

# It's fiction, but useful for mission

WHEN a nun protests outside a cathedral about the making of a film, a university lecturer finds his course heavily oversubscribed and the media company Sony are lobbied to alter the plot of a film they are producing, people start to ask: "What is happening?"

The answer is the recent furore surrounding the book by Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*. With sales figures currently only second to the Bible, the book has attracted considerable media interest.

The film version starring Tom Hanks and Sir Ian McKellen is likely to add fuel to the flames. Cardinal Tarsiscio Bertone, appointed by the Vatican to defend the Catholic Church's reputation, describes it as a "castle of lies". McKellen, on the other hand, says: "The idea that the book shouldn't be read, which I think is the official Vatican line, is pretty pathetic."

So what do people really think? To conduct some research I took the book on a train journey and engaged the (unfortunate) passengers who sat near me in conversation.

## the big issue



When we talk about Christianity, the claims outlined in one best-selling book often come up. How do we respond? Our director of mission the Ven Peter Hancock researches the topic.

All I spoke to had read it, some thinking it merited consideration as a serious piece of historical writing. All had enjoyed it and the ticket collector told me that he couldn't see what all the fuss was about, saying: "It's just a novel – for heaven's sake!"

This isn't the place for a literary critical analysis (which, quite frankly, the book doesn't deserve) but the plot is good, although somewhat contrived, the characterisation is weak and the characters don't develop as the book goes forward, swaying and lurching like an old train on a bendy bit of track.

I have read countless reviews and *Bookpage* probably gets closest to describing the appeal of the book: "...a labyrinth of intricate schemes, sidetracks and deceptions."

Today there is a seemingly insatiable quest for explanations of the mysterious, the spiritual, the intangible and churches have to acknowledge that most people are not looking for answers within traditional mainstream religions.

A recent article by a New Testament scholar concludes: "The combination of mystery, history, conspiracy and the use of romantic locations has made it a popular piece of non-fiction." That is perceptive, and my enquiries with Fareham library confirmed that it is popular and that they keep it in the non-fiction part of the library! Smart people, these librarians.

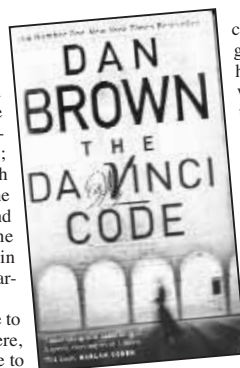
Without giving too much away for those who haven't read it, the controversy surrounding the book stems from the author's claim that it is based on historical fact and

that (1) Jesus married Mary Magdalene and that together they had a daughter; (2) the gospels falsely present Jesus as divine; and (3) the Church was divided about the divinity of Jesus and held a vote at the Council of Nicea in AD325 which only narrowly upheld that.

I haven't the space to debate these issues here, but can send an article to anyone who contacts me on 01329-280101 or admeon@portsmouth.anglican.org and wants to pursue it further.

Suffice it to say that many of these claims are based on the flimsiest of historical evidence. The fact that people are prepared to believe Dan Brown rather than the gospel writers suggests not so much that he has presented compelling evidence - more that people find a global conspiracy theory easier to believe and more exciting than the actual gospel.

What gives me offence, however, is not that the film is set in an English cathedral or that it implies Jesus was the father of a love



child, but the suggestion that somehow my faith is too weak to withstand the intellectual challenges that Dan Brown offers.

The important thing for us to realise is that here is a ready-made topic of conversation which allows us to talk with our friends about the gospel and about our faith in Jesus Christ.

House groups and youth groups might also wish to discuss the issues that it raises. If so I recommend the SU Bible Studies by a friend of mine, Di Archer. They are available from Christian bookshops or as an electronic download from: [www.connect.biblestudies.com](http://www.connect.biblestudies.com).

So, to summarise:  
Is it a good read? – Yes!  
Does it make you think? – Yes!  
Is it historically accurate – No!  
Does it undermine our faith? – Ask the ticket collector on the train to Waterloo!



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