

*The De Villiers Code* by Tom Eaton (Penguin)

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My editor sternly admonished me, when she sent me this book for review, that in order to do it justice I'd have to read Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, of which this clearly is a parody.

This placed me in a quandary. Having read an interview with Tom Eaton in which he described *The Da Vinci Code* as "excremental writing", I knew that in buying Dan Brown I'd be advancing an unworthy cause, and swelling, however imperceptibly, the bulging Brown coffers (and shrinking, perceptibly, my own). More perilously, I'd be running the risk of actually enjoying *The Da Vinci Code*, and thus becoming a part of that mindless mass, fifty million at last count, that as non-best-selling author I take some comfort in despising. Solidarity with my subject, that is *The De Villiers Code*, seemed to require that I should not read *The Da Vinci Code*; and yet how could I do justice to *The De Villiers Code* without reading *The Da Vinci Code*?

I resolved the matter by deciding to read *The De Villiers Code* first, reasoning that if it made sense to me without Dan Brown, I'd be relieved of the duty to read Brown. I duly opened *The De Villiers Code* and started reading. Within five pages I was so confused that I looked up *The Da Vinci Code* on Google. Prominent amongst the 59,800,000 entries dedicated to the novel is the official Dan Brown web-site, which gives pride of place to *The Da Vinci Code*, as a "lightening-paced [sic!] intelligent thriller." It also considerably reprints the first six chapters of the novel.

Starting to read, I was at first puzzled: it seemed to have been written by Tom Eaton. Everything that I'd assumed Eaton to have invented to cast ridicule upon Brown was right there: the unbelievably trite prose, the ludicrous plot, the impossibly talented hero, the hideous villain, the symbological-cryptological mumbo-jumbo, the patronising explanations to the reader, the "scholarship".

But this was indeed the Dan Brown website, and what I was reading was the real *Da Vinci Code*. Eaton's problem, in other words, may be that *The Da Vinci Code* is so bad that it's impossible to parody. Still, he is not a man to be deterred by the impossible, and I can now report that his parody is only slightly less funny than the original.

*The Da Vinci Code* has, of course, got up the noses of a lot of Christians through its denial of the divinity of Christ and its attack on the Roman Catholic Church. But Eaton declines to engage with the wonky research and crack-pot theology of *The Da Vinci Code*; he concentrates instead on the bad writing.

He satirises not the message but the method of the *Da Vinci Code*, as in his hero's description of the "Dan Brown method": "I assume a breathy and incredulous tone, and slowly reveal universally known factoids, bits of primary-school general knowledge, as if I'm uncovering them for the first time."

Early in the novel the hero, CC Langa, "pre-eminent historian, symbologist, anthropologist, mathematician, novelist, astronomer, pharmacist, archaeologist, linguist, and ceramic potter", states the central paradox of *The Da Vinci Code*: "This novel is truly, undeniably, eternally, diabolically awful, yet strangely compelling, even entertaining."

Eaton proceeds to be more entertaining than Dan Brown, and marginally more relevant to current history. Much of *The De Villiers Code* has more to say about contemporary South Africa than about Dan Brown's book, though it skilfully uses one to focus the other. Here are two characters discussing the "secret elite" running the world: "... they are more powerful than you can ever imagine: their power is godlike, and it has made them cruel. They are ruthless to their enemies. They are unknowable, unreachable, untouchable, unstoppable."

"Are you talking about Telkom?"

Another over-lap between Brown's book and Eaton's is the figure of the Teacher. One of the more entertaining sections of *The De Villiers Code* deals with the Bishop's discovery that the Teacher is in fact a teacher, as in geography teacher, and the poor man's diatribe against the indignities of his job is both funny and poignant: "Do you think I like wolfing my lunch of two sandwiches in a room full of failed accountants and retrenched academics and aspiring youth pastors? Do you think it's fun going to work every day in a place where every single one of your subordinates is a scruffy adolescent who wishes you dead?"

This has little to say about Big Topics like Christ's marriage to Mary Magdalen, and I suspect Tom Eaton's book is not going to make a big dent in Brown's sales: such is the cult status of the book that even opposition feeds its fervour. One of the most professional of the "anti" Da Vinci websites, The Da Vinci Dialogue, is sponsored by Sony Pictures, the makers of the movie, on the principle that as long as people are talking about the book they'll go and see the movie. To that extent Eaton's book may be counter-productive. But it's so enjoyable in its own right that one gladly forgives it another few (million) sales of Dan Brown's ludicrous best-seller.