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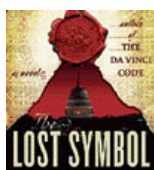
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Craving for a good conspiracy thriller

Pradeep Sebastian
Browser's Ecstasy

Are conspiracies also a comfortable way of making sense of the world?



Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol* continues to stay in the news, this time an announcement that its publisher Doubleday had unveiled the dust jacket cover. The UK edition has a different jacket, with a key suspended over a Washington monument. On Amazon you come across this: "Want to start deciphering *The Lost Symbol*? Follow along as we post mysterious new messages from the *Lost Symbol* Twitter and Facebook accounts every weekday."

When I clicked on it, it opened to a pdf that showed images and codes. On the Doubleday website, there is a live counter ticking away every second — a countdown to the publishing date, 9.15.09, when "all will be revealed." It will have a first print run of five million copies.

There isn't a question whether readers will want to grab it — they will because it comes after a five year hiatus from Dan Brown — but will its continuing theme of religious conspiracy and alternative history grip our imagination and explode in the way DVC did? In its wake were dozens of books, fiction and non fiction, getting behind the scenes of other hidden conspiracies.

The fiction spinoffs of DVC offered good (*The Last Supper*, *Labyrinth*, *The Last Cato*, *The Templar Legacy*) and bad stuff (*The Last Templar*, *The 13th Apostle*, *The Sacred Bones*) but we grabbed them all, greedy for more conspiracy.

Overkill?

Three years later, I notice, the feeding frenzy has died down. Simple overkill and oversaturation. Even I, a conspiracy buff, looked at these titles on a bookstore shelf and only gave them a bored glance. If *The Lost Symbol* had appeared two years after the DVC blitz, it would have intensified the excitement Brown's thriller had provoked in readers worldwide for conspiracy stories that unmasked the true and hidden histories of our sacred institutions. Now, however, I suspect readers will simply nod or just raise an eyebrow when "all is revealed" in *The Lost Symbol*. They won't be shocked or provoked. Unless Brown is going to reveal something earth shaking, readers are just going to get to the end of the book and go: 'Yeah, of course, this is what I expect from a new Dan Brown thriller'.

This is a pity. Because Brown's thriller deserves more than this. I don't know how good it is (though the legendary editor of Knopf-Doubleday, Sonny Mehta, reassures us that the wait has been worth it) but it is this sequel that will be the true successor of *The Da Vinci Code*; that is, only *The Lost Symbol* can really fulfill the high bar set by its predecessor, provide that conspiracy frisson we were yearning for, not the spins-offs and the follow ups. (Even Brown's own *Angels and Demons* pretended to be a sequel and not the prequel it really is).

And so *The Lost Symbol* comes two years too late. Conspiracy thrillers swamped the market, reaching even Indian shores with *The Rozabal Line*, and offered us so much meat, that we couldn't relish chewing anymore.

There were some clues in DVC that the sequel will be about the clandestine role of the Free Masons in the political and economic foundation of early American government. This was enough: Books were quickly researched and published on the Free Masons and their links to the founding fathers of America. One was even

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a primer, a preview of what The Lost Symbol (then titled The Solomon Key) could be about: Dan Burstein and David Shugart's Secrets of the Widow's Son: The Mysteries Surrounding the Sequel to The Da Vinci Code.

The jacket blurb tells us that this "is an unprecedented publishing event: A book about a book that has yet to be published. As the world waits breathlessly for Dan Brown to publish his sequel to The Da Vinci Code, this new book, Secrets of the Widow's Son, prepares international audiences for what they will experience in Brown's forthcoming book.

Instead of asking what is fact and what is fiction after reading Brown's next book (as so many readers did with The Da Vinci Code), those who read Secrets of the Widow's Son will have the unique opportunity to explore these questions in advance."

What is left then for us to find out? Only the plot of The Lost Symbol, which will condense action across centuries into a breathless 12 hour period. Brown's writing as we all know (and I'm certain the author himself admits this) is serviceable, not complex or stylish, and his plotting is clever more than intricate.

For those who still can't get enough of conspiracy thrillers (and though I whine and quibble to the contrary, I really am one of those) let me briefly bring up a few choice items published this year that I have sampled and can recommend: The Illumination, The Sign, and The Genesis Secret.

These theological thrillers along with the forthcoming new Dan Brown novel are further proof of how even more powerful than our craving for a good conspiracy is our desire to believe in one.

Are conspiracies also a comfortable way of making sense of the world? Things don't just fall apart — somebody makes them fall apart. It stems from the notion that all of us experience on and off: That things are not what they seem to be.

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