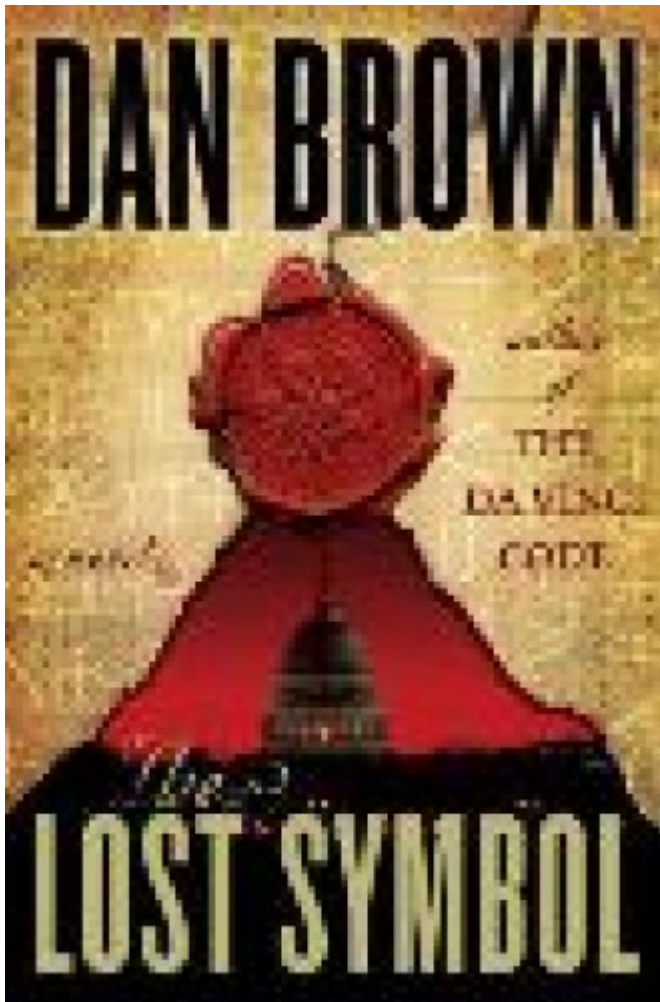


Occult attraction

By [Harold K. Bush](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

In Review



The Lost Symbol

Dan Brown
Doubleday

Dan Brown's latest megablockbuster exposes aspects of our current spiritual morass in several ways.

For one thing, Brown's growing oeuvre consistently speaks to Americans' long-lived fascination with various supernaturally inclined secret societies like the Masons and the Rosicrucians, our paranoid fears regarding such secret groups, and our predilection for Gnostic approaches to belief. In his earlier novels, Brown has presented various organizations, including the Knights Templar, Opus Dei and the Illuminati, as practitioners of the occult, according to a loose definition. These and other sinister cabals, says Brown, have engaged in all sorts of mayhem and manipulation in their attempts to control the world and the master narratives of our history.

As Brown's books progress, they delve into the realms of occult practice and introduce new archenemies. Clearly Brown is fascinated, if not obsessed, with the search for hidden truths and coded messages within various symbols and texts.

The Da Vinci Code, now the best-selling novel in history (with over 88 million copies sold at last count), is premised on fictional Harvard professor Robert Langdon's scrutiny of ancient and medieval symbols and his discovery that Jesus Christ was married and that he fathered a daughter who was spirited off to southern France and whose bloodline continues into the present day. This eclectic wisdom (*gnosis*) was hidden away and has been guarded for millennia by secret societies, especially by the Knights Templar.

As in Brown's garish romp *Angels and Demons*, the bad guys who are most to be lamented and despised, the ones who have squirreled away this precious knowledge so as to keep the common folk in the dark, are none other than the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church.

In *The Lost Symbol*, the protagonists' central preoccupation is the location of a so-called lost word. They believe that if they can discover this word, it will provide long-missing wisdom, along with world-bending powers of unclear genesis.

Besides the obvious reference to the Logos of scripture, Brown's lost word is connected to all of the world's religions and wisdom traditions, as well as to various books of esoteric and Gnostic belief. One of these, the Key of Solomon, is a medieval volume of magic containing instructions for the invocation of angels and demons. (The working title of *The Lost Symbol* was *The Solomon Key*.) King Solomon is a central hero of the Masons; he is also the personification of wisdom in biblical literature.

Some may protest that *occult* is too strong a description of Brown's interests, but the word describes the eclectic epistemologies that remain hidden and ultimately known only to a few initiates who are found to be worthy. In Brown's view, Christianity is just too darned simple. So he complicates things.

In addition to his depiction of the flagrantly occultic and flat-out weird beliefs of the novel's chief villain, as well as his detailed and mainly sympathetic accounts of Freemasonry, Brown presents lengthy, encyclopedic, straight-faced passages explaining the recent findings of "noetic science" (the study of the mind's power to alter physical reality), findings that become crucial to the plot. Noetic science turns out to be nothing but a latter-day form of alchemy, now reconceived in pseudoscientific terms, and of great interest to certain shady members of the CIA. It is occultic power with a doctorate from Cal Tech.

If taken by readers to be true, this material would accelerate our culture's plunge into doubt, despair and depression. Brown's storytelling exemplifies the deeply rooted paranoid tendencies of American culture—tendencies that were documented in Richard Hofstadter's classic 1964 essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* and are still with us more than a half century after the McCarthy era. As has been endlessly noted with regard to the Left Behind series (which, after Harry Potter, is the best-selling fiction series in U.S. publishing history), Americans are suspicious of faceless, ruling cohorts of power.

Brown is terrific at exploiting our postmodern cynicism and stoking our collective fears regarding organized religion, government systems and any extremes of dogma and certainty. Chief among such institutions in *The Lost Symbol* are the Masons and the CIA. Brown's plots generally begin with the manic, obsessed and slightly crazy devotees of these groups, whose evil designs lead to all kinds of violence and deception.

Historical deception is another standard feature of Brown novels. Readers should be prepared to handle all sorts of nonsensical conceptions as they digest his terrific plots. *The Lost Symbol* features some pretty slick (and often wildly incorrect) depictions of the American past and of Christian belief systems in the United States.

It's never clear how much of this Brown believes himself. Reading his books is like watching certain films by Oliver Stone—one must distinguish what is plausible from what is nothing but micro waved balderdash. Brown's contention in the opening

pages of *The Da Vinci Code* that “all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate” is both disingenuous and absurd.

A similar claim to historical accuracy appears in *The Lost Symbol* on the first page after the epigram. Readers should approach *The Lost Symbol* and other Brown novels aware that in our post modern culture people—and authors—often find it difficult to distinguish between fiction and fact.

Of course, some might say that *The Lost Symbol* is just a work of fiction, so don't be so concerned. But something crucially important is being examined in the works of the best-selling novelist in American history, so we had better get to the root of his complaint and take seriously the trajectories of his argument. His other readers certainly do, if the countless discussions I've had with confused people regarding *The Da Vinci Code* are any indication.

True confession: I like reading Brown's novels. After I begin one, his tale pervades my waking thoughts almost nonstop until I reach the end. I've heard numerous educated and intelligent readers say that his books are hard to put down. They are (though I doubt that *The Lost Symbol* will make anywhere near the splash that Brown's earlier books have). If we do our homework on what is truth and what is fantasy, we can enjoy the ride even more.