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DAN BROWN “THE DA VINCI CODE”, SYDNEY: CORGI, 2003

“Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false”, states one of the characters in a world best-selling book. Dan Brown’s “The Da Vinci Code” has taken the publishing world by storm.

First published in March 2003, it is now the best selling adult fiction book in recent history and the best-selling hard cover novel of all time. A total of about 17 million copies have been sold in 42 languages.

The novel has also created an “industry” of books replying to it. These are mainly by angry Christians and historians appalled at its errors. There are also over 2 million sites listed on the Google search engine.

But its popularity keeps rolling on. There are now tours of the European locations mentioned in the novel and at least one guidebook to them. The novel will be made into a movie in 2005 starring Tom Hanks.

The novel mentions a priest who died in 1917 in southern France. His grave had to be rebuilt in November 2004. This was to protect it from tourists trying to open it. He now rests in peace under a three and half tone sarcophagus, surrounded by five cubic metres of concrete.

What is all this fuss about?

The novel deals with Harvard Professor Robert Langdon and French police expert Sophie Neveu (herself unknowingly related to Jesus) who are caught up in a series of murders being conducted by a violent Catholic monk.

The novel argues that Jesus was an extraordinary human but only a human – He was not God. He did not die on the Cross. Instead Jesus and his wife Mary Magdalene (and eventual daughter Sara) went to live in the south of France. There their family married into the French line of Merovingian kings; their descendants are among us today.

This story has been kept alive by a secret society “The Priory of Sion”, to which many famous Europeans have belonged. They have passed the truth on from one generation to the next. The Priory guards this ancient secret that, if revealed, would undermine the authority of the church and completely discredit biblical Christianity. The Priory also carefully guards the secret

location of Mary's tomb and serves to protect the bloodline of Jesus that has continued to this day.

Artist Leonardo da Vinci was one of the Priory members. The "Da Vinci code" is in his the painting (done 1495-8) of "The Last Supper". The person on Jesus' right is not (as was thought) the young apostle John but in fact Jesus' partner Mary Magdalene. She is sitting in the place of honour at Jesus' right hand.

In the novel, the monk from the sinister Catholic organization Opus Dei is now hunting down all the current Priory of Sion leaders and killing them. With them all out of the way, the secret history of Jesus and Mary will disappear forever.

Langdon and Nevue are caught up in the violence in Paris. They flee Paris to avoid being killed and to find out more about why the murders are taking place.

In particular they are looking for clues of the Holy Grail. Traditionally, the Holy Grail has been thought of as the chalice used at the Last Supper. But in fact, as da Vinci has shown, the Holy Grail is not a cup but the body of Mary carrying the soon to be born daughter Sara. The Holy Grail is not a cup – it is the bones of Mary Magdalene.

The novel has outraged many Christians and historians. There is no evidence at all to support the claims about Jesus and Mary ever getting married, or having a daughter or living in the south of France or of their marrying into the French royal line.

Many of the early Christians died for their faith. They would not have done so if they had known that it was a fake and that Jesus was happily living with his wife and daughter in retirement in the south of France

"Everybody loves a conspiracy", one of the characters says in the novel. This novel is full of conspiracies, such as the shadowy Priory of Sion still manipulating events today behind the scenes. It is supposed to be the ultimate of secret societies.

But there is no evidence that Leonardo da Vinci was a member of the Priory of Sion - or that it even existed in his day. The evidence of the Priory's supposed long history in southern France goes back to some "secret files" found in the 1960s in a French library. But these were later revealed to be a hoax and some of the modern founders of the group had criminal records. There is no evidence that the Priory has any influence in France.

Meanwhile the novel's 600 pages also contain a variety of minor errors. For example, in the first paragraph on the first page, the murdered curator at the Louvre Museum and member of the Priory of Sion, Jacques Sauniere, is aged 76. But that is well beyond the compulsory French civil service retirement age and so he would no longer be employed at the Louvre Museum.

The author claims that the Catholic Church executed five million women as witches. In fact the figure was no more than 50,000 people – both female and male. That figure is still bad – but not nearly as bad as suggested by Brown.

The author claims that the Vatican tried to stop the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in the late 1940s. In fact it did not – and some Catholics have been part of the team translating them. Meanwhile, the author does not understand much about the Dead Sea Scrolls. They do not deal with Christianity as such because they were done by a Jewish community.

Why has the novel sold so well?

It begins with a statement of “Fact”, which among other things says that “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate”. It therefore exploits the low level of Biblical awareness of readers who do not know nonsense when they read it.

The novel taps into the low level of historical awareness of Christians (let alone other readers). Many Christians do not pay enough attention to their own history.

The novel taps into the New Age quest for goddesses. As one of the characters states: “Jesus was the original feminist. He intended for the future of His Church to be in the hands of Mary Magdalene”.

It offers a religion where there is more emphasis on female leaders. But men took control of the church soon afterwards and Mary was cast aside in church thinking and branded a prostitute. Men got control of the church and never lost it. They defamed her, the book claims, in order to cover up her dangerous secret – her role as the Holy Grail and designated leader.

Finally, the novel is particularly hostile towards the Catholic Church (“the Vatican”). It is capitalizing upon the widespread current criticism of the Catholic Church for child abuse, etc. This is the basis of the author’s suggestion that the Catholic Church has been willing to use assassination to stop the growth of the bloodline of Jesus and Mary. It suggests that the Vatican will do anything to maintain its power and privilege. But at the novel’s end, Brown backs away from that claim, no doubt to avoid complaints of religious bigotry.

In short, the book is an exciting read – but it should be taken completely as a work of fiction. There are very few true “facts” in it. It is to religious history, what John Wayne movies are to the history of the American West.

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