Steal this book

By Joseph Finder

The truth is that historical fiction has its roots in fictional history

IN the next week or two, a British judge will rule on whether one of the biggest-selling novelists of all time is a thief.

The co-authors of a 1982 work of non-fiction, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, are suing the novelist Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code*, for breach of copyright. They charge that Mr Brown's novel stole their hypothesis — which, in case you've been holed away for the past few years rereading Proust, is that Jesus and Mary Magdalene married, and a shadowy group called the Priory of Sion has protected their descendants over the centuries, fending off dark, contending forces inside the Vatican.

But what those in that London courtroom seem not to realise is that the novel has always been a confidence game. Early in the 18th century, the English novel came into being when a sometime jailbird gulled his readers with the counterfeit memoir of a certain Robinson Crusoe. Across the Channel, plenty of readers took narratives like *Manon Lescaut*, by the Abbé Provost, a convicted forger, as the historical accounts they pretended to be. No surprise that our ancestors' mischief has lingered in the literary bloodline, especially when it comes to fiction masquerading as history.

"Writers have to avoid taking material from other writers," one of the plaintiffs, Michael Baigent, has declared, unappeased by the fact that Mr Brown's book makes explicit reference to his. "It's part of the deal, really."

Tell that to the author of *A Tale of Two Cities*, who not only boasted of having read Thomas Carlyle's history of the French Revolution hundreds of times but also credited it with having "inspired me with the general fancy of that story".

The truth is that historical fiction has its roots in fictional history. So it is fitting that the "hypothesis" in the Brown dispute was largely the invention of a French hoaxster named Pierre Plantard, who died in 2000 at age 80. During the 1960's, he and his collaborators planted forged parchments in the French national library, the Bibliothèque Nationale, to provide spurious support for Plantard's wild tale about Jesus and his bloodline.

Alexandre Dumas would have smiled: In a preface to his *Three Musketeers*, Dumas, a jovial showman, claimed to have discovered the text in the Royal Library, the forerunner to the national library. "The discovery of a completely unknown manuscript, at a time when historical science is at such a high level, seemed almost miraculous," he declared. In truth, the novel was largely a reworking of *The Memoirs of M. d'Artagnan*, a fictionalised autobiography published much earlier. Once the novel became a blockbuster, the historian with whom Dumas collaborated sued him for royalties. We novelists call that foreshadowing.

So what's to be learned from a modern novelist whose plot involves conspiracies at the heart of the Roman Catholic church, and who finds himself accused of taking central plot elements from a previous work of non-fiction? I'm thinking, of course, of the French Nobel laureate André Gide and his brilliant 1914 novel, *The Vatican Cellars*, first published in English under the title *The Vatican Swindle*.

The novel revolved around a historical episode detailed in *The False Pope*, by the distinguished Hebraist Jean de Pauly. In the early 1880's, Pauly wrote, a ring of con artists persuaded gullible Catholic traditionalists that Pope Leo VIII was being held captive in the Vatican cellars, while Masonic conspirators (possibly with Jesuit assistance) had replaced him with an impostor. The victims forked over hundreds of thousands of francs that were supposedly needed for a secret crusade to rescue God's vicar on earth.

Gide's detractors found their ammunition. In a nimbly insinuating article, the literary journalist Frédéric Lefèvre framed the matter this way: "When André Gide wrote *The Vatican Cellars*, did he or did he not know *The False Pope*, published 20 years before? Mr Gide has enough talent that he does not need to plagiarise anybody, but there are coincidences, surprising points of convergence." So he felt obliged to address an issue of "capital importance", namely, "a writer's rights and duties in using, organising, and transposing reality".

Turning the case of the false pope into the case of the false author, these critics were too literal-minded to see that the "reality" in question concerned a fabulation — that what drew Gide to the true story was that it was a lie. Gide wasn't writing a historical novel about a hoax. He thought the novel was a hoax. "Fiction there is — and history," Gide wrote in *The Vatican Swindle*: "We are indeed, forced to acknowledge that the novelist's art often compels belief, just as reality sometimes defies it."

Maybe that's why *The Da Vinci Code* made Plantard's counterfeit history even more convincing than *Holy Blood* could, starting with its Dumas-style author's note: "Fact: The Priory of Sion — a European secret society founded in 1099 — is a real organisation. In 1975 Paris' Bibliothèque Nationale discovered parchments known as Les Dossiers Secrets, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo and Leonardo da Vinci."

The novel got its start because, whatever we claim, we've always hungered for fake true stories, or inventive lies we can pretend are real. Gide, for one, suspected that this hunger was actually the rock on which the Catholic Church was built. That's why his characters tend to be deluded, misinformed, confused, prone to false inferences, easily misled. Secret histories, hidden intrigues: he knew that people would always place their confidence in such things.

Another name for that confidence, Gide thought, was faith. Still another was fiction. Meanwhile, as the London litigants await the judge's verdict, you can at least be sure of this: the Vatican swindle goes on.

The writer is the author of Company Man and the forthcoming Killer Instinct