

Novel faiths: The junk food of gnostic stories

From the Editors in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

At first glance, it might seem that *The Da Vinci Code* and the Left Behind series occupy opposite poles of the cultural spectrum. The former's effort to reaffirm the "sacred feminine" with the claim that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife is the sort of reworking of tradition that presumably appeals to far-out liberals. The latter's unfolding of the apocalypse according to a dispensationalist eschatology presumably appeals to far-right biblical fundamentalists who scour the news for signs that the rapture is coming.

Yet these two publishing phenomena share more than success in the marketplace. As Rodney Clapp suggests (see p. 22), both trade on a fundamentally gnostic premise: that most of the church has been duped and that the *real* Christian belief is a secret that will now be divulged to the privileged reader.

Even though Dan Brown's novel has sold some 40 million copies and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's series some 60 million, their respective "secrets" still have the sexy smell of novelty and of being a threat to established ecclesial and political views. Both also update the dusty old gospel of the churches with action-packed stories that move so fast that readers tend not to notice the problems in the stories or the mediocrity of the prose. All the authors insist on the absolute plausibility if not veracity of the events they narrate. All they have done is lay a fictional story over the truth, they claim—as they smile all the way to the bank.

The early church rejected gnosticism and its purveyors (as in the case of the recently rereleased Gospel of Judas) because the gnostics were telling a fundamentally different story from that narrated by the texts that became the New Testament. The gnostics denigrated such fleshy things as the goodness of creation, the election of Israel, the humanity of Jesus and the resurrection of the body. (That is why Judas was a hero to the gnostics: he helped liberate Jesus from his body.) The church developed the rule of faith—the creeds, the canon, and the role of bishops in

apostolic succession—to keep Christian individuals and groups from spinning off whatever religious fantasy they liked, writing it up and claiming it was the “real” thing. Unlike the gnostics, the church told its story openly and engaged in public debate about its veracity. To hide its story would have betrayed the church’s evangelical purpose of being a light to the world.

Our age has some of the same unease that the gnostics had with the goodness of creation, the particularity of Israel’s election, and the flesh of Jesus. It is also uneasy about the body (a discomfort that lurks behind *The Da Vinci Code*’s ostensible effort to affirm the body). When the junk food of the gnostic stories fails to satisfy, churches should be there with the soul food of the gospel.