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Accuracy of best-selling 'Da Vinci Code' comes under fire

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Everyone loves a conspiracy," a character declares in Dan Brown's thriller "The Da Vinci Code."

So they must. Brown's book made its debut at No. 1 on the New York Times best-seller list, and it's still there after 20 weeks.

This religion-steeped tale of "the greatest conspiracy of the past 2,000 years" has garnered some good reviews, at least in the United States, but British reviewers have been less enthusiastic.

Peter Millar, writing in the Times of London, pulled out all the stops, describing the book as "without doubt, the silliest, most inaccurate, ill-informed, stereotype-driven, cloth-eared, cardboard-cutout-populated piece of pulp fiction I have read."

In my view, the book is unexceptionally written, with minimal character development and a third-rate guidebook sense of place. It is, however, a quick and easy read, largely because most of the chapters are only a few pages long, and just about all of them end as cliffhangers.

If you don't pay too much attention, but sort of let the book go in one eye

and out the other, you'll get to the end before you know it.

But will it bear a closer look?

"The Da Vinci Code" traces a web of conspiracies involving: an alleged secret society called the Priory of Sion; the Knights Templar, a real group here described as the Priory's military arm; and secret documents about the nature and whereabouts of the Holy Grail, documents that supposedly disprove fundamental Christian doctrines.

What does all this have to do with Leonardo da Vinci? Why, the book asserts, he was one of the Priory's grand masters, and some of his best-known works -- notably, "Mona Lisa," "The Virgin of the Rocks" and "The Last Supper" -- contain carefully encoded references to the Priory's secrets.

Obviously, the Catholic Church is involved. So is Opus Dei, a lay and clerical organization that seems to have taken the place of the Jesuits as the fictional font of all nefarious Catholic conspiracies.

The author is no longer granting interviews. But earlier this year, he told The Philadelphia Inquirer: "When you finish the book, you've learned a ton. I had to do an enormous amount of research." He has also said his book is "meticulously researched and very accurate."

Most reviewers have skirted the controversial theological issues raised in "The Da Vinci Code," but one reviewer who has dealt with those issues directly is R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Mohler calls the book "a misrepresentation of Catholic reality," but adds, "It's really an attack on Christianity per se."

It's not hard to see why Mohler feels that way. In the book, a historian says "Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea." This expert also asserts that "until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet."

But, Mohler pointed out in a phone interview, no one at the First Council of Nicaea, in A.D. 325, "would have questioned" Jesus' divinity. That, he said, "is in Scripture and was the confession ... for which Christians were willing to be martyred."

Mohler is an evangelical Christian. At the other end of the theological spectrum is the Rev. Hal Taussig, co-pastor of Chestnut Hill United

Methodist Church in Philadelphia and visiting professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Though he cautions against imposing "the modern term divinity on that era" and points out that "there were what we might call 'levels of divinity' in terms of thinking about Jesus" at that time, his views regarding the Council of Nicaea do not diverge that much from Mohler's.

A founding member of the Jesus Seminar, a project to evaluate the historical evidence about Jesus from antiquity, Taussig is also skeptical regarding the extravagant claims made in the book about Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Jesus.

"The Gospels both reveal and hide the extent of Mary Magdalene's importance," he says. That said, "One simply can't say anything about what

Jesus' relationship was with Mary Magdalene, except that she was an important follower."

Brown may not be talking, but such is not the case with the supposedly secretive Opus Dei. Brian Finnerty, the group's American spokesman, says the book's suggestion that the organization ponied up \$1 billion to save the Vatican bank from insolvency is "ridiculous."

Moreover, he says "The Da Vinci Code" is inaccurate even when it comes to minor details, including the fact that members of Opus Dei do not wear robes and are not monks.

One final note: If the book is to be believed, the Holy Grail is now hidden beneath a prominent landmark in a major European capital. The tourist bureau in New York of the country in question says it has yet to receive a single inquiry about that.

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