



## M-P Opinions

### Cracking the code

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#### *BOOK NOTES* by Joan Ruddiman

Everyone's talking about "The Da Vinci Code," the mystery by fiction writer Dan Brown. Brown blends the worlds of art, mysticism, the Knight Templars, the Vatican — and more — with the world's evils — deception, power and greed. The result is a rollicking good read, a really nice bit of entertainment. Unfortunately, what people are talking about is not the mystery that fiction writer Dan Brown cleverly crafts, but the "history" behind the story.

Let's make it really explicit. Dan Brown writes fiction. "The Da Vinci Code" is a mystery, a novel, a piece of fiction and nothing more. That he chooses to weave in conspiracy theories based on bits of facts makes the story intriguing, but does not make it true.

For those who see Brown's novel as a major bash against the Catholic Church, various popes, priests and the Opus Dei organization, remember that he is writing a mystery. Think "red herrings" — the clues that pull the reader off the trail when trying to guess "whodunnit." Rather heavy-handedly, Brown lays down the clues to divert his readers so they have that satisfying "ah ha!" moment when the real culprit is revealed in the last pages.

Good fiction asks the reader to suspend disbelief. So we accept — in the spirit of the story — some really wacko ideas and thus are rewarded with a fun, not very demanding reading experience. Honestly, if you don't buy into the conspiracy theory stuff, the mystery is rather transparent. Brown does go heavy on the foreshadowing.

For those who read the book while forgetting it is a mystery novel by the fiction writer Dan Brown, the experience can be more time consuming and, ultimately, frustrating. Resist the urge to cross-check "clues" with copies of Da Vinci's masterpieces, a map of the Louvre, and searches on the Internet for Holy Grail theories. The deeper you dig to make sense of Brown's plot the less it holds together.

However, for those who are specifically intrigued by the "secret gospel" strand of the plot, here's a suggestion: Read them for yourself. In the fields of theology and ancient history, there is nothing secret about the gospels Brown uses to build his grand conspiracy. The existence of the Dead Sea Scrolls is common knowledge. Less known, but by no means a secret, are the parchments uncovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945 which tell the story of Jesus from the point of view of several earlier followers. Mary Magdalene has her own gospel. Gospel literally

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means "the good news" as in the good news Christ brought to his followers. Thomas, James, Phillip and John (another John, not the one from Mathew, Mark and Luke fame) also record their memories and impressions of Jesus' life and ministry. Though these fragile parchments were mishandled before scholars could get to them, what remains has been translated and published. Marvin W. Meyer translated books by James, Thomas and John as published in the "The Secret Teaching of Jesus: Four Gnostic Gospels" which make these ancient writings easily accessible.

For those who appreciate the interpretation straight up, read Elaine Pagels who is a professor of theological history at Princeton University. She was one of the early scholars to work on the Nag Hammadi translation project. "The Gnostic Gospels," published in 1979, tells the fascinating story of how these ancient writings were found, how they survived ignorance and political intrigue and were finally translated. Pagels published "Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas" in 2003. Pagels sets the context of the times to understand how the four gospels of the New Testament were gleaned from many, many more to be the "official" word. She (and others) makes the point that the catholic — as in universal — church would have gone nowhere fast if left to the gnostics who were only concerned about their own self knowledge. Doing good works and reaching out to others were not their objectives.

Another credible source to explore is Karen King, a history professor at Harvard University's Divinity School and one of the world's leading authorities on Mary Magdalene. She is the author of "The Gospel of Mary Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle," the first English-language study of the gospel of Mary. King, as well as other scholars and theologians, argues that Mary and other women who followed Jesus understood his teachings better than his chosen 12 and they did a credible job preaching.

Unfortunately, the fine work by scholars has been overshadowed by the goofy historical interpretations by Brown who bases much of his mystery novel on "Holy Blood, Holy Grail" by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln. Recently, Laura Miller in the New York Times Sunday Book Review strongly criticizes Brown for his "Da Vinci Con" as she castigates the Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln book. What I term "goofy" Miller dubs "pop pseudohistory."

We all love a good mystery and none more so than wild unexplained enigmas like the Loch Ness monster, the Bermuda Triangle, or the Holy Grail. Brown is one clever writer to infuse a plot that is a 24-hour chase scene with bits of ancient conspiracy theories that compels attention as he drops names of famous people, places and objects of art.

Give Brown his due: "The Da Vinci Code" is a good mystery. But leave it at that.

*Joan Ruddiman is a teacher and friend of the Allentown Public Library.*

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