

Da Vinci, dark materials, and dogs in the night

An essay review by
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The Da Vinci Code

By Dan Brown
Doubleday, New York, 2003
454pp, pb, AU\$19.95

His Dark Materials trilogy

By Philip Pullman
Scholastic, pb, AU\$16.95 each

His Dark Materials 1: Northern Lights [*The Golden Compass* in the US], 1995, 399pp

His Dark Materials 2: The Subtle Knife, 1997, 326pp

His Dark Materials 3: The Amber Spyglass, 2000,
518pp

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

By Mark Haddon
Doubleday, New York, 2003
226pp, illustrated, pb, AU\$19.95

***The Da Vinci Code*³**

The first thing that needs to be said about *The Da Vinci Code* is that there are no codes in it. And this is just the start of its duplicity. There is one cipher, but most of the book is enmeshed in unravelling not codes but a series of cryptic clues of the kind one makes up for treasure hunts at children's parties. Perhaps this is the nature and level of its main appeal — that and its promotion of conspiracy theories, which are always popular.

The book has been hugely successful, selling millions of copies worldwide and making a fortune for its author, Dan Brown. He and his editor have hit on a bestselling formula that seems so obvious in hindsight that everyone wonders regretfully why they didn't think of it first: combining the excitement of a chase thriller with the fascination of a grand conspiracy theory and letting it unfold through a series of puzzles which are translucent enough so that ordinary readers can cope with them.

Such a combinatory strategy also lies behind the other publishing mega-success of the turn of the millennium. The *Harry Potter* series (Bloomsbury) melds two existing genres: the escapism and imaginative richness of fantasy combines with a story centred around the easily identifiable world of school, with its gangs, battles with authority, rites of passage and sporting contests; this is a potent combination which made it extremely resonant with young and adolescent readers. So obvious in hindsight — yet only JK Rowling's thought of it and was able to execute it with enough skill to make it work.

Dan Brown's marriage of chase, conspiracy and 'code' has been similarly attractive to a large and growing number of readers. Brown already had a trial run of the formula with his previous publishers in a book called *Angels and Demons* (Transworld Publishers Ltd, 2003). In some editions of *The Da Vinci Code*, the

God and the Christian church have been getting a literary hammering lately, and from three unlikely sources: a trashy thriller, a fantasy trilogy and a young adult novel. The first is a full-frontal attack that founders on dodgy research and spurious logic, not to mention sloppy writing. The second was, along with *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series, one of the three fantasy novels voted into the top five play-off in the BBC's Big Read vote aiming to find the best-loved novel in English of the twentieth century. In the final vote the trilogy finished third, behind *The Lord of the Rings* and *Pride and Prejudice*¹. This trilogy makes a serious assault on the legitimacy of the church and, given its huge popularity in England², its impact must be a concern to believers. The last is a 'sleeper' — a young adult novel that attracted the appreciation not just of the teenage boys at whom it was aimed, but also of serious adult readers, to such an extent that it won a major open fiction prize.

opening of the earlier book is reprinted as a teaser at the end and the parallels are palpable: both books open with what is called a 'prologue' but which in fact describes an incident whose action is more or less continuous with the rest of the events in the book and in which a prominent intellectual dies a horrible death while being tortured to reveal secret information. Then in the next chapter of each, the well-known 'symbolist'⁴ Dr Robert Langdon is approached to assist in interpreting the cryptic message that the dead man has left behind. In *Angels and Demons*, the Catholic Church is the victim and the villains are the mysterious Illuminati — long a favourite subject amongst conspiracy theorists. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the Catholic Church becomes the conspirator, which may partly explain the second book's greater success. None but a few fanatics care much about the mythical Illuminati, but many people, both non- and ex-Catholics, feel some Schadenfreude in seeing the Catholic Church embarrassed.

Another crucial difference between the two books was in the marketing plan. After publishing *Angels and Demons*, Brown's editor moved to Doubleday and Brown followed him there. Sensing the potential of the formula, Doubleday spent a lot of money and effort promoting the new book. Five thousand advanced copies were sent to selected readers around the US⁵ so that people started talking about it. Sales reps were asked to give it special prominence in bookshops, with dedicated displays and posters. The rest is publishing history. And subsequently, on re-release, *Angels and Demons* became a bestseller itself, riding on the momentum of *The Da Vinci Code*.

The form of *The Da Vinci Code* is that of a chase thriller — the two protagonists must follow a series of clues to find and save some vital information before the villains get to it and destroy it. At the same time they are being chased by both a sociopathic assassin and the French gendarmerie, which suspects them of the initial murder.

The book's content revolves around a mind-boggling conspiracy theory of unthinkable audacity which accuses the Catholic Church of concealing the true nature of Jesus and thus of Christianity. According to this theory, Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and she was his anointed successor, groomed to lead Jesus' followers after his death. However, she was levered from power and all but written out of the narrative by the male disciples and she escaped to the south of France carrying the holy grail — the *san greal* in old French. Not only that, she was also carrying Jesus' child, and what we mistakenly thought of as the *san greal* is revealed, by the deft trick of moving the word break one place to the right, to actually be the *sang real* — the 'royal blood', that

is, the bloodline of the saviour.

Meanwhile, the patriarchal church went on its merry way, reinforcing and maintaining its masculine focus and misogyny down to the present day. And the truth about the 'feminine' roots of Christianity was kept safe from the powerful and vengeful church down through the ages by a series of secret societies, including the ubiquitous Knights Templar, who seem to crop up in any self-respecting conspiracy theory. The current guardians of the secret are a group called the 'Priory of Sion'. The novel begins as the conservative Catholic group, Opus Dei, is already on the track of the Priory and their 'proof' of the Church's cover-up in order to stamp it out once and for all by killing all its members; the goal of the book's protagonists is to reach this 'proof' before the church does and protect it from destruction. To do this, they must solve a series of puzzles left by a dying Priory leader.

One of the pleasures of reading this kind of popular fiction is that one gains lots of interesting information about a particular milieu — for example, horse racing in the novels of Dick Francis and the international diamond trade in those of Wilbur Smith. There is an unspoken contract with the reader that, although the story may be fiction, the facts about the real world around which the plot revolves are authentic. Dan Brown cynically breaks this contract, while at the same time expressly affirming his facts' authenticity in the frontispiece of his book, thus doubly letting his readers down. We shall deal with this later.

The Da Vinci Code is not in general well written, but it is structured cunningly enough to entice one to keep reading. In the words of well-known Melbourne writer, editor and crime fiction aficionado, Garrie Hutchinson, 'It is the worst book I have ever finished.' Like all melodramas, every chapter ends in a cliffhanger. Other melodramatic devices include dumbing down the protagonists (every schoolkid knows that Leonardo da Vinci wrote his notebooks in reverse script, but our two protagonists — a code expert and an art expert — take a whole chapter to work out in a da Vinci context what a cryptic message obviously in reverse script is); withholding information known to the point-of-view character from the reader; crosscutting to the pursuers, who appear to know more than the main characters; and creating an unbelievably scary sociopathic albino assassin. The characterisation is perfunctory, the decisions of characters are often implausible and the identity of the villain is obvious about two-thirds of the way through the book. And despite the promise of the title, there are no codes.

Rather, what we are given are anagrams, cryptic clues with double meanings, a number puzzle, the

reverse writing referred to above and *one* cipher. The use of ciphers in this kind of fiction is by no means new: at least three of the masters have gone before: Jules Verne in *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 'The Adventure of the Dancing Men' and Edgar Allan Poe in 'The Gold Bug'. In Brown's case, the cipher is what is known as the *atbash* cipher used by the ancient Hebrews (cf *Jeremiah*, 25:26 and 51:41), in which the first letter of an alphabet stands for the last, the second for the second-last and so on and vice versa. Thus, in the English version, VINCI would be written ERMYP:

A	B		C		D		E		F	G	H		I		J	K	L		M
Z	X		Y		W		V		U	T	S		R		Q	P	O		N

For the rest of the puzzles, there are three anagrams⁶:

'O, Draconian devil' = Leonardo da Vinci

'Oh, lame saint' = The Mona Lisa

'So dark the con of man' = Madonna of the Rocks⁷;

a set of numbers which are easily recognised as the first eight members of the well-known Fibonacci sequence⁸ and simply have to be put in numerical order to solve the puzzle:

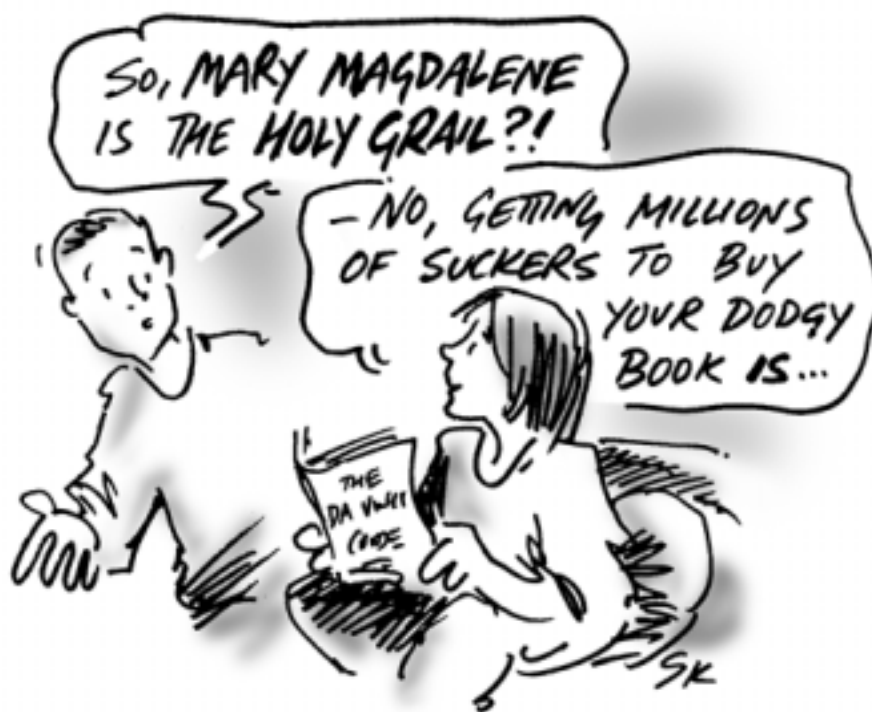
13 - 3 - 2 - 21 - 1 - 1 - 8 - 5;

and three cryptic poems.

None of this would have raised anyone's hackles in itself, but Catholic hackles have been raised by the promulgation in the book of the theory that Jesus' right-hand person was not Peter or James or John, but in fact Mary Magdalene, who was to have been the leader of his followers after he died but was prevented from doing this by the male disciples. The conclusion of this theory is surely blasphemy: Mary marries Jesus and has a child by him with whom she escapes to the south of France after Jesus' death; in France, their descendents found the Frankish Merovingian dynasty, and thus there are descendents of this line still alive today.

Such theories are clearly repugnant to the church because if true they would imply either that Jesus was not divine or that there have been many people in the past and still running around today who are direct descendents of Jesus and *ipso facto* of God. So the assumption is that if there exists proof of this theory then the church will do anything in its power to suppress this truth — this is the underlying premise of the plot of *The Da Vinci Code*.

Unfortunately, this and similar theories face an almost insurmountable objection. We can believe that an asbestos or a tobacco company might be involved in a cover-up because the stake is money and they might not care how they get it. If someone comes along and says they have *proof* that the product is dangerous, the company might be tempted to conceal these facts so the money still comes in. But the stake in the religion game is 'Eternal Life', and you can only get that if what you believe in turns out to be true. If someone comes along and *proves* that what you believe in is false, there is no point in hushing it up, because even if you succeed in hushing it up you still won't get 'Eternal Life', because the way you thought you'd get it is not valid, so what's the point? And if you weren't sure if the theory proved you were



wrong or not, rather than hushing it up, you would want to examine it rigorously to find out, for the same reason. On the other hand, if it was just a wild theory, which couldn't prove anything, then why concern yourself about it at all? It can just be dismissed as another groundless fabrication.

And this is what the theory behind *The Da Vinci Code* is. Speculative nonsense. It belongs to a large family of modern theories that share an erroneous epistemological basis. The theorists mistakenly believe that if you combine a number of vague possibilities, the likelihood of the combination being true is increased and that if you have enough dubiously possible facts supporting your theory then the theory is almost certain. But, as every schoolkid knows, you combine probabilities by multiplying them, not by adding them. To take a simple case, if

there is a fifty per cent chance of one thing being true, and a fifty per cent chance of another, independent thing being true, then the probability of them both being true is not $0.5 + 0.5 = 1$, i.e. certainty, but rather $0.5 \times 0.5 = 0.25$, i.e. the combination is twenty-five per cent probable.

The *Da Vinci Code* is heavily based on *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (Baigent, Leigh & Lincoln, Arrow, 1996)⁹, and what the writers have done here is accumulate hundreds, if not thousands, of tenuously possible facts and claim that they add up to something, when in fact these facts' cumulative effect is to make their conclusion less certain, and considerably so. Much of the evidence they adduce is very unlikely indeed, but even if one was to be generous and say that there was a fifty per cent probability that each of their pieces of evidence were true, and they had twenty pieces of such possible independent evidence, then the chance of them all being true would be 0.0000009 per cent, or less than one chance in a million. Of course, the fact that something is unlikely does not make it impossible. All I am arguing here is that, contrary to the underlying assumption of this and similar books, the accumulation of questionable evidence leads to less rather than more certainty.

The internet and other havens of speculative nonsense are full of theories based on such flimsy epistemological foundations. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* is but one of them and it is very easily seen to be highly dubious in its conclusions. But the Catholic Church, or elements of it, seems to have spent an inordinate amount of energy combating *The Da Vinci Code*. There are probably two reasons for this. One is the large and credulous readership the book has gained, many of whom may not have the intelligence or the knowledge to react critically to the book's wild assertions. The second reason is that Brown has broken the tacit contract between readers and writers of popular fiction that draws a clear and transparent line between fact and fiction. Brown prefaces the fictional part of the book, which we know to take *cum grano salis*, with a page which reads as follows:

Fact:

The Priory of Sion —

a European secret society founded in 1099 — is a real organisation.

In 1975 Paris's Bibliothèque Nationale discovered parchments known as Les Dossiers Secrets, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Sandro Botticelli, Victor Hugo and Leonardo da Vinci.

The Vatican prelature known as Opus Dei is a deeply devout Catholic sect that has been the topic of recent

controversy due to reports of brain-washing, coercion and a dangerous practice known as 'corporal mortification'. Opus Dei has just completed construction of a \$47 million National Headquarters at 243 Lexington Avenue in New York City.

All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.

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This is a particularly pernicious page as it is a patchwork of truths, half-truths and downright untruths masquerading as 'fact'. The second paragraph, which is one most readers would be able to check, is largely true, if exaggerated, and this might lead one to have faith in the first and last paragraphs as well. Such faith would be misplaced.

Paragraph one about the Priory of Sion is totally false. No such organisation exists or has ever existed in the form and for the purposes alleged in *The Da Vinci Code*. In the first place, the name 'dossiers secret' for certain documents discovered in the Bibliothèque Nationale was bestowed on them by the authors of the highly suspect *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* in order to give the papers a sense of mystery and status. They are not in any sense 'secret' and anybody with access to the Bibliothèque Nationale collection can read them; 'dossier' is simply the French word for 'file'. In the second place, the documents in the file are not 'parchments', as Brown claims, but press clippings and notes typewritten on ordinary paper. Thirdly, it has been established almost conclusively that they were deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale between 1956 and 1967 by a former French fascist called Pierre Plantard and/or his followers in order to give credibility and legitimacy to a fringe right-wing nationalist organisation he had founded. Plantard gave interviews to the authors of *Holy Grail, Holy Blood*, but he specifically repudiated the Jesus/Mary Magdalene connection, which was an invention of those authors. Apart from these spurious documents, there is no evidence of the historical existence of the Priory of Sion and it can be safely discarded as a hoax. Now if Dan Brown had done the modicum of research needed to warrant the claim to factuality he makes, he must have known this¹⁰. This means he is lying to his readers, and this is unforgivable.

The book would have been just as enjoyable if there had been no prior claim for the veracity of the Priory of Sion. In fact, Brown could have claimed credit for a wonderful fictional use of dubious alleged facts and coincidences, as many better writers before him have done.

Brown's further disingenuous claim that 'All

descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate' is also highly questionable (for example, the Louvre does not have security grids that fall down to trap intruders, and the glass pyramid outside has 698 panes, not 666, a number that doesn't even divide by four to make the four sides of a pyramid) but we have already given this disappointing book more attention than it deserves.

What is clear, and perhaps disappointing to atheists, is that there is no credible threat to the Catholic Church in its pages. There are other works of fiction, however, that undermine the church's authority in a much more decisive fashion.

The His Dark Materials Trilogy¹¹

The three books of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* fantasy trilogy are totally works of the imagination, but they are much more subversive of the church, and in fact Christianity as a whole, than the pseudo-history of *The Da Vinci Code*. Many readers, especially those of a rational frame of mind, are suspicious, if not downright derisive, of fantasy as a genre. We tend to file it in our minds with the pernicious myths of revealed religion, such as the stories of Adam and Eve and Noah's Ark, which are intended to instil moral and theological messages in our brains.

But the best fantasy, like the best literature in general, raises significant moral and philosophical questions, and because a lot of it takes place in secondary universes created by the author, it can do this uncluttered by the historical and contextual baggage that often clouds consideration of such issues here on earth. The central ethical question in JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is whether there are powers that human beings can create but cannot control and whether therefore such inherently dangerous creations should be destroyed. During Tolkien's lifetime his book was linked to the debate about the discovery of atomic energy and in our own time it is relevant to the debate about human cloning, genetic manipulation and other developments in reproductive technology. Like all great works, in the end *The Lord of the Rings* defies such simplistic literal analogies, but to live the lives of Frodo, Gandolf and Aragorn through entering into the action of the book is in a real sense to confront the same kinds of moral choices they do and, by reflection, to consider our own positions on these issues.

Other good fantasy books raise different types of question. *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the first book in Ursula le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy (which has now, through later accretions, become a quintet), explores the consequences of cutting ourselves off from the cruel and nasty side of our psyche — what Jung called the shadow archetype — and the healing effects of finally accepting it. CL Moore's short story 'The Black God's

Kiss' evokes the self-destructive element inherent in the mindless pursuit of revenge more successfully than any psychological treatise. But the *His Dark Materials* trilogy might be seen to trump them all in the range and depth of its ambition.

The canvas Pullman paints his narrative on is not just our universe, but all the parallel uni-

verses that quantum physics has proposed as a possible solution to some of the paradoxes that arise from its theories and calculations. Our own universe only enters Pullman's story in the second book of the trilogy, and does not really figure centrally in the plot of any of them.

The villain in *His Dark Materials* is none other than God himself. God is presented as an evil power bent on controlling the universes and all the sentient beings in them for his own egotistical and narcissistic pleasure. His ally — at least in our world, and in the similar world of the trilogy's heroine, Lyra — is our own Christian Church, or in Lyra's case something very like it. In the latter, though, it appears that history unfolded somewhat differently after that world's equivalent to the Reformation, with the subsequent ascension of Pope John Calvin!

The overarching title of the trilogy comes from Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Into this wild abyss,
The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed
Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight,
Unless the almighty maker them ordain
His dark materials to create more worlds,
Into this wild abyss the wary fiend
Stood on the brink of hell and looked a while,
Pondering his voyage...

Book II

The poet William Blake once wrote of Milton:

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of angels and heaven, and at liberty when he wrote of devils and hell, is that he was a true poet and of the devil's party without knowing it.

*'The villain in
His Dark Materials
is none other than
God himself.'*

Pullman is also 'of the devil's party', and his novel takes up the story of the revolt against God many years later, in something like our own time.

The action of the novels revolves around the adventures of two children: Lyra, an eleven-year-old girl who lives in a parallel universe to our own, at a university called 'Oxford' with similarities to the place in England, as the ward of the head of 'Jordon College'; and Will, a young boy of ten who lives in our Oxford (we don't meet him until the second book, *The Subtle Knife*). The two eventually meet and team up and by the end of the third book, after many adventures, they help Lyra's father, Lord Asriel, in the final battle against the forces of God. This God is not the benevolent patriarch of Christian legend but a power-hungry tyrant who wants to keep humans (and the other intelligent creatures we meet) in a state of ignorance and servitude, aided by the machinations of the repressive church. And in a reversal of *Paradise Lost*, in *The Amber Spyglass* God and his allies lose the battle and the forces of human reason and freedom are victorious. God, called 'The Authority' by Pullman, actually dies, not with a bang but a whimper, having become a mere shadow of his former self:

Between them they helped the ancient of days out of his crystal cell; it wasn't hard, for he was light as paper, and he would have followed them anywhere, having no will of his own, and responding to simple kindness like a flower to the sun. But in the open air there was nothing to stop the wind damaging him, and to their dismay his form began to loosen and dissolve. Only a few moments later he had vanished completely, and their last impression was of those eyes, blinking in wonder, and a sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief.

Then he was gone: a mystery dissolving into a mystery. It had all taken less than a minute...

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Embittered atheists, scarred by Christian childhoods ruled over by God's underlings, may think this is too good an end for him and pine for a more painful exit.

At the end of the book, Lyra and Will must separate and go back to their own worlds where their respective futures lie, in part so that they don't collectively repeat the mistakes of Adam and Eve.

Back in her own version of Oxford, Lyra remembers what Will's dying father said:

'He meant the Kingdom was over, the Kingdom of Heaven, it was all finished. We shouldn't live as if it mattered more than this life in this world, because where we are is always the most important place.'

Lyra then realises what she now has to do and be:

'We have to be all those different things like cheerful and kind and curious and patient, and we've got to study and think and work hard, all of us, in all our different worlds, and then we'll build...'

All the different bells of the city chimed, once each, this one high, that one low, some close by... In that other Oxford where she and Will had kissed goodbye, the bells would be chiming, too, and a nightingale would be singing, and a little breeze would be stirring in the leaves in the Botanic Garden.

'And then what?' said her daemon sleepily. 'Build what?'

'The Republic of Heaven,' said Lyra.

In our three-volume journey to this final point we encounter many wonders: armoured polar bears who speak, flying witches, diminutive assassins who fly tame dragonflies, amazing creatures who use large round seeds as wheels and have evolved to bowl themselves along on them, fallen angels, the amazing alethiometer that can answer any question if you know how to interpret it, and one of the most fascinating villains in recent literature — Mrs Coulter. But the most wonderful literary creation of all is the daemons. In Lyra's world, everybody has a creature called a daemon that shares their life, with whom they have dialogue. The daemons cannot move very far from their 'possessors' and act somewhat like their 'soul'. When either is hurt or dies, so does the other. Mrs Coulter's daemon is a vicious monkey; Lord Asriel's is a panther. Because Lyra has not yet reached puberty, her daemon can change shape according to circumstances; when danger threatens it will become something small like a mouse and hide.

The imaginative appeal of the three books to children and adults alike is immense, as seen by its third placing in the BBC Big Read. On top of that, it advances an atheistic message. As Pullman told an Oxford literary conference in August 2000:

'We're used to the Kingdom of Heaven; but you can tell from the general thrust of the book that I'm of the devil's party, like Milton. And I think it's time we thought about a republic of Heaven instead of the Kingdom of Heaven. The King is dead. That's to say, I believe the King is dead. I'm an atheist. But we need Heaven nonetheless, we need all the things that Heaven meant, we need joy, we need a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives, we need a connection with the universe, we need all the things the Kingdom of Heaven used to promise us but failed to deliver.'

No wonder the Christian apologists are apoplectic. Many of them made the mistake of praising the first volume of the trilogy, before its general anti-clerical thrust became clear. For example, Greg Krehbiel

writes in *Journeyman: A Journal for the Inquiring Christian*:

Philip Pullman's alternate worlds trilogy is fun and filled with memorable characters, but the third book is just a silly anti-Christian diatribe. It is engaging, witty and imaginative, and features some very likeable characters. Unfortunately, the worldview is sophomoric and blatantly anti-Christian...

So don't be deceived by positive reviews. (I regret to say that I gave *The Golden Compass* a thumbs up.) Avoid this series altogether. It's a sophomoric anti-Christian diatribe, but dangerous precisely because it is packaged as a fun series of books for young adults.

Vol. 1, No. 1, 9 January 2005

Similar views are expressed by Cynthia Grenier in *Crisis Magazine*, another Christian journal:

Though richly conceived and powerfully written, Pullman's trilogy presents a disturbing — not to say dangerous — vision. Parents, do you know what your children are reading?

October 2001

With endorsements like these, every rationalist and atheist in the country should be running out to purchase multiple copies, for themselves and for every child they know.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

While it is a book of much smaller compass than Pullman's fantasy trilogy, this novel by Mark Haddon, which won the Whitbread Book of the Year prize in 2003, also strikes a blow for reason against the edifice of religion. Like *His Dark Materials*, it is ostensibly a book for teenagers and young adults that has found a substantial market amongst adults. It is the first young adult book to win the overall Whitbread prize, against competition from books aimed at the more sophisticated adult market.

The title of the book comes from the thirteenth Sherlock Holmes short story, 'Silver Blaze', by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, which appeared in the collection *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, first published in 1894. Holmes and Watson are investigating the disappearance of a famous racehorse a few days before a big race the horse was expected to win. Holmes has solved the case to his own satisfaction but is being his usual coy self about the outcome and making the

horse's owner sweat it out until race day. The policeman in charge of the case, Inspector Gregory, asks Holmes:

'Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?'

'To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.'

'The dog did nothing in the night-time.'

'That was the curious incident,' remarked Sherlock Holmes.

'When it comes to people who believe in God or ghosts or the supernatural, Christopher uses his mastery of cold logic to dismiss their beliefs and cut them down to size.'

The curious and much more gruesome incident in the eponymous book is the discovery of the dead body of the neighbour's dog on her lawn one morning. The dog has been viciously stabbed with a garden fork. Fifteen-year-old Christopher, the book's narrator and protagonist, decides to investigate the crime, like his hero Sherlock Holmes.¹²

Christopher likes Sherlock Holmes because Holmes is logical and unemotional. Christopher himself suffers from Asperger's syndrome, in other words he is borderline autistic. This means he is disturbed by

physical contact; hates chaos, change in routine and the unexpected; has to have his life very organised and exact; doesn't understand jokes, metaphors or emotions because they are not logical; and is very good at maths. For this last reason the chapters in the book are not numbered 1, 2, 3, 4... but rather 2, 3, 5, 7...233 — the prime numbers! When, in the course of his investigations, Christopher gets put in a cell, he writes:

It was nice in the police cell. It was almost a perfect cube, two metres long by two metres long by two metres high. It contained approximately eight cubic metres of air.

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As his investigation unfolds, Christopher discovers some surprising facts not just about who killed the dog but also about his dead mother. Along the way he gives the reader his philosophy of life.

Some of these philosophies are quite irrational, such as liking red and disliking yellow — if he sees a yellow car on the way to school it will be a BAD DAY, but if he sees a red one it will be a GOOD DAY — but in those areas in which he applies his reasoning powers, his views will be very convivial to rationalists, atheists and sceptics.

Even Christopher's seemingly irrational notions like hating yellow have reasons behind them: yellow is bad because it is associated inter alia with custard and yellow fever. However, when it comes to people who believe in God or ghosts or the supernatural, Christopher uses his mastery of cold logic to dismiss their beliefs and cut them down to size. For example, one of the teachers at the school tells him that when his mother died 'she had gone to heaven'. Christopher is not taken in for a trice:

But when Mother died she didn't go to heaven because heaven doesn't exist...I asked [the religion teacher] where heaven was and he said, 'It's not in our universe. It's another kind of place altogether.' ...I said there wasn't anything outside the universe and there wasn't another kind of place altogether...I think people believe in heaven because they don't like the idea of dying, because they want to carry on living and they don't like the idea that other people will move into their house and put their things into the rubbish.

pp42-43

Christopher believes that when you die 'your body rots' and your molecules are broken down into other molecules and go into the earth and then go into plants, but 'that is all right because [the person] is a part of the flowers and the apple tree and the hawthorn bush now'. This view is not dissimilar to that put forward by Philip Pullman. Lyra convinces the people who believed in God and who now languish in the land of the dead that they ought to desert their ungrateful God and leave the dreadful place, even though it means they will disintegrate into dust:

'When you get out of here, all the particles that make you up will loosen and float apart...you've seen people dying...All the atoms that were them, they've gone into the wind and the trees and the earth and all the living things. They'll never vanish. They're just part of everything. And that's exactly what'll happen to you...'

The Amber Spyglass, p334

Christopher is equally dismissive of ghosts:

Lots of things are mysteries. But that doesn't mean there isn't an answer to them. It's just that scientists haven't found the answer yet.

For example, some people believe in the ghosts of people who have come back from the dead...Eventually scientists will discover something that explains ghosts, just like they discovered electricity which explained lightning...And then ghosts won't be mysteries.

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If only some adults were as clear-headed as this supposedly 'retarded' teenager!

I could give other examples, but I don't want to give the impression that the book is one long philosophy-of-science lesson. I have singled out some of Christopher's asides above to illustrate the nature of his thinking, but they are only a small part of the text as a whole, which is really about Christopher and his relationship with his father and his dead mother. It is one of the best looks I have read in the past few years and fully deserves all its accolades.

This book has proved very popular with teenage boys, so supporters of rationalism who have teenage sons or nephews or young male acquaintances might do worse than to buy them a copy of this book.

These three very different literary offerings are all critical of religion in different ways. One can be dismissed perfunctorily as a clever con, but the other two are worthy of our attention. I strongly recommend both the *His Dark Materials* trilogy and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. If you have no stomach for fantasy, at least do yourself the favour of reading the latter. Enjoy.

Footnotes

- 1 Being in England at the time of the final ballot, I was able to participate in this survey. Given the five choices available, I cast my vote for *Pride and Prejudice*.
- 2 I don't think it has been equally popular in Australia and the US to this time.
- 3 In this discussion I will be revealing and discussing aspects of the novel's plot, but as this book has been at the top of the bestseller list for over a year I am assuming that all those who want to read it have read it, and that anybody who hasn't will take my advice and not do so, so I trust I am spoiling no one's fun in making these revelations.
- 4 This, by the way, is an academic discipline unknown to any tertiary institution in the world, and one of Brown's many inventions.
- 5 For comparison, the entire first print run of an Australian novel would normally be 2,000-3,000.
- 6 These may be original anagrams or Brown may have borrowed them from one of the numerous books of anagrams and puzzles available on the market.
- 7 Another famous painting by Leonardo.
- 8 Strictly speaking, the Fibonacci sequence starts with 0 (zero), but many popularisations leave it out.
- 9 Brown's book relies so heavily on this book that it has been reported that its authors are suing him for a share of the huge profits.
- 10 The other possible explanation — that he did no research on his own but relied entirely on the flawed research of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* — gives Brown little comfort, as it would support the civil court claim of the authors of that book for adequate payment for the use of the results of their labours.
- 11 Again, in the following I reveal the ending of the trilogy, so if you want to read the books first, don't read this section. You may safely skip to the section below on *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, which gives nothing away.
- 12 Although Christopher likes Sherlock Holmes, he doesn't like his creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, partly because the latter was 'stupid' enough to be deceived by a couple of teenage girls in the Cottingley fairy hoax.

Pakistan: change in blasphemy laws welcome, but inadequate

This article first appeared in the *Rationalist International Bulletin* #135 on 21 November 2004.

The National Assembly of Pakistan passed — against the votes of the fundamentalist coalition *Mut-tahida Majlis-e-Amal* — a bill aimed at reducing the abuse of blasphemy laws, which include Numbers 295 B, C and 298 A, B, C of the Pakistani Penal Code. The amendment demands that allegations be investigated for substance by a senior police officer *before* criminal charges can be filed. Presently, vague claims against a person are taken as the basis for immediate arrest and accusation. Investigations are done later, if at all, often by junior officers. Due to these arbitrary procedural regulations, the blasphemy laws are not only a deadly dagger in the hands of religious fanatics, but also a cheap and brutal instrument for any unscrupulous person wanting to settle a personal vendetta, property arguments and many other disputes which don't have any connection to religion whatsoever.

The amendment will come into effect as soon as the bill is passed by the Senate. It may reduce the *abuse* of the blasphemy laws significantly, but this alone is not enough: the draconian blasphemy laws have to be abolished! The changes are 'welcome, but inadequate', said Tali Muhammed Khan, Chairman of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. In fact, by changing the procedures without touching the contents of the law itself, the National Assembly has really in passing *confirmed* the mandatory death penalty.

The blasphemy laws of Pakistan are a relic of the 1860 British colonial criminal law. In 1986, they were 'Islamised' and brought into line with Sharia law by Pakistan's military ruler, General Zia-ul Haq. In 1991, elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif made the death penalty mandatory. Abuse of this law became rampant after Zia-ul Haq's Islamisation of the laws: while there were only seven cases between 1927 and 1986, the number of cases between 1986 and today has increased to more than 4,000!

President General Musharaff criticised the draconian blasphemy laws several times in public speeches, but did not decisively press for changes. In May 2000, when fundamentalists launched fierce demonstrations against his liberal vision of Islam, he even declared that any plan to change the blasphemy laws had been abandoned. But international pressure on his government mounted when the blasphemy case against rationalist Dr Younus Shaikh unleashed a wave of international protest. Dr Shaikh, who was sentenced to death and kept for more than two years in solitary confinement in a small death cell in Rawalpindi jail, was finally acquitted. In December 2003, he spoke to the annual meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva about his case and the situation in Pakistan.

The fight against the blasphemy law has to continue. These laws violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has been signed by Pakistan, and have to be abolished. The bloody dagger has to be wrested from the hands of the fundamentalists.