

The Lost Symbol, a novel
Dan Brown
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Reviewed by Trevor W. McKeown

Author Dan Brown was invited to speak before the Scottish Rite shortly after *The Lost Symbol* was released. Unable to attend, he sent a letter, writing: "I cannot adequately express the deep respect and admiration I feel." He offered his "humble thanks for the noble example" freemasons set for humankind. He said he wished only "to reverentially explore the history and beauty of masonic philosophy." ¹

It is true that Dan Brown says nice things about Freemasonry in his latest book. At least, he has his protagonist, Dr. Robert Langdon, say nice things: "the entire masonic philosophy is built on honesty and integrity. Masons are amongst the most trustworthy men you could ever hope to meet." Langdon is quick to point out that Freemasonry "had always been one of the most unfairly maligned and misunderstood organizations in the world."

These are kind and welcoming words from a genre that is far more apt to play the conspiracy card.

But within the various story arcs that make up this novel there is one that many readers may not even notice. Underneath the adventure and thrilling mystery—the search for the lost symbol—are intimations of a shadowy group of "high ranking masonic leaders". They, or at least one of them, are so powerful that they can call out the head of an oversight department of the American Central Intelligence Agency and authorize her to track down and kill two innocent bystanders standing between them and the recovery of a videotape of a thirty-third degree initiation ceremony.

There's more. The so-called thirty-third degree initiation ceremony—described as a "dark ritual"—involves the candidate drinking wine from a skull. We know that Dan Brown is a fiction writer, even if on the front page under the headline: "Fact", he writes that all the rituals are real. Drinking wine from a skull may be part of some historical ritual or concordant body. ² It may even be practiced today. But it certainly doesn't happen in the Scottish Rite, or on the path to masonic leadership.

Mr. Brown's idea of reverentially exploring Freemasonry is to depict a group of powerful men prepared to kill for their privacy. But then what can one expect when his depiction of a "real ritual" is based on anti-mason Jim Shaw's tissue of lies, *The Deadly Deception* and anti-mason John Quincy Adams' *Letters*.

From the first page, the fictional nature of his facts is evident when Brown describes the masonic ritual garb as that worn by a mediæval heretic being led to the gallows. Heretics were rarely hung, and if they wore any special garb, it was a yellow painted chasuble and a fool's cap. But not in Dan Brown's universe.

In Dan Brown's fictional universe George Washington, Ben Franklin, and Pierre L'Enfant designed the street plan of Washington DC. In the real world, of the three only L'Enfant was involved, and he wasn't a freemason, although Brown twice calls him a Master Mason.

Dan Brown is writing fiction. Why else would he call the two-headed eagle a two-headed phoenix? Perhaps his definition of "real" is simply "something he read".

Brown's sources are clear: Manly P. Hall, whose major writings on Freemasonry were written years before he became a freemason; David Ovason's unsubstantiated claims about Washington's street plan; and anti-masons John Quincy Adams and Jim Shaw. Brown may have read the Rev. Joseph Fort Newton — he quotes him³— but he wasn't about to let that influence his depiction of freemasons.

In Dan Brown's fictional universe "more than half the framers of the constitution were masons, men who strongly believed that the stars and fate were intertwined, men who paid close attention to the layout of the

heavens as they structured their new world." In the real world, nine freemasons out of fifty-six delegates were actually signatories. In the real world none of the signatories had anything to do with the street plan of Washington DC. And who, other than Ovason, says they were interested in astrology?

He introduces the title "Supreme Worshipful Master" and several times refers to the 33rd degree as being the highest or most powerful, not failing to point out that "...within the masons, as with all things, money was power." He mangles the origins of the widow's son, and has to drag "the church" into it by having them label Aleister Crowley "the most evil man who ever lived", when it was in fact tabloid press journalist Horatio Bottomley.⁴

He refers to several scientific studies that remain controversial and are not as accepted as Brown presents them. Dr. Duncan MacDougall's 1907 attempts to measure the soul have been discredited, and never reproduced. Dr. Masaru Emoto's experiments in how emotions affect ice crystals have also not been reproduced under any sort of clinical rigour.

Make no mistake, this is a work of fiction. Complete with a first person account of death and the afterlife. While the errors are unimportant details in a work of fiction such as this, they are still off-putting since Brown is claiming some undefined foundation in fact.

Dan Brown may humbly thank freemasons for their noble example, but he's not about to depict that noble example in his fiction. In his fiction freemasons drink red wine from skulls; hold sacred the knife Abraham would have used to sacrifice his son; and are prepared to either kill to keep their rituals secret, or be killed to keep secret the knowledge of... something that seemed pretty banal and anticlimactic by the time all the running around and shouting was over.

But we must not forget that Mr. Brown writes fiction, and Freemasonry does not engage in literary criticism. We will leave that to *Daily Telegraph* writer Tom Chivers with his list of Dan Brown's 20 worst sentences, and Edinburgh professor of linguistics Geoffrey Pullum: 'Brown's writing is not just bad; it is staggeringly, clumsily, thoughtlessly, almost ingeniously bad.'⁵

To give Dan Brown his full due, among his legion of fans are found many freemasons who enjoy his brand of thriller, and who believe that there's no such thing as bad publicity. *Succès de scandale* has its attraction. We will soon know whether those attracted will be attracted for the right reasons.⁶

- 1 'Dan Brown, author of the novel *The Lost Symbol* (New York : Doubleday, 2009), was asked to address the 2009 Biennial Session of the Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite, Southern Jurisdiction in Washington DC, October 4-6, 2009, but because of his schedule, he could not be there.' http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/phpnews/show_news.php?uid=149 accessed 2009/10/17.
2. Knights Templar initiation, "fifth libation" : Avery Allyn, *A ritual of freemasonry*.... Philadelphia : John Clarke, 1831 p. 220-21 ; Jabez Richardson, *Richardson's Monitor of Free-masonry;* New York : Lawrence Fitzgerald, [1860], p. 119 ; Jonathan Blanchard, *Scotch Rite Masonry Illustrated*. Chicago : Ezra Cook, 1887-88, vol. 2, p. 470.
3. 'Time is a river, and books are boats.' Rev. Joseph Fort Newton, *The Bible in Masonry*, (Preface to some editions of the Bible published by A.J. Holman Company, Philadelphia.)
4. "The Wickedest Man In The World", Horatio Bottomley. London : *John Bull*, March 24, 1923.
5. "'Edinburgh professor of linguistics Geoffrey Pullum says "Brown's writing is not just bad; it is staggeringly, clumsily, thoughtlessly, almost ingeniously bad."' *The Lost Symbol* and *The Da Vinci Code* author Dan Brown's 20 worst sentences, Tom Chivers, *Daily Telegraph*, London 15 September 2009. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/6194031/The-Lost-Symbol-and-The-Da-Vinci-Code-author-Dan-Browns-20-worst-sentences.html> accessed 2009/10/17.
6. Statistics for the Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon website, freemasonry.bcy.ca show an average 2,300 daily visitors for the 45 days prior to the book release, a spike to 4,200 on Tuesday, 15 September 2009 and on Monday 21 September 2009, and an average for the following 45 days of 2,900 visitors a day. The Grand Secretary's office for the jurisdiction reports no appreciable increase in enquiries or petitions in September and October. S. Brent Morris reports that visitors to the House of the Temple in Washington, DC, in the month of October 2009 are four-fold those of October 2008.