

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*The Da Vinci Code*]

The Church of Dan Brown

By Steve Sailer

BACK WHEN I WROTE computer users' manuals, I'd try to break up the forbidding slabs of my pedantic prose by employing an EZ-2-Read Question & Answer format. Watching the similarly structured "Da Vinci Code," I couldn't help musing about how my tome, *HP LaserJet Code*, would have turned out as a \$125 million summer blockbuster:

Audrey Tautou (*beseechingly*):

How do I print in Times Roman?

Tom Hanks (*decisively*):

Insert the serif font cartridge.

Audrey (*frantically*):

But the printer's not doing anything!

Tom (*with steely resolve*):

Try plugging it in.

I'm confident the stars would have delivered my lines with more believability, charisma, and sexual tension than they mustered for screenwriter Akiva Goldsman's didactic dialogue.

Dan Brown's 2003 novel about a Harvard professor of religious symbology (huh?) who unravels Rome's 2,000-year-long conspiracy to cover up how Jesus wed Mary Magdalene but then St. Peter stole Church leadership from the Widow of Christ, is a knock-off of Umberto Eco's satire *Foucault's Pendulum* for the terminally literal-minded, whose number is legion, evidently: the book sold 60 million copies in 44 languages.

The Ron Howard-directed film is a monotonous thriller, doomed by its manifest bogusness. Yet daft esoterica doesn't have to ruin a movie. Both the Rudyard Kipling-John Huston classic "The Man Who Would Be King" and the amiable family film "National Treasure," for example, concern lost treasures of the Freemasons. But good movies don't take their pseudo-lore so seriously. "The Da Vinci Code's" unhinged loathing of Catholicism obliterates its sense of fun.

As Tom Wolfe pointed out in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and the Duke lacrosse team brouhaha has confirmed, there is a tremendous hunger these days for a Great White Defendant to hate. Paul Bettany, who in February's "Firewall" played one of Hollywood's standard-issue villains, a blond BBC-accented bank robber, ups the ante here by portraying the Great Albino Defendant, a blue-eyed, Latin-speaking albino monk, a sort of holy hit man dispatched by the conservative Opus Dei prelature to rub out Hanks and Tautou.

There's potential for self-mockery in lines like "I have to get to a library—*fast!*" Unfortunately, the film doesn't even try to earn your willing suspension of disbelief by being entertaining.

It's too busy bludgeoning you into accepting the neo-Gnostic balderdash that Brown lifted from the 1982 book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which, in turn, was based on a 1960s hoax by conman Pierre Plantard. He claimed to be King of France by right of descent from the Dark Ages' Merovingian Dynasty, who were, he asserted, the offspring of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. According to forged parchments that Plantard planted in the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Priory of Sion, a cabal of great men like Leonardo Da Vinci and Isaac Newton, has secretly fought the evil Vatican for 900 years to protect the sacred Magdalenian-Merovingian lineage.

In the not-so-shocking climax to "The Da Vinci Code," we discover that one of the characters is Jesus' last living descendent.

This "Holy Blood" hooey is superstition of the grossest sort. Consider how genealogy actually works. Go back 80 generations (2,000 years), and your family tree has one septillion slots to fill. If Jesus had any living descendents today, He would have millions of them. The only way there could be just one surviving heir is if the family had relentlessly inbred so incestuously that the latest Merovingian would have three eyes.

Brown's contribution was to appeal to women, the main audience today for novels, by concocting a New Age feminist slant: the Roman Emperor Constantine wrote Mrs. Christ out of the New Testament to subordinate women below the liberated state they'd enjoyed under "the pagans," who worshipped "the Goddess." (Which pagans? Which goddess?) Fortunately, Leonardo and Newton struggled to preserve "pagan reverence for the sacred feminine." (Uh, weren't they a couple of nature's bachelors?)

Although G.K. Chesterton apparently never quite said the most famous line attributed to him—"When a man stops believing in God, he doesn't then believe in nothing, he believes anything"—it sure applies to the millions of "Da Vinci Code" fans. Evelyn Waugh noted, "Western Christianity, alone of all the religions of the world, exposes its mysteries to every observer," which makes it too egalitarian for modern Gnostics who want the inside skinny instead, even if they have to sit through the 149 endless minutes of "The Da Vinci Code" to hear it. ■

Rated PG-13 for disturbing images, violence, some nudity, thematic material, brief drug references, and sexual content.

BOOKS

[*Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different*, Gordon S. Wood, Penguin, 319 pages]

Founding Principals

By Daniel McCarthy

AFTER 230 YEARS, the American Revolution and our Founding Fathers have become shopworn things, leached of much of their character and reduced to mannequins to be dressed up in the intellectual fashions of the day. Idealized portrayals of Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and the rest still find a popular audience, resisting revisionist pressure. But as objects of reverence, the Founders cease to be what they were—revolutionaries, men who took up arms against their government and spilled blood for their rights.

If alabaster Founders survive at the popular level, clichés of a different sort prevail in academia, where perpetual debunking is the fate suffered by these men—and that they were men is part of the problem. But only part: Washington was rich as well as white and male. And he owned slaves. So did Jefferson, who slept with one, too. Because of the gulf between his life and his ideals—“all men are created equal”—Jefferson has become a particular target of censure. But the others get their share too.

Not that all scholarly treatments of the Founders fall into that mode. Just as pervasive, and just as off base, are those scholars who find in the *Federalist* and other papers of the founding generation far-sighted statesmen who anticipated the modern world of competing interest groups and lobbyists scrambling over one another like beetles after the main chance. Political parties and pork-barrel politics are what America has always

been about, in this view, right back to the Constitutional Convention.

Gordon S. Wood, the Alva O. Way University Professor at Brown, navigated past all these shoals of stereotype in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, the work that won him a Pulitzer Prize a little over a decade ago. He does so again in *Revolutionary Characters*, which restores something of their 18th-century significance to the eight revolutionaries treated within these pages. But cleaning away the layers of whitewash and graffiti that have accumulated on these men is only part of Wood's project. He also has a more specific objective in mind: to show why a nation aborning that produced a half-dozen statesmen of world-historical caliber—and perhaps a score more of nearly that rank—seemingly cannot produce a single one today.

“What made subsequent duplication of the remarkable intellectual and political leadership of the revolutionaries impossible in America,” Wood contends, “was the growth of what we have come to value most, our egalitarian culture and our democratic society.” The Enlightenment's gentlemanly ideal demanded statesmen like Washington, Adams, and Jefferson. But the commercial and increasingly egalitarian and democratic Republic they created had little use for—and considerable suspicion toward—men of such character. Those Founders who lived long enough to taste the fruits of their labor, Jefferson especially, found them unexpectedly bitter.

Disinterestedness was the hallmark of a gentleman's character. He was not the creature of financial interests—if he was not independently wealthy, he at least affected the attitude of one who was, spending generously and borrowing as needed to show that money had no hold over him. He was impartial, concerned only for the public good, not the advancement of friends or, still less, of party. Cultivating this kind of character was of overriding importance to the men Wood profiles (except, notably, Aaron Burr) so much so that even personal shame was preferable to a tarnished political reputation. When

Alexander Hamilton was accused of corruption for making payments to a man named James Reynolds, rather than let it be thought that he was engaged in any political intrigue, Hamilton revealed that he had, in fact, been conducting an affair with Reynolds's wife—the money was for blackmail. The personal humiliation involved, for Hamilton's wife as well as Hamilton, was secondary to the risk to his public character.

Money, much more than sex, was the root of all republican evils. There was more to this belief than just aristocratic contempt for commerce. Bribery was a mainstay of political power in 18th-century Britain; it was the means by which the king subverted the independence of Parliament and thereby the liberties of Englishmen. Not for nothing did Samuel Johnson define “pension” in his great dictionary as, in part, “pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country.” The young Republic had as much to fear from foreign wealth as well as foreign armies, and the possibility of one branch of government corrupting another was very real.

The Founders feared as well the mixture of industrial interests with state power, a combination likely to create constituencies for monopoly at home and wars abroad. Monopoly, in the 18th century, was not understood as a result of free competition but as a state grant of exclusive privilege to favored manufacturers. Indeed, “Social honors, social distinctions, perquisites of office, business contracts, privileges and monopolies, even excessive property and wealth of various sorts,” Wood wrote in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, “...seemed to flow from connections to government, in the end from connections to monarchical authority.”

Only disinterested men could administer government justly. Any other kind would lead to tyranny, either by betraying the Republic to foreign interests or by using the power of government to enrich themselves and their friends at the expense of others. That, at least, was the theory—though Hamilton, for one, had other ideas.