

ENDPAPER

PRADEEP SEBASTIAN

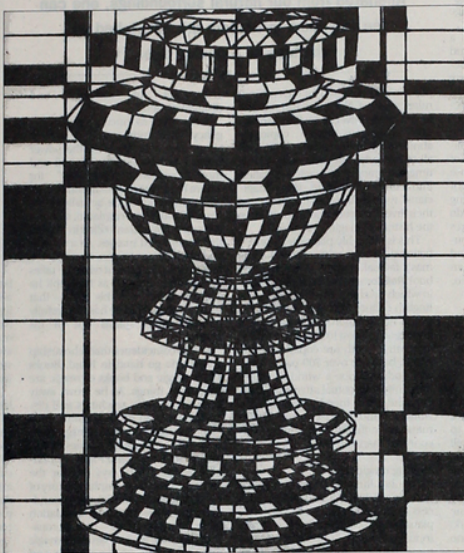
# The Code revisited

**D**ON'T get me wrong. I loved *The Da Vinci Code* as much as any conspiracy buff out there, but to take it seriously as established history would be actually doing the book a disservice. Dan Brown's unputdownable theological thriller should be read as the grandest kind of entertainment out there: a conspiracy that is part history, part fiction. If you literally believe the conspiracy, it isn't thrilling anymore. For a conspiracy to be truly tantalising, the connections, the threads, should never add up but hint at bigger conspiracies. Only then will the paranoia be real. *The Da Vinci Code* is proof that 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.

## Global phenomenon

*DVC* has become a global publishing phenomenon, prompting a special illustrated edition. Its fans stay well into the night to finish it, or find themselves at two a.m. desperately looking for any art book featuring a detailed reproduction of *The Last Supper* or *The Mona Lisa*. What most people want to know when they've finished it is: what is fact and what is fiction? Intrigued, I decided to probe a little more. The first thing I discovered is that the book has not yielded all its secrets yet. Dan Brown has left clues all over the hardcover book jacket (look carefully at the left hand margin of the back cover, the spine, and the blurb on the inside jacket) that points to a mysterious code. If you go up his website ([www.danbrown.com](http://www.danbrown.com)) you'll find a contest that links several clues leading to the subject of his next book.

Brown didn't invent the *Da Vinci* conspiracy — it has been kicking around for several years in New Age pseudo-history/alternate history books. His genius was to take these fringe conspiracy theories/alternate histories and fashion a fascinating theological thriller that is also an intellectually challenging novel of ideas. In particular, he was inspired



by three controversial non-fiction bestsellers from the 1980s: *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, *The Templar Revelations* and *The Woman With The Alabaster Jar*. In the wake of *DVC*, several of these source books have come back into print. What is more interesting is the number of books published in the last six months offering a key to the mysteries in *DVC*.

Wading through several of them, I found most of them to be biased one way or the other: some have been responses by conservative theologians explaining why *DVC* is a hoax, while the others are by New Age historians or secret society buffs attempting to add credibility to the conspiracy. A few even chide Dan Brown for not having gone all the way and revealed everything, and then proceed to invent us of bigger conspiracies.

I don't think the book threatens people's faiths as much as provoking

them to take a fresh look at its origins and traditions. What the book has accomplished is to bring all these parallel or alternate histories that have been floating around in fringe circles to the mainstream; in particular celebrating the sacred feminine in Christianity by reclaiming the centrality of Mary Magdalene to the Christian faith. If you remember, Teabing tells Sophie: "Jesus was the original feminist. He wanted Mary Magdalene to lead the church."

Perhaps the one balanced (if you can have balance in conspiracies at all), comprehensive, definitive, intelligent and informed guide to *DVC* is *Secrets of the Code: The Unauthorized Guide to the Mysteries Behind The Da Vinci Code*, edited by Dan Burstein. It brings together essays, interviews, opinions and reviews that pertain directly to *DVC* or subjects relating to it by theologians and religious scholars

(conservative, liberal, radical, New Age), art historians, archaeologists, academic and alternate historians, scientists, literary critics, and philosophers. The book is really open ended — you can take what you want from it. But its editor, the remarkable Dan Burstein, a huge fan of *DVC*, offers his conclusion (informed by non-partisan experts like Elaine Pagels, Simon Singh, Laura Miller, and having read all the essays closely myself I concur): that one half of what Brown reveals is based on growing documented, authentic evidence, and another half, alas, is conjecture based on myths and legends that he presents as established truth. (That mythologies spell their own truth is another thing.)

## Between truth and tall tales

The parts (spoilers ahead) rooted in historical evidence: the importance of Mary Magdalene to the founding of the early church, the possibility of a romantic relationship between her and Jesus, the history of the Knights Templar and the quest for *The Holy Grail*. The parts that are speculations recycled from legends and lore: Magdalene to the Holy Grail, a marriage between Magdalene and Jesus, a royal lineage from their bloodline, and the Prioress of Siem as an ancient secret society guarding a 2,000 year old secret. Further, respected art historians strongly refute the thesis that it is the Magdalene in "The Last Supper". Umberto Eco, whose *Foucault's Pendulum* dealt with the Knights Templar, told the press recently that the idea of a marriage between Mary and Jesus and a secret royal bloodline in *DVC* was based on 19th Century fairy tales as common as "Pinocchio" and "Red Riding Hood".

Well, I can't say I wasn't disappointed the first time I discovered this but that's when I realised it wouldn't be as much fun or as fascinating if it was all true. It wouldn't be a conspiracy anymore, it would be history. Though I still like to think that it is Mary Magdalene in "The Last Supper". She is, after all, worthy of being *The Holy Grail*.  
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**W**HEN a historical figure as large as Tipu Sultan captures the imagination of a playwright of Girish Karnad's stature, the upshot is bound to be a masterpiece.

Girish Karnad's "The Dreams of Tipu Sultan" commissioned by BBC Radio in 1996 to commemorate 50 years of Indian Independence is undoubtedly one. The Oxford University Press recently published "The Dreams of Tipu Sultan", along with "Bali: The Sacrifice".

The play sees-saws between the apparent present — where Hussain Ali Kirmani, the court historian, and Colin Mackenzie, the Oriental scholar, are trying to reconstruct Tipu's life; the past — how Tipu lived and what he aspired for; and Tipu's dreams — which he recorded, along with his interpretations of them, in a book.

Though he is writing of events that happened over two hundred years ago, Karnad's situations and dialogues have a touch of the modern world — with many references to issues of trade, commerce and governance that continue to dog the world. The words of the British representative Charles Malet, when he urges the Maratha statesman, Nana Phadnis, to join the English against Tipu to punish a man who is "the enemy of all mankind," have tones of George Bush urging the world to back his war on terror.

Karnad explains that Tipu's interests extend beyond the scope of trade, administration, war and politics to all things new, scientific and innovative. For a soldier who spent most of his life on horseback, Tipu was a man with a keen, enquiring mind and a desire to learn and move ahead. Throughout the play, Tipu's admiration for the Europeans is evident. Karnad brings dreams and reality into play, without really defining the boundaries between the two. The real glides into the dream world and back so seamlessly that in the closing scene, you almost believe that Tipu has won the Fourth War of Mysore, that the English are fleeing, that the roses are blooming... until the scene shifts back to Kirmani saying that was Tipu's last dream. He died that afternoon, fighting the British and his men betrayed him.

The sense of disappointment is acute proving that Karnad is a brilliant playwright who can sweep you along with his words and his imagination. The semi-matter-of-fact, almost hurried way in which Kirmani and Mackenzie sum up Tipu's last battle and the subsequent developments in India in the closing of the play is more powerful than stretched-out words detailing treachery and deceit could have been. With "Bali: The Sacrifice", the pace

DRAMA

# Powerful plays



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shifts to a less straightforward play about the philosophy of violence. Bali is a puzzling play that doesn't follow a beginning-middle-end format. It's the kind that thrives on layers of subtleties that makes you want to sit down and sort out the zillions of thoughts it stirs up.

The play is based on a 18th Century Kannada epic, "Yashodhara Charite", which refers to various other texts dating back to the Ninth Century. It deals with the idea that violence is just beneath the surface. With the idea that thought, intention and action are not so different after all.

It debates the Jain notion that intended violence is as atrocious as the action itself. That the mere thought of bloodshed or brutality condemns one as much as the deed would. The focus is on the conflict between Vedanta and Jainism. Karnad has effectively dramatised the myth of the Cock of Dough to bring out the idea that violence is pervasive and often masked by other actions and aspects.

The scene of the King and Queen's first meeting shows how constant exposure can numb people or children to violence. The concept of injury causing pain and idea of

compassion occur to the Hindu King for the very first time, when he sees his future Queen, a Jain, mourning over a bleeding bird. The effect is so profound that he converts to Jainism and marries the Queen against his mother's wishes.

It's a play about a conflict of beliefs. The mahout is not merely the reason for the queen's transgression, he symbolises the belief in a listening, logical God. The Queen believes that salvation comes from living a life of compassion, and the Queen Mother follows a Goddess who needs to be satiated with blood to be benign. In between is the King who has forsaken the faith he grew up in to embrace Jainism and is now torn between guilt and confusion about the right path.

Both "Bali: The Sacrifice" and "The Dreams of Tipu Sultan" are powerful plays that stay with you long after you have finished the last line — Tipu for its fervent nationalism and power of words, Bali for the power of the thought behind the text. ■

**SHALINI UMACHANDRAN**  
Two Plays: *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan; Bali: The Sacrifice*; Girish Karnad, Oxford University Press, Rs. 195.