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Monday, Feb 16, 2004

## Living

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Posted on Sat, Jan. 24, 2004

### 8 surprising fictions in the *Da Vinci Code*

 By Alyson Ward  
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

Even if you lived under a rock - a rock in a remote area of the Arizona desert - you could not avoid hearing about *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown's runaway bestseller of a novel.

This book, which has spent 43 weeks at the top of the *New York Times'* bestseller list, is not great literature. It's clunky, overwrought suspense with way too many breathless revelations. But reading *The Da Vinci Code* isn't like listening to a disposable pop song, when you know you're listening to trash but you sing along anyway.

*No, Brown's novel - which makes an eye-opening list of claims about hidden truths, suppressed Gospels and various conspiracies maintained by the Catholic Church - has got people thinking. Talking about faith and art and history, pondering the mysteries of the past, wondering what to believe and what to discount. A recent trip to the bookstore to buy a copy of The Da Vinci Code turned into an impromptu book club meeting, with the cashier and the next guy in line both offering opinions, theories and suggestions for further reading.*

*The talk has moved beyond bookstore lines. Brett Younger, senior pastor of Fort Worth's Broadway Baptist Church, says he has heard people talking about the book for months. A few weeks ago, he arranged a discussion to let church members ask questions and exchange ideas about the novel; 100 people showed up.*

*Similar discussions have been arranged at churches across the country, because people are confused by The Da Vinci Code. Brown presents his ideas as facts, but they fly in the face of what most Christians have been taught. Where is the truth? Probably somewhere in between.*

*"He's a wonderful storyteller, and he's a lousy church historian," Younger says of Brown.*

*Besides several art-history quibbles (the big one: Brown insists on calling the artist Da Vinci, not Leonardo - "It's like calling Jesus `Of Nazareth,'" Younger says), The Da Vinci Code has riled up religious scholars as well. The Internet is full of lengthy treatises about the book's many errors and assumptions.*

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*Here's a look at some of the burning questions brought up by 'The Da Vinci Code' - and the real religious history behind those ideas.*

*Question: Was Jesus married?*

*What The Da Vinci Code says: Not only was Jesus married to Mary Magdalene - they had a daughter. Her name was Sarah! And their descendants are living in France today, their identity protected by a secret society called the Priory of Sion. `It's "the greatest cover-up in human history"!'`*

*Reality: We don't know for sure whether Jesus married, but most scholars don't think so.*

*There's no biblical evidence that Jesus had a wife. But there's also nothing to prove indisputably that he didn't marry. (In fact, the Bible's silence on the issue is the best evidence for either side of the argument.)*

*Those who believe Jesus was married point out that during Jesus' lifetime, it was unusual for a Jewish man to be single - surely, they say, the scriptures would mention the anomaly if Jesus were a single Jewish man.*

*On the other hand, Younger points out, there are places where the Bible would logically mention a wife - but it doesn't. There's no mention of a wife being present at the Crucifixion. Early Christian literature doesn't mention a wife. And in all the writing Paul did about marriage, he never made a reference to Jesus' marriage or held it up as an example.*

*Question: Who was Mary Magdalene, really?*

*What The Da Vinci Code says: Mary Magdalene's importance in religious history has been buried under stories that she was a prostitute. It was a "smear campaign" launched by the early church, which wanted to hide her true identity. She was the wife of Jesus and the mother of his child. And because she bore his descendants, she is the Holy Grail - " `the chalice that held the blood of Christ"!'`*

*Reality: The Bible doesn't say a lot about Mary Magdalene. Brown is right, though, that she isn't the fallen woman history has made her out to be. Mary Magdalene's trampy reputation is one that was assigned to her, a misconception that eclipsed evidence to the contrary. See, in A.D. 591, Pope Gregory the Great delivered a sermon that combined Mary Magdalene with a few other women in the New Testament, including a sinful woman mentioned in the Gospel of Luke. Why? No one's sure. But after centuries of promoting Mary Magdalene as the repentant sinner, the Vatican officially retracted Gregory's statement, in 1969. In fact, now scholars are examining her story and theorizing that Mary Magdalene was an apostle - and that other women had leadership roles in the second century.*

*There's no evidence that Mary Magdalene married Jesus or carried his child. And though Brown believes her value has been purposely hidden by a male-chauvinist church, Younger points out that she comes off pretty well in the New Testament. After all, she's the one to whom Jesus appears after his resurrection; she's charged with telling the news.*

*"Women have been mistreated by the church," Younger says. "But it's an extremely important position she holds. If the church could have put down women by editing scripture, that would have been the first story to go."*

*Question: Did Leonardo really include Mary Magdalene in 'The Last Supper?' What The Da Vinci Code says: The truth of the Holy Grail is all hidden in The Last Supper! Though we've overlooked her all these years, Mary Magdalene is seated next to Jesus at the table. And there's no chalice in the painting - which means the Holy Grail isn't a cup after all, but a person - `the very person sitting next to Jesus!'*

*Reality: That's probably not Mary Magdalene. Plenty of people have puzzled over this, because the figure to Jesus' right looks like it could be a woman. Most art historians have concluded, though, that*

*the figure must be the disciple John. John is often portrayed as young and clean-shaven. And if he's not sitting next to Jesus, where `is' John, anyway? He was Jesus' beloved disciple - he wouldn't be left out of a depiction of the Last Supper.*

*Furthermore, the fact that Leonardo didn't include a chalice in the scene is somewhat irrelevant, Younger points out. The painting isn't `about' the Holy Grail - in fact, really, it's not even about the Eucharist. The painting is about Jesus telling his disciples that one of them will betray him. Which makes the glassware and table dressings seem pretty unimportant.*

*Question: What about this secret society, the Priory of Sion? Is that real?*

*What The Da Vinci Code says: The Priory of Sion was founded in 1099 by a French king with a secret. The members know about the Holy Grail and protect Jesus' descendants. Some of the group's famous members were Sir Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo and `Leonardo Da Vinci!'*

*Reality: There may have been a group called the Priory of Sion. Some sources say the organization was real but disbanded in the 17th century; other sources say the Priory of Sion was nothing more than a social group founded in France in 1956. At any rate, there's no evidence that the Priory of Sion - whatever it is - has ever been involved in the kind of cover-up The Da Vinci Code describes.*

*Question: What about Opus Dei? Does it really exist?*

*What The Da Vinci Code says: Opus Dei is the fastest-growing Catholic organization in the world, and it's controversial because some of its members are religious nuts. Its members have been called "God's Mafia" and "The Cult of Christ," but even so, `it has the full endorsement of the Vatican!'*

*Reality: Opus Dei is real, and so is the opposing watch group Brown mentions, the Opus Dei Awareness Network. Opus Dei, which says it "helps ordinary lay people seek holiness in and through their everyday activities," is, indeed, recognized by the Vatican - it was canonized by the pope in 2002.*

*Some former members of Opus Dei have spoken out against its practices, and the Opus Dei Awareness Network objects to the organization's aggressive recruitment and advocacy of corporal mortification. Regardless, Brown's book has been seriously bad PR for the group, which has posted a statement on its Web site ([www.opusdei.org](http://www.opusdei.org)) reminding the public that The Da Vinci Code is a work of fiction.*

*Question: What about Jesus' divinity? Did the church make that up?*

*What The Da Vinci Code says: Before A.D. 325, no one believed Jesus was anything more than a mortal prophet. But then the Council of Nicea met and made arbitrary decisions about the date of Easter, the Church sacraments and the divinity of Jesus. These men declared Jesus divine by "a relatively close vote," and then the emperor Constantine commissioned a new Bible - one that got rid of all the Gospels that suggested Jesus was a mortal man! "Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false!"*

*Reality: Brown is more than a little overdramatic. Early Christians worshipped Jesus as divine `long' before the Council of Nicea, Younger says - for example, Paul and the Gospel of John both present a divine Jesus, not a mortal human prophet. And the 27 books of the New Testament - the ones The Da Vinci Code claims were hand-selected to hide the truth? Well, most of those books were on their way to canonization well before Constantine ever got interested in them. "The books in the New Testament were not chosen in a smoke-filled room," Younger says. They emerged as the most useful books, the ones most likely to be accurate and authentic, after decades of use by the Church.*

*Question: What about these lost Gospels the book mentions? Are they real?*

*What The Da Vinci Code says: The earliest Christian records are the Gnostic Gospels, discovered at*

*Nag Hammadi, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. They don't match up with the Gospels in the Bible. For instance, they say that `Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married!'*

*Reality: The Gnostic Gospels, lost for centuries, were indeed discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. Scholars are examining these documents now, learning more about the earliest days of Christianity, but they are far from being canonized. Besides - even these documents don't make a clear statement that Jesus was married. And the Dead Sea Scrolls? No one can figure out why Brown included those in his story. The Dead Sea Scrolls date from 200 B.C. and have nothing to do with Jesus.*

*Question: So does Dan Brown really believe all of this?*

*What The Da Vinci Code says: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate!"*

*Reality: Yeah, he seems to believe it all. Just before the prologue, a page titled "Fact" asserts that though the characters are fictional, the world they're moving in - with its art, its history and its secrets - is real.*

*No matter what Brown says, Daryl Schmidt, chairman of the Texas Christian University religion department, suggests we take everything with a grain of salt.*

*It's good that people are asking questions, he says, instead of accepting everything in Brown's book as fact. It's a good way to approach all religious history.*

*"We'd be hard-pressed to factually verify a lot of official things about Christianity itself," Schmidt says. "There have always been stories and traditions far greater than the ones we have inherited. We all need to develop some instinct about - What's really' the case?' "*

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### ***Decoding The Da Vinci Code***

*If you're fascinated by Dan Brown's bestseller, you may want to examine the history a bit more. Religious and art historians say Brown plays fast and loose with his facts, but the "facts" he presents are' rooted in history.*

*"He didn't make this up out of whole cloth, as we say," Daryl Schmidt, chairman of the Texas Christian University religion department, says. "The basis for [these ideas] existed."*

*For instance, the notion of Jesus and Mary Magdalene's descendants didn't originate with The Da Vinci Code.*

*"There are no facts to support that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a bloodline," Schmidt says. "But are there stories that have been out there for a long time? Oh, sure."*

*If you're interested in cracking The Da Vinci Code, take a look at some of these resources:*

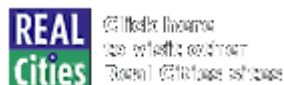
*The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle, a scholarly examination of Mary Magdalene by Karen King (Polebridge Press, \$20), has gotten an extraordinary amount of attention since it was published in November, thanks to the public's sudden interest in Mary Magdalene. The book puts Mary Magdalene's role into the context of the second century, Schmidt says, asserting that "there was a time and a place in the second century when women had an important role [in the church] - had leadership roles."*

*Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Richard Leigh, Henry Lincoln and Michael Baigent (Dell, \$7.99) is the 1980s bestseller Brown leaned on heavily while writing *The Da Vinci Code*. This nonfiction book suggests that Jesus' descendants, the bloodline, are the true Holy Grail.

The Opus Dei organization: [www.opusdei.org](http://www.opusdei.org)

The Opus Dei Awareness Network, a watch group that opposes Opus Dei: [www.odan.org](http://www.odan.org)

*Crisis magazine*, a publication that examines politics and culture from a Catholic viewpoint, published an article last fall that puts a magnifying glass to *The Da Vinci Code*'s history, examining the novel's big assertions and small historical details. Find the article, written by Sandra Miesel, at [www.crisismagazine.com/september2003/feature1.htm](http://www.crisismagazine.com/september2003/feature1.htm) .

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