

## PROLOGUE: THE RIDDLE OF THE COVER

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**T**here were probably four million other readers ahead of me when I picked up a borrowed copy of *The Da Vinci Code* in late January of 2004. I read it quickly, intensely. Like popcorn at a movie, I gobbled it down.

Of course, it gave me reason to do a double-take once in a while. Among other phases in my publishing career, I had spent about fifteen years of my life as a writer and editor in the aviation industry, so I was surprised to see author Dan Brown talk of a “waiting turboprop” for Bishop Aringarosa on one page, and then, a few pages later, specify an airplane that is *not a turboprop*. Later in the book, a Hawker jet does a “customary” about-face under its own engine power inside its hangar. (This is an unsafe maneuver that no jet pilot would ever do. The thrust could blow out the hangar walls.)

I thought it over for a few days and decided to write the author about the flaws. In my naïve sincerity, I figured he might actually read my letter and fix the next edition. I even suggested cinematic ways to make the plot repairs in time for the *Da Vinci Code* movie that I was sure was coming (and indeed it is, scheduled for May 2006, starring Tom Hanks and Audrey Tautou).

I didn't get a reply. Still haven't. Later I learned that by 2004 Dan Brown had become pretty reclusive, holed up in his Exeter, New Hampshire, home, presumably working feverishly on the sequel to *The Da Vinci Code*.

Over all, I liked the book a lot. The clever way that Brown had compelled me to turn page after page was something I had not encountered in a novel in a long time, and the fundamental themes of history and religion were powerful, provocative, and seductive.

I have been in various forms of publishing for about thirty-six years, and have been fortunate to work with some very fine people. I was lucky enough to get back in touch with an old friend, Arne de Keijzer, and he mentioned a book project he was doing with one of his old friends, Dan Burstein, a seasoned pro at book writing and a remarkably good editor. The project was *Secrets of the Code: The Unauthorized Guide to The Da Vinci Code*, and it was already well under way.

“Funny you should mention that Dan Brown book,” I said to Arne. “I just sent a letter to the author about some plot flaws.”

Soon, Arne was back to me with a proposition: “Do you think you could find other plot flaws in *The Da Vinci Code*?”

“Based on what I have seen at a glance, I bet I can,” I told him.

“How many do you think there are—could there be ten or twenty?”

“Well, I won’t know for sure until I get into it, but I will bet there are,” I said.

What followed was about nine weeks of intense scrutiny of *The Da Vinci Code*—or the *DVC*, as we came to call it—itsself, plus much of the pageant of Western cultural history that the *DVC* makes its focus. At any given moment, I was digging deep into topics like the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, street maps of Paris and London, with each new topic sparking endless Google searches that led in a myriad of interesting directions. I hit a level of sleeplessness that became its own standard.

A large part of my career as a journalist has been in aviation. This is a very absorbing and demanding field. It requires you to quickly, and accurately, learn all kinds of very esoteric things. It goes without saying that you are expected to know every part of every model of every current aircraft and engine. You also need a working knowledge of avionics, navigation, instrument flight procedures, and about forty other subjects that ordinary people don’t feel deficient for *not* knowing.

Aircraft accident investigators sometimes wax poetic over a thing like the fracture face indications of metal fatigue. As a journalist, I not only had to keep up with the investigators, but then explain it to my readers.

Today, because of hit television shows like *Crime Scene Investigation*, it has become common for ordinary people to know something about autopsies and causes of death. I actually had to study hundreds of traumatic injuries (with photos) when poring over thousands of aircraft accident records. One of the most important virtues of a journalist, though, is the sense to know when you don't know something, and to call an expert. So there were times when I would talk to medical examiners, psychologists, chemists, aircraft designers, and anyone else in the world who could help to explain the *why* of an aircraft crash.

Having pilots as my audience simply pushed me to a higher standard of accuracy, for a very simple reason. Pilots trust their lives to the information, so they are very selective about what they consider credible. You typically don't get a second chance if you make an error. For example, if you say the wings have a flaw in the "F" model but the "G" model has a beefed-up spar, you had better be right. If you're wrong about that "G" model, you can just assume that its pilot has canceled his subscription (assuming that the wing didn't break before he could learn of the flaw). I managed to excel at aviation journalism, capturing some five awards for my work.

In Dan Brown's *DVC*, the aviation errors hit me like a two-by-four, and I felt a sort of embarrassment on behalf of the author. I knew that thousands of "aviation people" were reading the same passage I had read about the "waiting turboprop," and then found the author naming a Beech Baron 58 as the airplane. The Baron 58 is not a *turboprop*, although some models of it are *turbocharged*, and perhaps that's where Dan Brown got sidetracked.

The other errors I found were sometimes real howlers, too, and they included simple mistakes on fundamental things, like driving north in Paris when the destination was south. This doesn't require any specialized knowledge—just a map of Paris.

In fact, for me, the whole plot-flaw hunt began, literally, with a bang. On the first page of the narrative, Silas the crazed monk shoots the Louvre curator, Saunière. His first shot has gone into Saunière's stomach. He aims and pulls the trigger again, but the chamber is empty. He reaches for a second clip that is in his pocket, but decides his victim will die soon enough anyway. Later on in the book, we find out the murder weapon is a thirteen-shot automatic pistol, and that Silas has killed three other old men that evening before coming to the Louvre.

Pardon me for stopping to do the math, but this means he averaged four shots per man for the previous victims. With that kind of shooting record, don't you think he would put in a fresh clip *before* going into the Louvre to shoot his fourth victim?

For me, *DVC* became an adult treasure hunt, a kind of video role-playing game in which I got to scamper through a book's little nether-world, picking up gold tokens. Each token was one of Dan Brown's bloopers, and all I had to do was to recognize it against the camouflage.

Eventually, I discovered more than one hundred fifty plot flaws, small and large, and documented one hundred of them in *Secrets of the Code*. My plot flaws section of the book earned special mention from a number of reviewers, but there were dozens of other contributors, including many scholars and experts in all kinds of disciplines, and I was honored to be in such fine company.

We were extremely pleased when *Secrets of the Code* burst onto the scene and rather rapidly climbed the *New York Times Best Seller List*, promptly eclipsing about eleven other books about *DVC*.

Along the way, Arne called me one day and said, "Have you heard there is a code on the dust jacket? It gives a hint about the next Dan Brown novel." So I turned my attention to it, and soon noticed that the two blurbs had some characters that were set in slightly bolder type than the rest. My eyes could not reliably pick them out, so I had my wife and eleven-year-old son sit around the kitchen table and copy out the characters:

ISTHERENOHELPFORTHEWIDOWSSON

This turned out to be a question: “Is there no help for the widow’s son?”

So I typed the phrase into the Google search engine on the Internet. This became my first clue.

It immediately led me to a speech given in 1974 by Reed C. Durham, who had become a kind of pivotal figure in the Mormon Church because of this single talk. In it, he related various connections between the founder of the church, Joseph Smith, and certain influences from his period of history. Smith lived from 1805 to 1844.

The history of the Mormon Church? How could this be of interest to Dan Brown? Well, once you have read *DVC*, you are willing to sit still at least for a short lesson, so I read on.

History is definitely not dull when you are digging into material like this. Your senses are even more stimulated when you are constantly paying attention to the potential for a novelist like Dan Brown to bring history to life. I learned how the young Joseph Smith cooked up his religious stew with a pinch of Freemasonry and a dash of occult magic. There were a lot of little brain ticklers, too, because Reed Durham was building a picture of a Joseph Smith who “married” several dozen women, created an entire religion without any significant prior religious experience, and was murdered, all by the age of thirty-eight.

It didn’t seem to have an obvious connection to the next Dan Brown novel, but it brought up the topic of Freemasonry, which I instinctively began to research. This led to a lot of hits on Google, and became my second clue.

It also hooked me up quite quickly with conspiracy theories and the Illuminati, and I got a strong vibe about Washington, D.C. I decided to pursue the Washington trail.

Now, things started to make a lot of sense! Having analyzed *DVC* page by page and by now having read *Angels & Demons (A&D)*, I could readily see how Washington could provide Dan Brown with a symbolic playground for his hero, Robert Langdon, in which to race around (no doubt going the wrong way down one-way streets, a Dan Brown

thing). Brown had already “done” Paris, London, and Rome. The city of Washington also has a history that is a mystery to most of us. These secret histories could be a ripe background for Dan Brown to deploy his patented mix of symbology, conspiracy theory, occult history, and religious themes.

I circulated a modest guess about the next Dan Brown novel, among my publishing buddies, and became known as “the guy making a prediction.” This eventually solidified into a long-term assignment, and I was off on the quest. My earliest prediction was a “Mormon-Mason treasure hunt,” probably set in Washington but perhaps involving travels elsewhere. We published this guess in *Secrets of the Code* in April 2004.

I have to admit that I am still not sure about the Mormon connection. When I pursued it, I learned an awful lot about the origins of this religion that involved the occult, the formative years of America after the Revolution, and Freemasonry—all potential Dan Brown themes. So, even if it doesn’t come up in the next Dan Brown novel, I am glad to have studied these interesting topics.

On May 4, 2004, our publishing group issued a press release highlighting what I had found out about the dust jacket clues. It took only a couple of weeks for the guess to be confirmed by the best possible source, the author himself.

On May 18, Dan Brown himself let slip a clue or two in a rare public appearance, a speech to the New Hampshire Writers Project. According to news accounts of the speech, he said his next novel would be “set in Washington and would focus on the Free and Accepted Masons, a secretive fraternal organization.” Brown said the architecture in Washington is “soaked in symbolism and plays a major role in the novel.” My publishing associates were pleased at this. It was nearly a perfect confirmation of my prediction and, in earnest, I now sought to figure out what Dan Brown would do next.

Immediately, there was a sea change in my life. If you do not count technical tomes, aircraft flight manuals, and all of the endless software manuals I’ve had to absorb in a thirty-six-year career as a journalist with

heavy emphasis on technical matters, I had gone the last five or ten years reading only perhaps two “books” a year. Those days are gone for good. I soon settled into a routine in which I was reading two or three books a week and had about five open at one time.

This was in addition to endless hours searching the Internet. Each time I found a particularly good article, I would e-mail it to myself, to keep a running record of my research. The initial effort on *DVC* came to about 475 articles. This was followed by about 350 articles on *A&D*. Now, in the effort to anticipate Dan Brown’s next novel, I have over 700 articles. Printed out, it comes to more than 5,000 pages.

The research hasn’t stopped. The more I discover, the more there is to discover. Dan Brown says he uses only about 10 percent of the research he gathers when it comes to actually writing the novels, so I probably have much more material than he’d ever use. And, of course, there is no guarantee that I have anticipated everything Dan Brown will explore. It also could well be true that Dan Brown will miss some of the nuggets of gold that I have collected.

Consider this an invitation. Come with me on this treasure hunt through history. My pledge is twofold: to tell you what I have discovered, and to expose you to further mysteries yet to be solved.

I am specifically not attempting to spoil the plot of Dan Brown’s next book for you. This book is really in homage to the extraordinary mind and research of Dan Brown. Instead, I am seeking to make you a well-informed reader, ready to have an even richer and more enjoyable experience reading Dan Brown’s next book—which the publisher has announced will be called *The Solomon Key*.