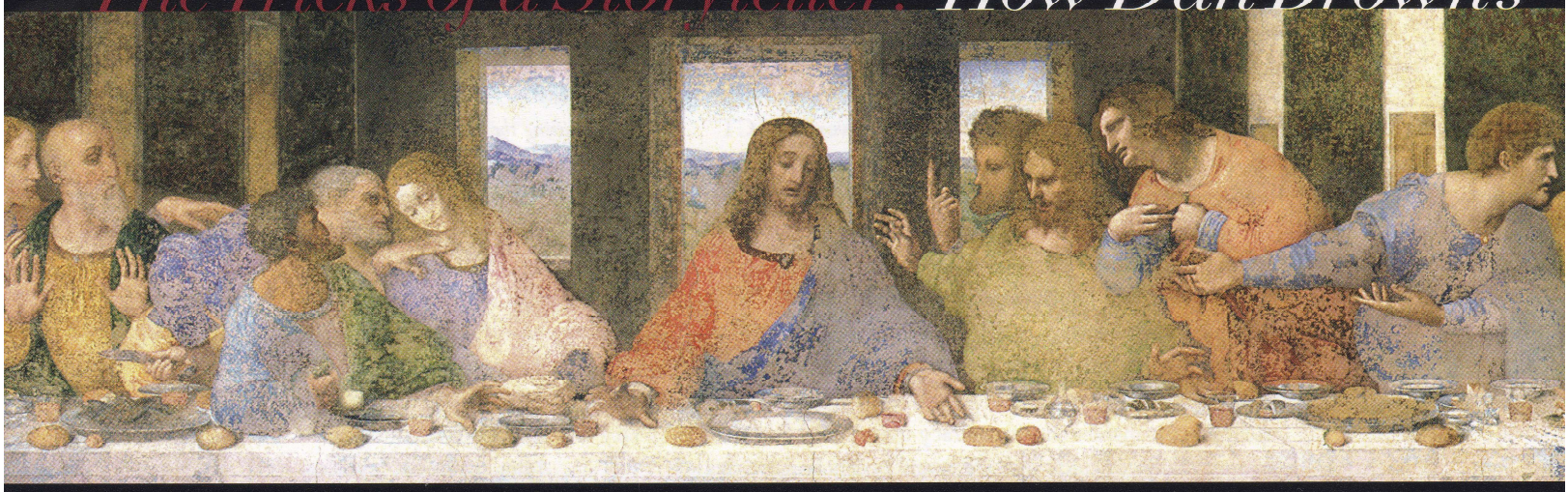
The Tricks of a Storyteller: How Dan Brown's



The Da Vinci Code Persuades Readers

by Gary E. Schnittjer © 2006

Storytellers can be powerful magicians. They can craft their tales in ways that change the world, or at least the storyworld. Good storytellers are able to wield their wizardry to persuade readers to see the world in new ways. Facts, tradition, history, and evidence are no match for a good story.

Anyone who has ventured into a bookstore in the past three years knows there are many books that promise to "break" or "crack" *The Da Vinci Code*. My intention is much more modest. This article explains some of the tricks that Dan Brown, the storyteller of *The Da Vinci Code*, uses to insinuate massive conspiracy, and, more importantly,

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to attempt to gain the reader's confidence and accept the conspiracy as plausible.

How does Brown insinuate conspiracy and attempt to increase readers' desire to accept it as plausible? Regarding the first half of the question, Brown claims that the details within the story are based on historical fact. On the page preceding the Prologue, the word "FACT" appears boldly at the top. The page then explains that a medieval secret society, whose membership included Leonardo da Vinci, still exists today. Next, it mentions a fanatical sect within the Catholic Church. Lastly, the page claims, "all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."

How does the claim of "facts" within a novel help persuade readers? Therein is one of the tricks: Anyone inclined to consider the conspiracy theory that Brown presents may conclude that the many books and articles written against *The Da Vinci Code* are actually part of the massive conspiracy. In this situation, whose facts should one believe? Or better, which plausibility does one want to believe?

What about Leonardo da Vinci's artwork that the book so vividly describes? Does da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1497), for example, serve as a key to the mystery of the Holy Grail? Here are three significant claims the novel makes about da Vinci's *The Last Supper*:

First, the person sitting to the right of Christ is a woman—specifically, Mary Magdalene.

> *Sophie examined the figure to Jesus' immediate right, focusing in. As she studied the person's face and body, a wave of astonishment rose within her. The individual had flowing red hair, delicate folding hands, and the hint of a bosom. It was, without a doubt . . . female.*
>
> *"That's a woman!" Sophie exclaimed.*
>
> *Teabing was laughing. "Surprise, surprise. Believe me, it's no mistake. Leonardo was skilled at painting the difference between the sexes"* (243).

Second, the center of the work is a ⌄ shape, an ancient symbol for womanhood.

> *Even before Teabing traced the contour for her, Sophie saw it—the indisputable ⌄ shape at the focal point of the painting. It was the same signal Langdon had drawn earlier for the Grail, the chalice, and the female womb* (244).

Third, Peter is depicted as jealous of and angry at "Mary Magdalene."

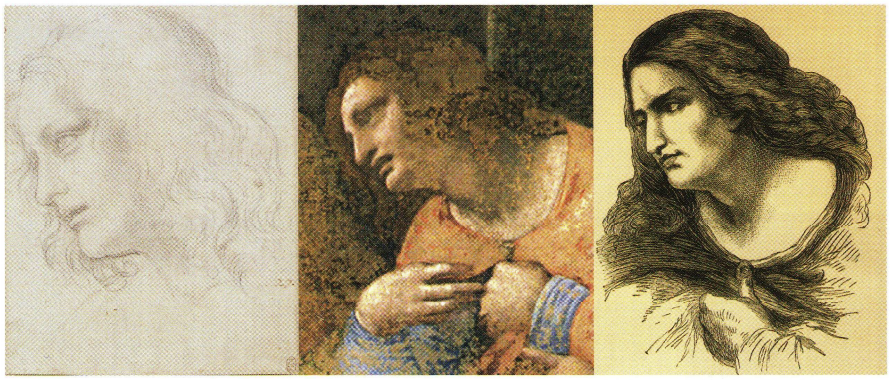
> *Again, Sophie was speechless. In the painting, Peter was leaning menacingly toward Mary Magdalene and slicing his blade-like hand across her neck! . . . Sophie squinted and saw a hand emerging from the crowd of disciples. "Is that hand wielding a dagger"* (248)?

Are these clues? Does da Vinci's painting actually depict Mary Magdalene next to Jesus? Is the ⌄ between Jesus and his beloved disciple the focal point? Does Peter wish to harm the person to the right of Christ because he is jealous?

Like Dan Brown, I do not hold a Ph.D. in art interpretation. However, I do remember what my junior high school art teacher taught us about *The Last Supper* when we learned about perspective and depth.

> **IMAGE 1:** A Nineteenth Century Woodcut of the Beloved Disciple in da Vinci's *The Last Supper*

"...characters know no more than the author who invents and animates them."



> **IMAGE 2:** Da Vinci's Study of St. Philip, Philip in *The Last Supper*, and a Nineteenth Century Woodcut of Philip

Is the beloved disciple, to Jesus' right, a woman? Da Vinci's John the beloved disciple does look "pretty" (see Image 1). Do any of the other disciples look "feminine"? Consider da Vinci's study of and depiction of Philip (see Image 2). Did da Vinci ever make other males appear feminine? Consider da Vinci's portrait of the locust-eating preacher of judgment, John the Baptist (see Image 3). Why might Renaissance artists use characteristics we call feminine to depict fishermen and fiery wilderness preachers? So-called feminine characteristics were used during this period to connote youthfulness or affection. Was there any reason to depict John this way? If da Vinci was, indeed, trying to connote such attributes of the beloved disciple, he may very well have used feminine characteristics.

Is the ⌄ shape the focal point of *The Last Supper*? If it is, my art teacher, and most other art teachers, missed it. The standard view is that everything points to the Lord (see Images 4 and 5).

Why is Peter gesturing as he is? Why is someone clutching a knife? Peter's gesture seems to be part of the focus on the Lord. Conventional interpretations of *The Last Supper* hold that John and Peter are leaning toward each other so the latter can ask about the betrayer, who, in da Vinci's brilliant interpretation, sits directly between them (see John 13:24). And when Peter hears of the betrayer he grabs a knife to defend his Master (see Images 6 and 7), much like he would do just hours later defending Christ in Gethsemane.

Why did Dan Brown choose da Vinci? That is another part of the trick. Anybody who takes art class in junior high school learns that da Vinci was brilliant, eccentric, and sometimes painted unusually. Da Vinci is

If Jesus did have a wife and children, would it make a difference?

One of the leading premises in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is that the Christian church desires to hide the alleged marital and paternal status of Jesus of Nazareth. One of the novel's characters describes it as, "the greatest cover-up in human history. Not only was Jesus Christ married, but He was a father" (249). Does the basis of the supposed conspiracy have any merit? Are Christians afraid of such things?

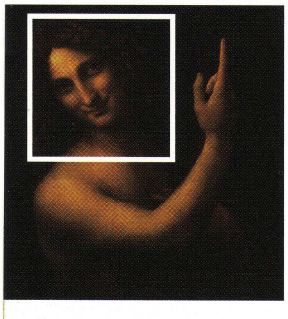
Darrell Bock, historical Jesus studies specialist and professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, challenges the basis of the supposed conspiracy. Bock embraces the historical Christian affirmation of the complete divine and complete human natures of Christ. Concerning the latter, he writes:

> "One of the most basic beliefs of Christian faith is that Jesus was 100 percent human. So *if He had been married and fathered children*, His marital relationship and His parenthood would not theoretically undercut His divinity but would have been reflections of His complete humanity. *Had Jesus been married, there was no need to cover it up.* The whole rationale for covering up any supposed relationship has no basis in theology. Had Jesus been married, theoretically He could still have been and done all He did" (33-34, emphasis mine).

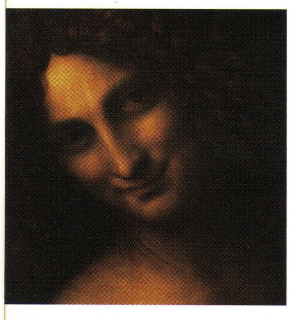
I have mused over this point when interacting with *The Da Vinci Code* in my graduate theology courses for the past few years. The last time I saw Darrell we talked about it. Like nearly all historical Jesus scholars, evangelical and critical alike, Bock does not think there is any evidence that Jesus was married or had children. But his point provokes. If Jesus did have a wife and children, would it make a difference? Not at all. So why hide it even if it were a viable possibility?

Far from being an embarrassment, if it was established that Jesus was a husband and father, Christians likely would be eager to embrace it. Such a thing could serve as an emblem of the scriptural witness to Christ's incarnation—human in every respect as we are (see Phil 2:7-8; Heb 4:14-16). Without a conspiracy, however, Dan Brown's novel would not be so "fun."

Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville: Nelson, 2004).



> **IMAGE 3:** Leonardo da Vinci's *St. John the Baptist*



"The storyteller is the sovereign ruler of the storyworld. Whatever happens, whatever characters think, say, or do, everything in the storyworld unfolds according to the storyteller's will."

strange. The trick is in finding a new way to explain the painter's oddities.

After the character, Teabing, interprets da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, he goes on to quote from ancient religious writings which allege a new view regarding the "true" nature of the relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene. This is a good trick. Teabing reads two passages from Christian pseudepigraphical writings of late antiquity. The first is introduced by, "[this writing] is always a good place to start" (246). This makes it sound like there are many passages about Jesus and Mary Magdalene. When Teabing introduces the second passage, this insinuation is reaffirmed. The character says, "I shan't bore you with the countless references" (247). Is it that he "shan't"—because he does not want to—or that he "can't"—because there are not that many? Are there many passages like the two quoted? No. Actually, the two are the only two that have "useful" soundbytes. A couple other passages, with some zealous imagination, could be used for allusions or hints, but there are not many (i.e., *Gospel of Thomas*, 114; *Gospel of Philip*, 32, 55; *Gospel of Mary*). Moreover, the only reason these two soundbytes work is because they have been lifted out of context.

The trick, in this case, is creating a supposedly well-read character who says there are many allusions to Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Another character—a Harvard University professor—affirms the accuracy of the first character's statements several times. Such characters may impress the reader who forgets that the characters know no more than the author who invents and animates them. Brown neither holds a Ph.D. in the Gnostic writings of late antiquity, nor is a professor of religious symbolism at a prestigious university. In the real world, many Sunday school children know that the Dead Sea Scrolls are pre-Christian writings of an ancient Judaic extremist sect (first and second centuries BCE). In the novel, Dan Brown's Harvard professor mistakenly asserts that the Dead Sea Scrolls speak of Christ's life (see 234-35).

The tricks regarding the second half of the question—How does a storyteller insinuate massive conspiracy *and increase readers' desire to believe it?*—are much easier to pull off. First, Brown presents guileless, likable, skeptical, resourceful, truth-seeking protagonists. From the beginning, there is no hint of guile in the protagonists. The combination of their skepticism and desire to know the truth offers incentive to the reader who wants to believe that a massive conspiracy exists within the church.

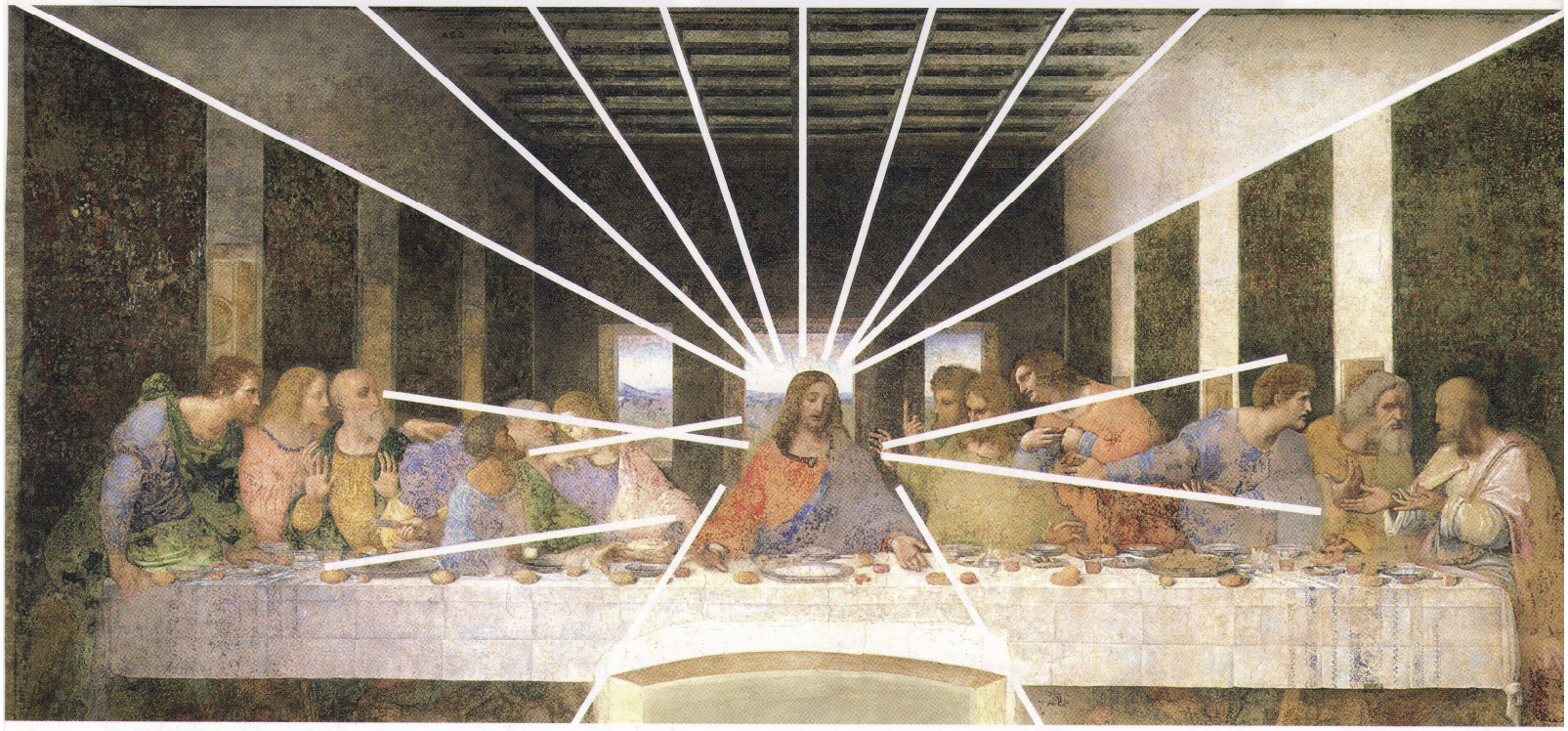
How can two people be so pure in motive and un-conflicted about the truth? They cannot. That is the point. The two protagonists are not people. They are fictional characters. This leads to another trick, the role of the storyteller.

The storyteller is the sovereign ruler of the storyworld. Whatever happens, whatever characters think, say, or do, everything in the storyworld unfolds according to the storyteller's will.

Sometimes, when people watch a movie or read a novel, it becomes so engrossing that they forget where they are or even what time it is. At a lesser level, people are not always conscious of the storyteller. An example may help.

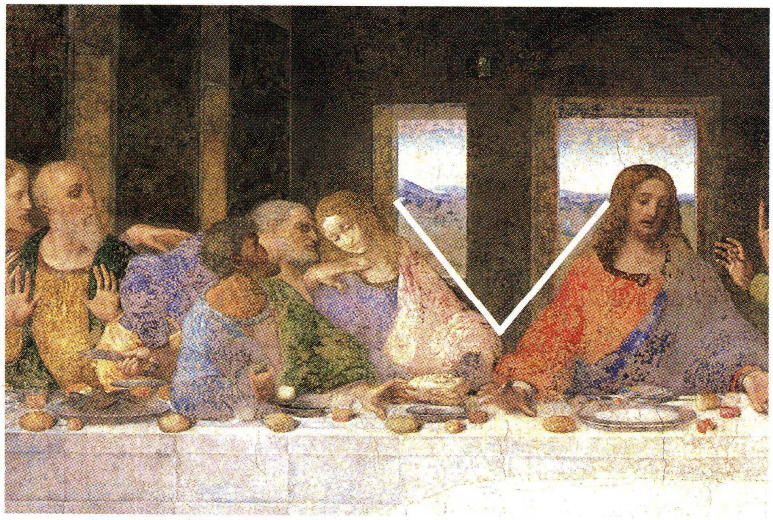
In Matthew Pearl's novel, *The Dante Club*, the leading characters are trying to interpret Dante's *Inferno*. In the

> **IMAGE 4:** Everything Points to the Christ in da Vinci's *The Last Supper*

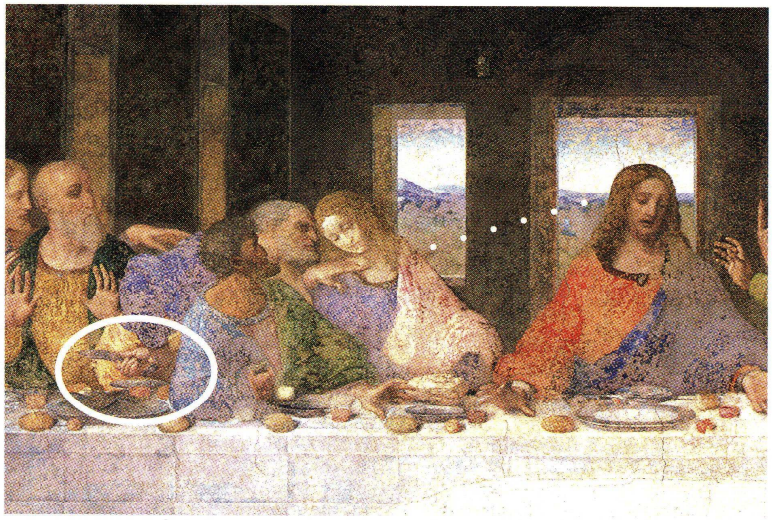


"Is the ⌄ shape the focal point of *The Last Supper*?"

> **IMAGE 5:** Christ as the Focal Point of da Vinci's *The Last Supper* is even More Striking in the Broader Physical Context of Its Setting



> **IMAGE 6:** The Posture of the Beloved Disciple and Peter after the Lord Announces a Betrayer in da Vinci's *The Last Supper*—"Simon Peter motioned to the [beloved] disciple and said, 'Ask him which one he means'" (John 13:24 NIV).



> **IMAGE 7:** Peter's Gesture and the Knife in da Vinci's *The Last Supper*

"Facts, tradition, history, and evidence are no match for a good story."

course of their work, they have been thinking of Dante as the main character—narrated in the first person—on a journey through the many levels of hell, which he is. In the *Inferno*, Lucifer is the master of hell, and Dante is a visitor. Yet, at one point in *The Dante Club*, a character addresses his fellow interpreters: "But shall I give you advice? You are not after Lucifer—that is not the culprit you describe. . . . No. You are after Dante—it is Dante who decides who should be punished and where they go, what torments they suffer. It is the poet who takes those measures, yet by making himself [Dante] the journeyer, he tries to make us forget: We think he too is another innocent witness of God's work" (228). Dante the author is the master of the *Inferno's* narrative world, and Lucifer and Dante the traveling character are merely puppets of the author's will. The storyteller is the supreme ruler of the storyworld.

Dan Brown is not the main character in *The Da Vinci Code*. He does not have the credentials or experience of the main characters. Brown, however, is the sovereign lord of his novel. Some readers forget. They think well of the protagonists and enjoy the tale. Readers want the protagonists to discover the "truth." That is the trick.

A good story is magical. The storyteller can amaze and do the kinds of things illusionists do. Dan Brown invented a massive conspiracy for his novel. The story uses many tricks to persuade. But once people see the puppet strings, the magic evaporates. What remains is entertaining fiction.

QUOTATIONS FROM:

Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
Matthew Pearl, *The Dante Club* (New York: Random House, 2003).

CREDITS

- The woodcuts of John the beloved and Philip from *The Last Supper* (Images 1 and 2) are from public domain: Alfred Nevin, *et. al.*, eds. *The Holy Bible: containing the Old and New Testaments, Translated out of the Original Tongues, with Apocrypha, Concordance, and Psalms*. Philadelphia: H. W. Kelley, 1876.
- Image 2: Da Vinci's Study of St. Philip ("The head of St. Philip"), courtesy of: The Royal Collection © 2006, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.
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