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HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL

By Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln

By Ken Mondschein

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ADMIT IT: You've read The Da Vinci Code.

There's no denying it. I saw you with it last week on the subway, your finger stuck in the spine to keep your place. You were plainly pissed off that you had to put the book down just as you were about to learn the secret connection between the Knights Templar and the murdered museum curator, but there were no seats on the train, and trying to read under the watchful gaze of Dr. Zizmor while hanging on to that lurching center pole feels kind of like trying to ride the Coney Island Cyclone after drinking half a bottle of tequila.

Look, I'm not here to judge you. You don't have to defend yourself to me. I believe you when you say you usually only read serious literature. I'm sure you bought the new David Sedaris the day it came out. Still, if you're going to subject your gray matter to Dan Brown's unholy union of Tom Clancy and Indiana Jones, you should at least get some background on the source material he lifted his plot from: Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln's 1982 bestseller Holy Blood, Holy Grail, which has been recently revived in the wake of Brown's success. (I didn't say that you should actually read the book: For me to require you to do that goes beyond the level of torture even Donald Rumsfeld would feel comfortable with.)

If the names of the authors of HBHG seem somewhat familiar, there's a reason for it. The name of Brown's character, Leigh Teabing, the crippled English aristocrat who's also an expert on the legend of the Holy Grail, is a combination of "Leigh" and an anagram for "Baigent." Likewise, Brown's other character, Jacques Sauniere, the art historian who sets the plot of The Da Vinci Code into motion by getting whacked by an albino monk in the first chapter, is named after Berenger Sauniere.

Berenger Sauniere is also as good a point as any to begin to try to explain Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln's long, strange trip. Sauniere, according to HBHG, was a poor village priest in late-19th-century southern France who suddenly came into fantastic and mysterious wealth and began hanging out with the creme de Parisian society after discovering mysterious documents hidden inside a church he was restoring. The south of France, as it turns out, was where Alaric and his Visigoths stopped after sacking Rome in 410 A.D. to hide their swag?which included the loot from the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem that the emperor Titus had carried back to Italy from the big fire sale that had followed the Jewish revolt against Roman rule in 70 A.D. The Visigoth's secret stash, whatever it might have been, also somehow inspired the Cathars, the medieval heretics whom the Catholic Church so hated that it not only created the office of the Inquisition to crush them, but Pope Innocent III even declared a crusade against them in 1209?the first instance of Christians declaring holy war against other Christians in Europe.

Irregardless of the fact that the Cathars and the Knights Templar were ostensibly on opposite sides, the heretics somehow passed the ball off to the jocks in chainmail before they all got killed, and when Philip IV of France had all of the Templars in his realm arrested and executed for heresy in 1307, they, in turn, shipped their secret off to Scotland, where the Sinclair family, the hereditary heads of Scottish freemasonry, kept the secret safe, and even built Rosslyn Chapel outside Edinburgh to hold it?where (if we're to believe the Scottish tourist board) it remains today.

By this point in the book, you expect the tinny synthesizer theme to "In Search Of" to start playing and Leonard Nimoy to pop out at any moment, but Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln still have yet to drop the real bomb. First, they bring up an old medieval myth that the Merovingians, the royal family that ruled France from about 447 to 751, were the direct descendents of Jesus, who (as the story goes) didn't die on the cross after all, but instead, in the Frank Capra version of The Passion of the Christ, married Mary Magdalene and lived happily ever after. (If you're wondering why the villain in the Matrix movies was named "the Merovingian," it's because HBHG was on the Wachowski Brothers' reading list. Draw your own conclusions.) The real treasure, the authors deduce by interpreting several sources (of various levels of reliability), is that Jesus' bloodline is still existent today. Thus the book's title: "Holy Grail" in Old French is san gral, which should actually be sang real?or "holy blood."

This is all, of course, proven by Sauniere's documents?which no one has ever seen?and secret records kept in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris?which, as it turns out, are impossible to check out on interlibrary loan because of surly Gallic librarians employed by the Priory of Sion, the secret force behind the Knights Templar, which has been charged with preserving the holy seed of Jesus. In their defense, the Priory's RIAA-like clampdown on the free flow of information is somewhat out of character for them, since not only did they kickstart the Renaissance, but they also counted such intellectual luminaries as Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo and?here it comes? Leonardo Da Vinci amongst their leaders.

Don't be hard on yourself if you don't remember this from Western Civ. Even though they're an all-powerful organization that's been guiding human society for the past millennium, the Priory members still tiptoe around the stage of history, since the Catholic Church has been trying to wipe them out for centuries. After all, having countless Christspawn running about the modern world would threaten the Church's legitimacy more than even pedophilic priests and pro-choice politicians.

Having come up with such a fascinating conspiracy theory, it's a shame how many details Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln get completely wrong. To begin with, they work just about every Christian heresy that has cropped up since the Virgin Mary got knocked up into their alternative history?never mind that the Cathars, who denied that anything in the material world could ever be good, were completely different from the Aryan heresy the Visigoths adhered to, and whose insistence that Jesus was wholly human was the theological equivalent of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. Likewise, they imply that the Visigoths and the Merovingian Franks were somehow on the same side, even though the two nations were actually deadly enemies. If simply being against the Church means that you're somehow "in" on the conspiracy, then the song "Catholic Girls" from Joe's Garage makes Frank Zappa one of the Illuminati. (As everyone knows, it's Apostrophe/Overnight Sensation that clearly links Zappa to the shadowy puppet masters who control human destiny.)

The idea of keeping the family tree pruned to bonsai-like proportions is also completely fallacious. Infant mortality in pre-modern times was ridiculously high, and you'd only need one childhood accident or disease in 2000 years to wipe out the bloodline; if, however, even one extra sibling per generation survived to reproduce, the numbers of descendents would increase at an exponential rate; keep the children of Christ marrying each other, on the other hand, and eventually they'd be so inbred that the sons of God would have flippers for feet.

Likewise, there's an entire cottage industry devoted to disseminating crazy conspiracy theories about the Knights Templar, from Richard Metzger's Disinfo.com (which seems to be more interested in the believers than the belief) to Dagobert's Revenge, the New Jersey-based conspiracy zine to which industrial musician Boyd Rice is a prominent contributor (it's named for a murdered Merovingian king). I've heard everything from the Templars having hidden the Ark of the Covenant in Ethiopia to their having built a supposed medieval tower in Connecticut a hundred years before Columbus sailed the ocean blue. The sad truth is that, while remnants survived in such groups as the Knights of Christ in Portugal, the Templars have about as much effect on the modern world as does the Empire of Trebezonia. Rosslyn Chapel is just an ordinary, albeit ornate, church built by the Sinclair family in the 15th century. True, they spent so much on it that they had to sell the Orkney islands?but if there was more to the place than that, some art history grad student or restoration team would have found it by now.

As for all the clues supposedly hidden in great art (for Brown, the works of Leonardo; for Holy Blood, Holy Grail, Poussin's Et in Arcadia Ego)?sure, early modern art is full of symbolism, but it was all easily decipherable by any educated contemporary. Renaissance artists did work out the "ideal proportions" for the human figure (Albrecht Durer even wrote down the rules for everyone from classically proportioned ubermenschen to stout peasants), but if people were really designed according to the "Golden Mean Ratio," we'd be walking around like Marty Feldman in Young Frankenstein. Likewise, you can learn the basic principles and mystical significance of "sacred geometry" in any Art History 101 course?it's all based on very sound and very orthodox ideas that have been common knowledge since the Roman Empire.

It's amazing how far you get, though, by mixing some medieval history gleaned from the Society for Creative Anachronism's membership manual with highfalutin talk of the Dead Sea Scrolls and mystic traditions that "transcend Christianity itself." After all, how can you disprove that history, as it's commonly accepted, isn't all one big cover-up? It's impossible to argue with pristine logic like, "we were confronted with a dazzling array of coincidences?coincidences too numerous to be truly coincidental." Mention something outrageous, insinuate something else, put two completely irrelevant pieces of common knowledge next to each other, and?bam!?you've discovered the truth that's been hiding in plain sight for centuries. As a rhetorical style it leaves much to be desired.

Believing in conspiracies, whether the big secret is an antigravity generator built by a rogue Russian scientist or the fact that the Royal Family are really intergalactic shape-shifting lizards, is more fun than using Occam's razor to cut them to shreds. It's a natural human tendency to look for patterns and connect disparate sources, and books like Holy Blood, Holy Grail suggest that if you're just clever enough to figure out the riddle, you can find the buried treasure and get invited into the secret club?kind of like Mensa, but instead of just playing Dungeons & Dragons, you get to fight for control of human destiny. Nevertheless, if you want to read something like this done right, then I recommend Umberto Eco's Foucault's Pendulum or Arturo Perez-Reverte's The Club Dumas. At least Eco and Perez-Reverte didn't pretend they're not writing fiction.