Dan Brown's truthiness

By Rodney Clapp in the May 16, 2006 issue

The word *truthiness* was named Word of the Year for 2005 by the American Dialect Society. It was also recognized by the *New York Times* as one of nine words defining the spirit of the age.

But in fact (Is there still such a thing as “fact”? Do we care?), *truthiness* has been around since the 19th century. It was not, as some might think, invented last year by television comedian Stephen Colbert. Colbert, host of Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report*, did re-coin the term to spoof the way politicians and TV pundits insist that what they feel and want to be true must be treated as true, all contrary evidence be damned.

It is the zeitgeist of truthiness that best accounts for the extraordinary success of *The Da Vinci Code*. Many clever thrillers are best sellers, but the success of Dan Brown’s novel—a 43-million-copy best seller about to debut as a motion picture—is so phenomenal that it bears some reflection.

In a culture supersaturated with information, overwrought with shrill grabs at our attention, overstimulated by media of many kinds, none of us is immune to the allure of truthiness. Besides receiving the usual torrent of books, movies, radio voices, television shows, magazines and newspapers, modern searchers for truth must now take into account the World Wide Web, 24/7 news shows, 200-channel cable TV systems, videogaming, DVDs and iPods. It’s tiring to keep up with even a few of these media. Our attention is stretched thin and largely confined to the surface. As we shoot the thundering, ever-rolling tube of hypermedia, we are often forced back on our intuition, on some reflexive sense of what “feels true.”

Enter Brown’s novel in March 2003. With the benefit of hindsight we can say that *The Da Vinci Code* got noticed not only because of able marketing by the publisher, Doubleday, but because the book profoundly played into the manic milieu of truthiness.

Two of Brown's previous best sellers were technothrillers that also delved into arcane worlds—computer encryption in one instance, space science in the other. The books were praised for Brown's apparently thorough research into realms that very few readers knew but that were of some importance to their everyday lives. All laptop-using readers of *Digital Fortress* could relate to concerns about the security of computer transmissions. And readers of *Deception Point* had seen televised NASA rocket launches and knew about the search for life on other planets. Whether or not the books were accurate, they seemed plausible and "truthy" to nonexperts.

If science gave Brown's books a reader-magnetizing air of real-world gravity, he soon discovered that religion would serve that end even more dramatically. Built into the plot of *The Da Vinci Code* is the thesis that the founder of the world's most populous and arguably most powerful religion did not actually die on a cross, but survived, married Mary Magdalene and sired children. Controversy was guaranteed.

The book was assured more attention amid the ambiance of a fresh round in the culture wars. In the oversimplified binaries of that confrontation, some conservative Christians felt that their country had been taken away from them and that their faith was under attack, while some secularists felt under their feet the rumble of Inquisitorial dungeons and feared full-blown theocracy whenever Christianity assumed a public presence or influence. The anxiety and urgency of a post-9/11 world made it all the easier to tap into the desperate fears and hopes of these warring parties. Nerves were kept frayed with the controversy over Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, released in Lent a year after *The Da Vinci Code* hit bookshelves.

Pastors say that the parishioners most drawn to *The Da Vinci Code* tend to be ex-Catholics or people who otherwise think they have reason to be suspicious of the Roman Catholic Church. As a Connecticut pastor put it, Brown's depiction of conniving bishops and assassin monks rings true to those who "always knew the church was lying to us." A pastor in Ohio commented that the novel appeals to those "who feel the Catholic Church harbors something shady in its depths."

A scan of the 3,068 (!) customer reviews of the novel at Amazon.com substantiates this impression. Perhaps most poignantly, one reader who read the book in light of the pedophilia scandals and the church's early secrecy about them says, tentatively but tellingly: "With all that is going on in the Catholic Church today, it makes you wonder if some of the fiction is actually true."

Of course, it is a real leap from sex scandals and bureaucratic mismanagement to the argument that the Catholic Church will go to murderous lengths to stifle evidence that contradicts its teaching, and that the church's highest officials do this cynically, knowing that the faith is a fraud. (In the end, the novel cops out on this point anyway. The scholar-detective hero, Robert Langdon, never locates the proof that is dangled like a carrot throughout the book.)

But in a culture of truthiness, actual evidence or contrary details are readily ignored. And for most readers, the world of faith and the academic study of Christianity is as exotic as that of South Sea Islanders. They aren't struck by the fact that Harvard employs no "symbologists" like Langdon and that no such discipline exists. Readers may well be impressed by Brown's claim that he relied on 39 books. His research is hardly adequate by academic standards, but repeatedly readers and reviewers have commented on Brown's thorough research.

The Da Vinci Code covers a lot of ground, not only in theology and Christian history but in the specialized worlds of art history, cryptography, architecture and police procedure. For many readers, it is sufficient that it covers this ground engagingly, and in a manner that seems plausible. "Remember that novels are supposed to tell stories that just might be true, not stories that are 100 percent certainly true," exhorts one Amazon customer reviewer. "Whether the description of the art in this book is accurate . . . does not matter," avers another. "What matters is that Brown managed to take something that coulda, mighta, maybe happened, and made sense." A third exults, "I loved this book because it makes history (false or not) very VERY interesting. . . . It's about history and the church, but it's actually interesting." (Who would have imagined it—the church, actually interesting?)

Many readers of the novel have noted how much it seems made for the movies. Truthiness, as already observed, dwells on the surface of things, and film does so as well, often marvelously and enrichingly. *The Da Vinci Code* is highly cinematic and suited to surfaces in a number of ways. It is plot-driven, propelled by external events and visible action. The entire hyperventilating story occurs within the span of a single day. This compressed time span lends an air of great urgency, as in television shows such as *24*.

Other than exercising memory, which is displayed in the highly cinematic form of flashbacks, the novel's characters exhibit practically no interior dimensions. In addition, the chapters are exceedingly short—often three pages or fewer. They

resemble the rapid, short scenes and cuts popularized by MTV and prevalent in many Hollywood movies. The chapters, like the old movie serials, almost always end with cliffhangers, propelling the reader forward—especially when each chapter is so brief. You may be busy, but it'll only take a few minutes to read to the next revelation.

There's also a tourism angle. The action occurs in photogenic locations such as Paris, and the plot hinges on visual clues to be ferreted out of famous paintings and statues. Readers now carry the book along on their visits to the Louvre and Westminster Abbey. A special edition of the novel with color art and photography has been produced. Those who spend much more time with film and television than with books have found *The Da Vinci Code* exceedingly congenial.

To introduce a final cinematic aspect of the novel, consider this observation by film critic David Thomson: "If books are about the possibility or potential of meaning, films are about disclosure, revelation, appearance." Film "is a medium most acute when fixed on what happens next; whereas literature, sooner or later, is about the meaning behind events."

What is key here is not just Thomson's note that the cinematic fixes on "what happens next," but his emphasis that its attraction abides in disclosure, on revelation of what was secret and hidden. In its parts and as a whole, *The Da Vinci Code* is all about the striptease of truthiness, the seductive (apparent) solving of puzzles in a world that otherwise is frustratingly obscure and opaque. In this regard, the novel resembles another literary phenomenon of our times, the Left Behind series, which rests on the thrill of decoding the Bible by way of dispensational theology.

Dan Brown's novel has played perfectly into a culture that stays close to the surface, to the cinematic, to the allure of truthiness. However much it consumes our attention at the moment, *The Da Vinci Code* is a sand castle on the beach, one that will soon erode and melt from view, subjected to the waves of information and stimulation that ceaselessly beat the shores of our hypermediated culture. The far more pressing challenge, and the one that will not soon go away, is how the church can faithfully serve its mission of witnessing to enduring truth in a world more and more susceptible to truthiness.