

Publishers Weekly

March 26, 2007

Reimagining the Past; Alternative histories ride a wave of post-Code popularity

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SECTION: SPECIAL REPORTS; Religion Update; Pg. SC6

LENGTH: 1163 words

Religious history is hot-but not the kind taught in Sunday school. Publishers are churning out a raft of titles that claim to unveil secret histories so controversial or unorthodox that religious authorities suppressed them for decades or centuries-until now. Tales of hidden relics, holy bloodlines and long-buried belief systems purport to supply crucial information that the powerful didn't want the little guys to know.

This genre of alternative or speculative histories is thriving since *The Da Vinci Code*, which whetted readers' appetites for "facts" about religious origins and coverups. Now publishers face a dual challenge: deliver nonfiction page-turners that lead imaginations to new heights while making sure readers are inhaling credible insights. To get there, they're positioning authors as genuinely authoritative, albeit on grounds that don't always include scholarly credentials.

New Old Christianity

Perhaps the biggest current sensation in this vein comes from Harper San Francisco, publisher of *The Jesus Family Tomb* (Feb.). In it, journalist Simcha Jacobovici and archeologist Charles Pellegrino theorize that a 1980 Jerusalem construction project unearthed the remains of Jesus, as well as his wife, Mary, and a child. The discovery has been largely hidden to date, they say, because it involves what the authors describe in the book as "archaeological artifacts that people would rather not find." In addition to an early Discovery Channel documentary, the book received a February kickoff on NBC's *Today* show and coverage in more than 400 news outlets.

There's more brewing in the revisit of ancient Christianity. On the scholarly side, Viking in March released *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* from Gnosticism experts **Elaine Pagels and Karen King**. Harper San Francisco in February issued a revised version of Coptic scholar James Robinson's *The Secrets of Judas*. In April, Harper will publish a new annotated translation of *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, which include such church-rejected texts as the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Thomas.

"All of these contribute to a fresh understanding of first-century Christianity," says editor Eric Brandt, "and we find people are very hungry for that kind of information, no matter what their point of view is."

Inner Traditions aims to feed a broader hunger for the suppressed. *Jesus After the Crucifixion* (Mar.), by independent researcher Graham Simmans, argues that the Narbonne region of France teems to this day with a Gnostic spirituality that captures the true essence of Christianity for a simple reason: Jesus and Mary settled there after first fleeing from Jerusalem to Egypt. *The End of Eden* (July) "presents compelling evidence that civilizations worldwide became warlike and monotheistic after Earth passed through the tail of a comet in 1500 B.C.," says Inner Traditions.

Secrets of the Maya

But the year's biggest winner for Inner Traditions is likely to be Barbara Hand Clow's *The Mayan Code* (May), according to sales and marketing director Rob Meadows.

"I would expect to sell over 25,000 copies in its first year, and we've only done that a handful of times," Meadows says. "Clow has a following. She's written 11 books, and they've done very well. And the Mayan material has really come into its own this year."

For evidence of Mayan mania, Meadows cites the success of Penguin/Tarcher's *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl* (2006). Building on the fact that the ancient Mayan calendar ends in December 2012, author Daniel Pinchbeck brings readers on a psychedelic drug-infused quest to see human consciousness transformed with help from ancient Mayan insights. Pinchbeck appeared on *The Colbert Report* last year, and the book continues to sell at a rate of several thousand per month, according to editor Mitch Horowitz, with more than 40,000 in print.

"There's an enormous subculture in America that takes a deep interest in indigenous and shamanic beliefs," says Horowitz. Members of that group don't fit into any neat demographic, he says, but they do show up en masse at the annual Burning Man festival in Nevada. They also buy books, such as Tarcher's *The Cosmic Serpent* (1999), an anthropologist's exploration of traditional Amazonian culture and drug use, with sales of about 100,000 copies.

Others see opportunity in a Mayan-fueled run-up to 2012. In November 2006, Council Oaks served up a handbook for taking part in the anticipated shift in cosmic energy from male to female with *2013 Oracle: Ancient Keys to the 2012 Awakening*. Random House's Morgan Road imprint explores the dark side of Mayan forecasting in *Apocalypse 2012: A Scientific Investigation into Civilization's End* (Jan.). And Red Wheel/Weiser provides an optimistic, Mayan-informed take on the new age to follow the winter solstice of 2012 in *Serpent of Light*, due in fall 2007.

What Creates Authority?

Booksellers are eager for the fare. Meadows says Inner Traditions received queries last year, including one from Barnes & Noble, seeking to be sure an ample supply of 2012 books would arrive long before that pivotal year. But retailers are treading cautiously to find trustworthy material for their clientele.

"There's a lot of fringe stuff that is latching onto the 2012 theme," says Carridwen Brennan, book buyer at For Heaven's Sake, a New Age store in Denver. But her customers, mostly women turned off by orthodoxy of all types, want well-researched material that is in this case both "sane and Mayan."

"They're looking to re-examine," Brennan says. "They want information that has been suppressed or ignored, and then they want to look at it for themselves and think about it for themselves."

Meanwhile, the popularizing influence of Dan Brown has publishers both responding to and anticipating his work. In March, Weiser is releasing two books by Laurence Gardner: *The Magdalene Legacy* and *A Shadow of Solomon*. The second, which links Freemasonry to the art of levitation, anticipates a reportedly forthcoming (and long-delayed) Brown novel about Freemasonry. Other titles appear positioned to get a leg up on the same phenomenon, including Weiser's *The Knights Templar of the Middle East: The Hidden History of the Islamic Origins of Freemasonry* (Nov. 2006) and Inner Tradition's *The Templar Pirates: The Secret Alliance to Build the New Jerusalem* (first English-language edition, Feb.).

In the end, publishers agree that the authors who lead this genre will be those who are both fun to read and credible. What makes them believable in readers' minds remains to be seen. Weiser publisher Jan Johnson invokes the successful sales of sacred geometry popularizer Drunvalo Melchizedek, who "has a degree in physics, but he's been meditating and doing independent research and connecting with his heart and spiritual guides from other dimensions since 1972."

For Weiser authors, she says, "their authority comes from primary research and from their own practice."