The Da Vinci Code:
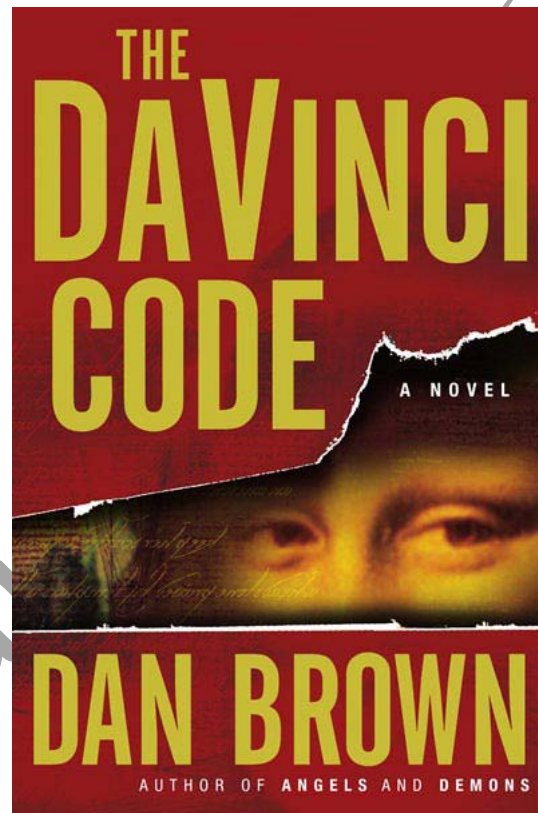## *Mission Impossible meets The Name of the Rose*
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

About a year ago, in response to a question posed by several readers, I explained my practice of only writing favourable reviews. I noted that a novelist may have several aims: to entertain the reader, to offer a challenging puzzle to solve, to provide insights into human behavior under specific circumstances — or indeed, all three of these ends. But the common denominator of all good fiction writing is simple: it presents us with a tale well told. With over two thousand mystery-and-crime-fiction novels published every year, some are bound to be better than others. My goal, I averred, was not to criticize all the bad crime novels out there, but simply to put readers in touch with good reads.

I was only partly right. Many novels are flawed, saddled with implausible plots, boring characters, and poor writing. In the normal course of things, such books suffer the fate of Natural Selection: given small production runs, little-to-no publicity, and ignored by readers, they soon find their way to the sale tables, to be remaindered at bargain-basement prices, or to be recycled as packing material for more notable efforts.

Unfortunately, some novels are not merely mediocre; they are painfully, even excruciatingly, *bad*. Like George W. Bush and instant mashed potatos, their very existence calls out for attention, some effort to expose their many deficiencies to the harsh light of day, and to inform the public that they have the right to (and ought to demand) *better*. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is one such travesty recently perpetrated on the reading public. It is living proof that whatever is good is not necessarily popular, and whatever is popular is not necessarily good, and readers who doubt this distinction should invest in a good dictionary.

The commercial success of *The Da Vinci Code* is, as the trendy say, a *phenom* (though of course the term itself is more than a bit passé). I wish I could say that the phenom in question seems to be on the wane. Published in 2003, and re-

leased as a movie in May of this year, the book enjoyed lavish reviews from such power players as the *NY Times* and the *Washington Post*, and has sold over 60 million copies. The film has been more critically received, yet had grossed over three-quarters of a *billion* dollars U.S. as of mid-2006. Although there is evidence that the book's popularity has peaked, there is no question that Dan Brown is laughing all the way to the bank.

So what explains *The Da Vinci Code's* success? Why has it done so much better than other, more deserving, books? One critic has noted that "…what readers love about the novel has nothing to do with story, or character, or mood, or any of the qualities we admire in good fiction. They love it because of the *nonfiction* material the book supposedly contains, a complicated, centuries-spanning conspiracy theory…. What entrances…readers is the possibility that a secret society has protected a religious and historical secret for almost 2,000 years, a secret that could undermine Christianity as we know it…." (Internet, "The Da Vinci Crock," by Laura Miller) It is, in short a skillful blend of the pace of *Mission Impossible* with the religious-historical storyline of *The Name of the Rose*. Think Umberto Eco Lite.

To be fair, the plot of *The Da Vinci Code* is clever and well-conceived: it is an action-thriller aimed at the movie-going public. The frenetic pace has our intrepid hero, art historian Robert Langdon, accompanied by French police codebreaker (and descendent of Jesus) Sophie Neveu, dashing from Paris to it's outskirts, on to London, then Scotland, and back again to Paris, in search of the Holy Grail, no less—all in the space of less than twenty-four-hours!

Moreover, the novel is badly overwritten, right from it's opening line: "Renowned curator Jacques Saunière staggered through the vaulted archway..." Could his fame possibly be postponed until we know more about him? Brown seems addicted to the liberal use of exclamation marks and italicised phrases labouring the obvious, like a ham-actor villain in a silent movie looking directly at the audience and leering in a menacing manner: *"This is my fault!" "Is she out of her mind?" "If I hadn't seen it with my own eye" "I'll just take a fast peek!" "There must be something here!" "Could that be it?" "I'm dreaming. A dream. What else could this be?"* And so on.

Brown's plot devices range from the merely silly to the outrageous. In supporting his claims about hidden messages in works of art he ludicrously weaves in a reference to Walt Disney's *The Lion King*. More disturbingly, Brown plays fast and loose with history. A sample: in his preface, Brown claims *"all descriptions of artwork...in this novel are accurate."* Yet in the service of his plot Brown shamelessly reverses the figures of Jesus and St. John the Baptist in Leonardo's painting, *Madonna of the Rocks*, even though it's obvious who is whom (St. John has his signature staff, and Jesus is blessing him, not the other way around.) Nor is the archangel Uriel making a slitting-his-throat gesture (as asserted), but is simply pointing at John. Finally, Brown bases his entire plot on the existence of a secret society called The Priory of Sion, allegedly founded in 1099, whose existence is "confirmed" by medieval documents deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. *But described as "fact" at the beginning of the book, the Priory of Sion never actually existed.*

Far from having a history that spanned more than a millennium, the Priory was a hoax perpetrated by Pierre Plantard, a convicted con-man who in 1956 *planted* the bogus "medieval" documents in the National Library's files. Now, I've no problem at all with novelists inventing "facts" to lend their stories credence; after all, that's what fiction is. But it's downright misleading—and sucks in the uninformed—to describe such claims as *facts* before the novel itself begins. Brown shamelessly presents fiction as fact in the service of his plot—and that's what makes *The Da Vinci Code* so pernicious.

To say that *The Da Vinci Code* is over-rated is to abuse the term. Its out-standing virtue is that it lures readers into bookstores; in the process they may stumble across other, more worthwhile, reads. Its lesser merit is that its very size (weighing in at nearly 500 pages) makes it easy to throw it away.

Jim Napier can be reached at
 jim.napier52@gmail.com