

Best-sellers book list

Following is the Catholic Bestsellers List for June 2003, according to the Catholic Book Publishers Association.

HARDCOVER

1. *The Heart of Henri Nouwen*. Christensen & Laird (Crossroad)
2. *Send My Roots Rain*. Megan McKenna (Doubleday)
3. *The Lamb's Supper*. Scott Hahn (Doubleday)
4. *Lord, Have Mercy*. Scott Hahn (Doubleday)
5. *The Catholic Prayer Book*. leatherette. Michael Buckley (Servant)

PAPERBACK

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (Doubleday and Our Sunday Visitor)
2. *Your One-Stop Guide to the Sacraments*. Rushek & Dodds (Servant)
3. *Return of the Prodigal Son*. Henri J.M. Nouwen (Crossroad)
4. *Rosary Novenas to Our Lady*. Charles V. Lacey (ACTA)
5. *Mother Teresa's Lessons of Love and Secrets of Sanctity*. Susan Conroy (Our Sunday Visitor)

CHILDREN

AND YOUNG PEOPLE

1. *Did Adam & Eve Have Belly Buttons?* Matthew Pinto (Ascension)
2. *Tear Soup*. Schwiebert & DeKlyen (ACTA/Grief Watch)
3. *My Rosary Coloring Book*. Virginia Helen Richards (Pauline)
4. *Little Acts of Grace*. Gorlier & Piscitelli (Our Sunday Visitor)
5. *A Teen's Game Plan for Life*. Lou Holtz (Ave Maria/Sorin)

SPANISH LANGUAGE

1. *Junos Para Toda la Vida*. Joseph M. Champlin (Liguori)
2. *Manual Para el Catolico de Hoy*. A Redemptorist Pastoral Publication (Liguori)
3. *Catecismo de la Iglesia Catolica*. (Our Sunday Visitor and Doubleday)
4. *Mis 15 Anos — My 15th Birthday*. Diocese of San Bernardino (Pauline)
5. *Catecismo Basico*. Mary Lea Hill (Pauline)

'Code' clever but offensive

Joseph R. Thomas/CNS

To put the matter succinctly, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown (Doubleday, \$24.95) is overwritten (454 pages), overplotted and overdrawn.

And Christians are likely to find it offensive, although it is exceptionally clever in an intellectual way. It distorts church history while putting a modern dress on the hoary Arian heresy, weaving historical and pseudo-historical threads through a contemporary mystery that is set in motion by the murder in the Louvre of the famous museum's curator.

On the surface, the tale involves Langdon and a French police cryptologist, Sophie Neveu, in efforts to unravel puzzling clues crafted by Jacques Sauniere, Sophie's grandfather, as his life ebbed away after he was shot by a monkish albino figure pursuing a religious secret of which Sauniere was the last surviving guardian. Three other guardians were killed earlier.

Because Langdon's name surfaces in Sauniere's cipher, he immediately becomes the chief suspect, making it necessary for him, with Sophie as an ally, to evade the police while following the clues.

As you might expect, however, nothing is as it seems. Sauniere, it turns out, is the head of a secret society, the Priory of Sion, dedicated to protecting historical documents challenging the divinity of Jesus.



Moreover, the monkish figure is a member of Opus Dei acting on behalf of the bishop who heads that society. Behind them both is a shadowy character they know only as the Teacher.

Sauniere's clues pinpoint the location of the documents. They refer the *cognoscenti* to famous Leonardo da Vinci paintings at the Louvre, among them the Mona Lisa and the Last Supper, in which other clues regarding the nature of the secret are to be found, thus explaining the title of Brown's book.

Now if you have strong feelings about reviews that give away too many details of a mystery, then you had best stop here and go on about your business.

Brown's secret concerns the Holy Grail.

However, the Holy Grail is not the chalice of the Crusades and Arthurian legend but the "cup," or womb, of Mary Magdalene.

As Brown has Langdon explain to Sophie, in da Vinci's rendition of the last supper the Magdalene is the figure generally thought of as an Apostle resting on the breast of Jesus. She is doing so because Jesus, who is a great man but nevertheless only a man like other men, is her husband.

Plunging further into the land of make-believe, *The Da Vinci Code*

then identifies Sophie as a blood descendant of that union, this too being among the secrets Sauniere had been guarding.

Moreover, all of this, including a "spiritual" sex ritual which led Sophie to shun her grandfather for 10 years, is tied up with the church's suppression of the "sacred feminine" side of Christianity. One aspect of this suppression was the manipulation of Scripture by the early church, with contrary writings being left out of the scriptural canon.

Through his characters, Brown also posits this suppression as a factor in the development of attitudes which led to the killing of 5 million women during the Inquisition.

One can argue, of course, that in fiction the author has great interpretive leeway. As indeed he does. But Brown mixes actual — if arcane — facts with speculation and fantasy in such a fashion that the whole easily takes on that aura of historicity.

To a writer, this is a skill of great value. But, like any skill, it can be put to less-than-honest use. In *The Da Vinci Code* it is used to call into question the basis of Christian faith and to attack the church in a format — the novel — where one does not ordinarily expect to encounter argument masquerading as historical truth.

Thomas is the retired editor in chief of *The Christophers* and a former diocesan newspaper editor.

Learn etiquette of different faiths



So your cousin, who is a Mormon, sends you a beautiful invitation to her daughter's wedding reception, and you stew for a couple of days, because you weren't actually invited to the wed-

ding. You always invite her to your family's weddings. What's the deal?

Quick, where's your copy of *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook*? If you don't have one lying around the house, now is the time to get one.

Let's see, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist — OK, here it is: Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) — history and beliefs, basic service, appropriate attire, life cycle events, marriage ceremony. Mmm-hmmm — here it is: "Members of the church are encouraged to be married in one of its temples"

How to be a Perfect Stranger:

The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook, 3rd edition, edited by Stuart M. Matlins and Arthur J. Magida. Skylight Paths (Woodstock, Vt., 2003), 432 pp., \$19.95.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Rackover

and "only faithful members of the Mormon church may enter a temple. Guests invited to the temple marriage ceremony must present a 'temple recommend' issued by their bishop to indicate that they are, indeed, faithful members." Your cousin loves you, and wants to include you fully in her daughter's wedding party. You can go to the reception and hold your head high.

For the naturally curious, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger* will be interesting spot-reading. The editors are

completely objective in the "history and beliefs" entries. They give equal time to each faith and suggest further reading to learn more about that faith. This comprehensive, 432-page paperback consolidates and updates two earlier hardback volumes.

This is a great sourcebook in the context of cross-cultural relationships. If, for instance, you're invited to a wedding by an office colleague, and you're unfamiliar with their culture or faith, this book will give you detailed insight on how to dress, what (if any) gift is appropriate, and even how to pronounce congratulations in that religion's language!

These editors did their homework. Now you will be able to do yours in record time, with utmost confidence.

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