



*Some have called it the worst literary attack on Christianity since Celsus, a third century opponent of Christianity. On May 19, the assault will bloom onto thousands of the nation's theater screens. The Ron Howard production of *The Da Vinci Code*, starring Tom Hanks, will surely compound the damage done by Dan Brown's best-seller. That publishing phenomenon—40 million copies worldwide before even going into paperback—is regrettably typical of a media horizon currently littered with caricatures of Christ and the church that He founded.*

by Paul L. Maier

Reactions to the *Code* come in all shapes and sizes, and Christians should be prepared with a ready reply to all of them. Here are a few:

"I thought the novel was fun reading – a real thriller." Agreed! The book is indeed a page-turner. However, halfway into the story, a cascade of deceptions, distortions, and outright falsehoods about our faith ruin Brown's effort for anyone still interested in the truth.

"Oh, a few things might be wrong in the book, but nothing serious." If only that were true! Unfortunately, many statements in the novel are fantasy, not fact—outright perversions of history and malicious attempts to discredit Christianity. The book claims "almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false." It tells us that Jesus married Mary Magdalene; that Constantine, the first Christian emperor, was "a lifelong pagan" who collated the New Testament; that the early Christians thought Jesus was only a man until the Council of Nicaea turned Him into a god; that Mary Magdalene was sitting to Jesus' right in Da Vinci's painting of *The Last Supper*; that God had a divine consort—and dozens of other falsehoods that have seduced some readers into abandoning Christianity while shaking the faith of others.

"OK, but I still think that Brown is on to something. Where there's smoke, there's fire." Not necessarily. The smoke might be fog—an opaque mist of mendacity, luring conspiracy theorists and the impressionable into wrongheaded conclusions based on misinformation.

"Brown's publisher would never have produced the book if it had all these errors." Never make the mistake of assuming, "If it's in print, it must be true." Recently, it seems, many publishers have sold their souls to the corporate bottom line under the motto, "If it's sensational, it'll sell; never mind the facts!" *The Da Vinci Code* would not have been published by any reputable New York publisher a half century ago unless massively re-edited. James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* is only the latest example of literary fraud.

"I still think Brown and his book are reliable." Well, then, know this: There is not one reputable scholar anywhere in the world who endorses what Brown has done.

And finally, the most frequent response of all (I get it regularly): **"Chill out, Maier! It's fiction, isn't it? Why all the fuss?"** Point taken and it's a good point! Trouble is, many people read fiction as if it were fact. Witness the damage caused by this novel. In fiction, there is a foreground dimension that involves the principal characters and their actions, and a background, which is the setting. The novelist is free to do whatever he or she wishes with fictional foreground characters—that's obvious! But the background (unless it clearly is a fantasy novel) is always accurate for purposes of credibility.

Brown, however, has fictionalized both! Accordingly, readers who are used to factual backgrounds will assume the same for *The Da Vinci Code* and will be deceived.

An illustration may help. Hundreds of novels have been written about World War II. Why, in the background of all of these, do the Allies win and the Nazis lose? Duh! Because that's what happened! Now, if Dan Brown were resorting to the same approach that he used in the *Code* for a World War II novel, he would have no problem painting a backdrop in which Hitler won the war and put Roosevelt on trial in Washington and Churchill in London! Young readers, with little knowledge of history, might even believe this.

What about seekers, non-Christians, and even Christians with little knowledge of history? Some are believing the *Code's* falsehoods and therefore disbelieving Christianity. That's the danger and the tragedy.

All of us must battle for the truth, and the release of a movie based on a perversion of the past will certainly give us the chance. And with people talking again about Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the church, this can even be a rare opportunity for Christian witness.

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For an in-depth study of the novel and its historical distortions presented as background facts, read **The Da Vinci Code, Fact or Fiction?** by Paul Maier and Hank Hanegraaff.