivity. Indeed, Dan Brown comes right out with it in the last paragraph of his acknowledgments in "The Da Vinci Code": "And, finally, in a novel drawing so heavily on the sacred feminine, I would be remiss if I did not mention the two extraordinary women who have touched my life. First, my mother, Connie Brown--fellow scribe, nurturer, musician, and role model. And my wife, Blythe--art historian, painter, front-line-editor, and without a doubt the most astonishingly talented woman I

have ever known." Men, read at your own peril.

As it happens, the book gets off to a properly masculine opening. Late at night in a gallery in the Louvre in Paris, an aged curator confronts a monstrous pink-eyed albino who demands to know where some secret lies. When the curator refuses to tell, the albino carefully shoots him fatally in the gut. "Pain is good, monsieur," says the albino, slipping away.

Following the page where he blesses his mother and wife on their beneficent influence on his life, Brown presents his readers with a page headed "FACT" in bold face--where he states that the book's "Priory of Sion" is a real organization, a European secret society founded in 1099 with such members as Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Leonardo da Vinci.

He adds that the "Vatican prelature known as Opus Dei is a deeply devout Catholic sect that has been the topic of recent controversy due to reports of brainwashing, coercion, and a dangerous practice known as 'corporeal mortification.'" He then adds that "the Opus Dei has just completed construction of a $47 million National Headquarters at 243 Lexington Avenue in New York City." He winds up with a final sentence: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."

CALL ME A SKEPTIC, but this I simply do not buy. The rituals he recounts are a mishmash of an author's reading in various fanciful tales. If you've ever considered the possibility that the Holy Grail sought by King Arthur's knights is really the chalice containing the bones of the True Mother of the Church, then "The Da Vinci Code" is the book for you. If

your imagination has never moved in quite that direction, the book is better skipped: You're not likely to be moved by the 454-page book's final description of Brown's hero falling to his knees before the three-foot tall pyramid beneath the enormous glass pyramid in the Louvre's courtyard--because he has at last discovered that the Sacred Mary's bones are there.

As for general factual accuracy of detail, let me say if Brown, his mother, his wife, and his editors believe that the Hotel de Crillon is about a mile from the American Embassy (actually, it's just across the rue Boissy d'Anglas), they are hardly to be trusted on more complex matters of religious lore. Brown's view of Paris is really quite imaginative. The Carrousel du Louvre was, he writes, "once the site of Paris' primeval nature-worshipping festivals . . . joyous rites to celebrate fertility and the

Goddess." Oh, please. Someone needs to give the man and his editors both a standard history of Christianity and a map.

Brown's earlier novel, "Angels and Demons"--which features a pope committing suicide in a burst of flames on a balcony in St. Peter's Basilica--shows an equal disregard for historical accuracy and a marked hostility to the Catholic Church. But it has risen high on the paperback-bestseller list this summer, thanks presumably to the success of "The Da Vinci Code." It's really very naughty of Brown and his publishers to try to pass this gallimaufry off simply by sprinkling actual historical names and details here and there.

MEANWHILE, this year's other religious bestseller, Alice Sebold's "The Lovely Bones," has the partial merit of being reasonably well written, a small cut above most pop-

thriller fiction. Fourteen-year-old Susie, the narrator, was brutally raped and murdered, but she can stay around Earth, observing and growing up, and even experiencing a wonderful vicarious sexual encounter.

While Susie keeps an eye on her beloved family, she and some other young women who also met untimely ends go to high school in a sort of vague Purgatory, but a nice high school that every teenage female in Sebold's world no doubt dreams of: no schoolbooks, no homework, but lots of pretty women's fashion magazines to browse through. When Susie finally makes it to Heaven (a fairly nebulous process, incidentally), she declares, in case any of us here on earth might have any doubts: "Heaven is fun." And Susie--not God, as He is nowhere present in this work--deals out

punishment herself, finally wreaking vengeance upon her rapist.

There is, it must be said, something frankly obscene about these works offering their jejune comfort in the world as we find it today. Early in the twentieth century, Max Weber regretted a world from which "the ultimate and sublime values" had been withdrawn. Where are those "ultimate and sublime values" today when we need them more than ever?

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