

# “DA VINCI CODE’S” DECEITFUL GENRE

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When Dan Brown’s book *The Da Vinci Code* was originally published, we ignored it. We did so because we are generally dismissive of novels. But things began to change when we learned that Brown was selling his work as an authentic historical account.

In October 2003, ABC-TV invited the Catholic League to send a staff member to view a rough cut of an upcoming ABC News special, “Jesus, Mary, and Da Vinci.” Joseph de Feo, now an editor at the Capital Research Center in Washington (Terry Scanlon’s gain, our loss), represented the league. He was upset to learn that though Brown saw his book as fiction, he also declared himself to be “a believer” in the book’s plot.

The ABC special was disconcerting on several levels. Indeed, as de Feo wrote in the December 2003 *Catalyst*, “The program suggested that there is something sinister about ‘orthodoxy,’ and its often-ominous tone was better suited to a program on the Trilateral Commission and the New World Order than to a program on a major world religion.” But it was the program’s “inconsistent use of evidence” that caught de Feo’s eye. This tactic, employed by Brown himself, ultimately triggered a Catholic League response.

One of the books Brown read when writing his novel was *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln. Baigent and Leigh now say that Brown did more than consult their book—they say he lifted what they call the “central architecture” of their thesis. Indeed, they sued Brown (Lincoln was not party to the suit) for plagiarism and the case wound up in a London court.

When I first read this, I was puzzled. How could Baigent and Leigh, whose 1982 book was on the non-fiction list, sue a novelist? Isn't that what novelists do, offer a fictional story of some chapter in history? There was a bigger problem, too, because Baigent and Leigh had the audacity to write that Christ survived the crucifixion and eventually married Mary Magdalene; the Catholic Church, according to this tale, suppressed the truth from being told. So my question was: How could these authors maintain that their book was non-fiction when there is absolutely no evidence to back up their fabulous claims?

As it turned out, the lawyers for Baigent and Leigh maintained that their clients' book is not "a historical account of facts and it does not purport to be such." So what is it? "Historical conjecture," they said. See how cute this is? Because Baigent and Leigh now hold that their book is not a historical volume, they are free to sue Brown for an infringement of copyright. In short, they're all living in fantasy land, and they're all plainly dishonest.

Brown, and the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, are emblematic of a deceitful genre of writers, producers and directors. For example, in the 1970s, Alex Haley gave us *Roots*, a book which purported to be an accurate account of slavery; it became the basis of an enormously popular television series. Not only was Haley sued for plagiarism by white and black authors—and forced to settle out of court—he admitted taking considerable liberties in weaving his tale: When pressed to provide historical evidence for his book, Haley replied that it was "faction"—part fact and part fiction.

Oliver Stone's "JFK" was a conspiracy theory about the Kennedy assassination made for the big screen. What made it particularly despicable was the release of study guides for classroom use; they were funded by Warner Brothers and distributed to 13,000 high school and college history teachers.

Steven Spielberg's "Amistad," a movie about slave traders and the early American judicial system, was the subject of a lawsuit for plagiarism. After Spielberg won that round, he was blasted by historians for ripping off the public: his studio sent study guides to 18,000 college and 2,000 high school educators. The movie was criticized for being nothing more than propaganda, and the study guides were denounced for being exploitative.

We don't expect there will be any study guides to accompany Ron Howard's adaptation of Brown's hoax, but that hardly resolves the problem. On the movie's website, there is a clip with a voice-over saying, "We are in the middle of a war. One that has been going on forever. To protect a secret so powerful that if revealed it would devastate the very foundations of mankind." It ends with a foreboding remark about this being "the biggest cover up in human history."

Speaking for the Vatican, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, a friend of Pope John Paul II, last year labeled the book "anti-Catholic." John Calley, the film's co-producer, last year branded the movie "conservatively anti-Catholic." Is it any wonder why the Catholic League isn't taking this lying down?