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31 October 2017

Geography in Dan Brown’s *Origin*

With much anticipation, the fifth book in the Robert Langdon series, *Origin[[1]](#endnote-1)*, was released on October 3rd , 2017. This recent publication follows the best sellers, *Angels and Demons[[2]](#endnote-2)*, *The Da Vinci Code[[3]](#endnote-3)*, *Lost Symbol[[4]](#endnote-4)*, and *Inferno[[5]](#endnote-5)*, all of which sparked many controversial debates usually involving religion and also raised doubts about secret societies and science. In order to inc rease media coverage and public excitement for this latest addition to the series, author Dan Brown launched a mega publicity campaign via his Facebook account, and his posts even give clues to specific places in Spain that relate to the plot of *Origin*. For instance, he posted photos of important Spanish sites such as Gaudi’s Parque Guell, the Madrid Barajas international airport, and the Montserrat monastery in Barcelona, all which have roles in the plot of *Origin*. Brown effectively uses each to create interest and mystery surrounding the storyline of this new novel. However, unlike his past publicity campaigns, which highlight word games and just create general excitement for the books, *Origin*’s campaign specifically reflects the importance of locations that Brown uses in the Robert Langdon series. In *Origin*, Dan Brown’s continual use of actual and historically meaningful geography draws his readers into his story and makes the plot all the more believable; such a world reaction to the discovery could actually come true.

Dan Brown begins *Origin* in the Guggenheim Museum of Modern Art in Bilbao, Spain; Langdon has arrived to witness Edmond Kirsch’s unveiling of a large discovery that supposedly will change the world as we know it. At that moment, a murder happens. Similar to past works, the author sets the central characters of this new thriller across the world: Langdon in Spain, Allamah Syed al-Fadl in Dubai, and Rabbi Yehuda Köves in Hungary. Soon the reader is anxiously following Langdon and the heroine, Ambra Vidal, the Guggenheim curator, evade the killer and the Spanish Guardia Real as they traverse from Bilbao to Barcelona in their race to release the transformative discovery of Kirsch that was halted by his untimely murder. Brown effectively creates a suspenseful tale for his readers while making the story more credible by using a myriad of real and well-known locations throughout Spain. In addition, Brown continues to tie famous works of art to locations central to the plot, and he once again asks the reader to contemplate the intriguing intersection of the Humanities and science.

In the prologue, Edmond Kirsch, a famous scientist and futurist, meets with three major religious leaders, Bishop Valdespino, Rabbi Yehuda Köves, and Allamah Syed al-Fadl, at the sanctuary chapel in Montserrat. Montserrat creates an important backdrop of religion in the beginning of the novel; it also underscores the rise to enlightenment that Krisch is said to have with his groundbreaking presentation. Soon the reader leaves Montserrat to read about Bilbao where Langdon and Vidal meet. When these two central characters flee the museum, the journey begins. The reader feels the suspense rise as they hurry to find the line of poetry used as a passcode for Kirsch’s presentation. They arrive in Barcelona where the author introduces the reader to the famous works of the Spanish artist Antoni Gaudi; Kirsch’s apartment is located in Gaudi’s “La Casa Milá”. Next, they go to La Sagrada Familia, the famous cathedral in the middle of the city, which is Guadí’s most renowned design. Meanwhile, Prince Julian and Bishop Valdespino traverse from the Madrid Palace to El Escorial, the historical residence of Spanish kings. Later, they continue to the Valley of the Fallen (Valle de los Caídos) to meet the king, increasing suspense for the readers. After much hurried exploration of Barcelona, Langdon and Vidal finally make it to the Super Computing Center, which allows them access to Winston, the supercomputer that Kirsch created, which helps them finally unlock and broadcast the presentation. Anticipation peaks as they watch the presentation along with the world and learn about Kirsch’s mind blowing discovery. Afterward, as Langdon travels to Montserrat the puzzle pieces fall into place, and he realizes that Winston was the one who orchestrated the whole drama, including Kirsch’s execution.

It is important to note how the settings of the novel play a vital role in establishing credibility of the storyline for the readers. While at the Guggenheim Museum, Brown uses many current, well-known artworks and installations to create a visual and interesting backdrop. For example, the description of Louise Bourgeois’ larger-than-life metal spider catches the reader’s attention just as the author, himself, spins his own intriguing web. Langdon wanders past such controversial artworks of Jeffrey Koontz, Anish Kapoor, and Joan Miró and seems to get lost in the curves of the museum. Such detail makes the story seem much more real, for many readers know these famous artists, their works, and the impressive Guggenheim setting designed by American architect Frank Gehry. Furthermore, the majority of the readers recognize the name of one of Spain’s most famous artists, Antoni Gaudí. Brown masterly uses Gaudí’s well-known buildings to lend truth to his tale. In the novel, Langdon raises the notion that La Sagrada Familia was not designed to be a Catholic church, but instead a “mystical shrine to science and nature.” (Brown 280). While visiting both La Casa Milá and La Sagrada Familia, Langdon and Vidal get exclusive access to the buildings that would usually be full of tourists; this allows Langdon (and the readers) to appreciate the beauty and the scientifically intricate designs that have made Gaudí so famous: “Langdon found himself marveling over the utterly bizarre details of this church’s main entrance.” According to the [Barcelona Tourist Guide](http://www.barcelonatouristguide.com)[[6]](#footnote-1), more than 3,000,000 people visit La Sagrada Familia each year.

However, unlike most of his former novels, it is curious to note that Brown does not use locations that have or suggest that they hide many secrets and secret passages. Instead, Brown cleverly utilizes Gaudi’s work to be the center of the novel possibly to mirror the complexity of Gaudi’s creative genius and ties to the natural and spiritual world. As a result, Brown highlights how nature affects everything in life just as Edmond Kirsch strongly believes.

In order to better understand Brown’s unique use of geography and specific locations in *Origin*, it is important to also reflect upon and compare the role of locations in all of his past books. *Origin* clearly builds off of the other novels in the Robert Langdon series: *Angels and Demons*, the *Da Vinci Code*, *Lost Symbol,* and *Inferno*. Brown uses a similar style when writing all of his novels. One example of this similarity of style is that the main characters are spread across the world and all converge to one place. The convergence of all the characters is important in highlighting the gravity of Langdon’s journeys because it appears that everyone is being drawn to one place as if by a larger force. Another commonality is that Brown often chooses landmarks that are famous yet may be hidden in plain sight. For example, La Casa Milá, the Mason Temple, El Passetto di Borgo, and the Vasari Corridor are just four of the many different locations that all get overlooked in daily life, yet play major roles in the novels. In addition, all of the novels start with Langdon at home in Cambridge unaware of the adventure he is about to embark upon. Brown might do this to help keep a common storyline for the Professor and also to help create suspense since Langdon blindly steps into these momentous journeys that transform the world.

Brown opens the first of the *Da Vinci Code* series, *Angels & Demons,* with a tone of confusion as the main character Robert Langdon wakes up in Boston to a fax from an unknown person pleading for his help at 5:00 am. Brown then jumps to another storyline with different characters in an undisclosed location (Vatican City), a secret that heightens the mysterious beginning. As the tale unfolds and the race to find the valuable vial ensues, Brown artfully uses a variety of specific locations to draw in his readers while adding credibility to the story.

In the beginning of the novel, characters are everywhere; Langdon is in his home in Boston, Kohler is in Switzerland, Vittoria is studying marine life in the ocean, and the Hassassin and the Camerlengo are in Rome. This initial scattering of characters contrasts greatly to the final common destination of the Vatican City where they all converge to find the vial. Just as in *Origin,* everyone is drawn from many locations to one final mysterious site, which makes the race suspenseful as the readers experience a maze of turns and dead end passages right along with the characters. While Langdon and Vittoria discover the Path of Illumination, Brown uses well-known chapels and churches, actual geography of Rome, which lends more credibility to his novel. For instance, Langdon and Vittoria first travel to the Pantheon, the ancient and well-known church, “erected in 27 BC by Maruc Vipsaniu”[[7]](#endnote-6). Next, they leave the Pantheon and travel to Santa Maria del Popolo (Capella Della Terra) (Brown 286) and then continue on to St. Peter’s Square and the Obelisk, the center. Langdon returns to the Vatican Secret Archives, flies off to Piazza Barberini, and then on to the Fountain of the Four Rivers. Langdon finally confronts the Hassassin at the Church of Illumination in Rome.

Brown purposefully uses these famous locations to paint a visual map for the readers to follow and also to persuade the readers to believe in the story. For instance, at Bernini’s Fountain of Four Rivers, Brown details the dove resting on the Obelisk, which he suggests actually points to the Path of Illumination. Since the reader can confirm that the piece of art truly exists like many of the historical settings, Brown’s story becomes more convincing. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the author intentionally leads the reader down the same Path of Illumination that members of the Illuminati supposedly traveled centuries ago to find the hidden meeting place in order to gain membership into the controversial secret society.

Likewise, *The Da Vinci Code* geography plays a key role in creating a suspenseful thriller that takes the reader on a global scavenger hunt. In the beginning, characters are spread across the world while the murder takes place in Paris, France inside the Louvre museum. The race to decode the symbols found at the murder site takes the characters zigzagging through Europe, from Paris to a Chateau in Condecort, France to the busy city of London and then north to Edinburgh, Scotland. Eventually, all clues point back to Paris, and the main character, Robert Langdon, returns to the Louvre to reveal the final resting place of the Holy Grail. Similarly, Bishop Aringarosa starts in New York City and then travels to Italy to meet with the Vatican officials, which helps bring the church into the race to find the Holy Grail and also creates more credibility to the story. Furthermore, while Langdon is in all of these locations, Brown gives vivid description that allow the readers to effectively picture them. For example, while is the Rosslyn Langdon describes the chapel, “Each block was carved with a symbol, seemingly at random, creating a cipher of unfathomable proportion” (Brown 436). From this description the readers begin to image and attempt to decipher the code illustrated on the arch.

It is possible that the setting of *The* *DaVinci Code* deliberately mirrors the supposed movement and history of Mary Magdalene. Brown mentions that some Holy Grail hunters believe that the sarcophagus of Mary Magdalene had originally been kept in France, but then it was secretly moved to London; it is debated if it was returned to France or actually stayed in London. It is also important to recognize that all of the locations have important cultural and religious history, sites like Westminster Abbey and Rosslyn Chapel. By selecting these settings, Brown adds credibility to his story and makes his tale more convincing to his readers.

The *Lost Symbol*, Brown’s third novel, begins invoking excitement for the readers when Langdon catches a private jet from Boston to Washington D.C to give a presentation for his good friend and Mason, Peter Solomon. Unlike any other novels of the Robert Langdon series, all of the characters and the whole storyline is located in a single country, the United States. However, Brown does continue to use locations to further draw the readers into the plot. As Langdon and Katherine Solomon evade the CIA and race across the D.C area attempting to solve the Masonic code to save Peter’s life, the novel is similar to the others in its race from site to site.

To begin the suspenseful race, Mal’akh symbolically sends Langdon to the Capitol Rotunda located under the United States’ capitol building, which symbolizes the heart of not only the building, but also the city. Brown captures the building’s beauty in a way that evokes awe and creates a majestic image for the readers (Readers from the United States can identify with it, especially if they have ever visited Washington, D.C.). From here, Langdon and CIA director, Inoue Sato, travel to the deepest, most secret part of the capital building: the subbasement SBB13. Here is where Brown does something unique to the *Lost Symbol* - he does not use an actual location but a fictitious one. Even though a subbasement of the capitol building exists the extra level B and room 13 do not exist. But it’s intriguing to the reader, nonetheless. Meanwhile Katherine Solomon, Peter’s sister, nearly escapes death from the same man that has kidnapped Peter. She flees her lab in the Smithsonian in order to meet Langdon in the capitol library where Langdon has just escaped to, thanks to the help of the capitol’s architect, Warren Bellamy. Solomon and Langdon again evade the CIA and head to the Washington National Cathedral to solve the masonic pyramid with the help of another 33rd Degree Mason. They then race to Mal’akh’s house to save Peter, but instead get captured and reveal the secret to Mal’akh, who tortures Langdon through the use of a sensory deprivation tank. This makes Langdon appear to drown but really just puts him in a trance. With increasing suspense the CIA race to save Langdon while Mal’akh travels to the Masonic Temple to release a video incriminating many governmental figures and sacrifice Peter. Langdon and the CIA are able to stop Mal’akh from releasing the video in the most action-packed scene yet. In the falling action of the novel, the readers follow along to the top of the Washington Monument and to the top of the Capitol dome to witness the sunrise and how the first light hits the top of the Washington Monument; the readers are left awestruck.

The locations in *The Lost Symbol* all have rich history, especially American, and help extend credibility to the plot. For example, Brown effectively uses the description of the Apotheosis of Washington to underscore Mal’akh’s mission and highlight the Masons, a major theme of the novel. Other sites rich with masonic history include the Masonic Temple, the Washington Monument, and the Capitol itself, all which serve to underscore the influence of the Masons in American history and to increase reader anticipation as Langdon and Solomon decipher the code of the Mason pyramid. Furthermore, the Capitol’s underground pathway follows Brown’s pattern of using many locations that have actual secret passageways that Langdon uses to his advantage like the Vasari Corridor and the Passetto di Borgo.

The fourth novel in the *Da Vinci Code* series, *Inferno*, opens once again with a scene charged with mystery and confusion as Langdon experiences a frightening dream and then wakes up in a state of shock in an unknown Italian hospital. For one of the first times in the series, all of the main characters are all located within Italy and not spread across the globe. As Langdon and the heroine, Sienna Brooks, evade their pursuers, they decipher a secret code left by an infamous proponent of eugenics who has threatened to release a deadly virus to kill a large percentage of the world’s population. Landon and Brooks chase across Italy and then eventually arrive in Istanbul, Turkey. Brown effectively creates a suspenseful tale for his readers while making the story more credible by using a myriad of real and historically meaningful locations in both Italy and Turkey.

As the novel opens, all of the characters are located in Italy; Langdon and Sienna are in a Florence hospital; the Provost is in the Mendacium situated off the coast of Italy; and Dr. Elizabeth Sinskey, captive to Agent Brüder, is in an undisclosed location of Florence. Suspense builds as the Provost and Brüder follow Langdon and Sienna throughout Florence and then to Venice. Langdon hardly makes sense of his surroundings when Vayentha bursts in and chases Langdon and Sienna from the hospital through the windy, cobblestoned streets of Florence. While hiding in Sienna’s apartment, the readers and Langdon discover the importance of the journey, stopping a virus from being released by Zobrist who wants to “solve” the world’s overpopulation crisis. The readers feel the tension rise when Langdon and Sienna are cornered in Boboli Gardens, Pitti Palace and escape from Brüder and his team via the secret passageway, Vasari Corridor. It leads them right over the top of Vayentha. Excitement increases when Dr. Sinkey, Brüder, and Langdon sprint from Hagia Sophia to Topkapi Sarayi in Istanbul, with the hope to beat the clock and prevent Sienna from releasing the virus.

Langdon’s quest cleverly introduces places important to Dante Alighieri, the famous Italian author of the *Divine Comedy*, who lived in Italy in the 14th century. For example, Langdon and Sienna visit the Church of Dante that “According to lore… at this church, that Dante first laid eyes on Beatrice Portinari — women for whom he fell in love with, and for whom his heart ached for his entire life.” (Brown 266). Brown makes a fictional storyline seem factual by using real piazzas and famous museums and churches such as the Boboli Gardens, Pitti Palace, the Vasari Corridor, the Palazzo Vecchio and the Hall of Five Hundred where the characters find the death mask of Dante Alighieri. Later, they continue on to the Museo Casa Di Dante and then on to the Baptistery of San Giovanni to find the stolen death mask of Dante. Following the code’s message on the mask, they travel to Saint Mark’s Square and St. Mark’s Basilica, Venice. Sienna escapes and Langdon is brought to the Provost off the Italian Coast where Dr. Sinskey and the Provost explain Sienna’s deceit. Then they race to Istanbul to prevent a world disaster.

The novel creates a feeling of chaos for the readers that links the readers to the hell detailed by Dante Alighiere in *Inferno*. The readers follow Langdon as he decodes messages and must use real references to Dante’s *Inferno* to do so, “First stanza is Dante’s… ‘O you possessed of sturdy intellect…” (Brown 303). The parallels of actual locations to Dante’s works of literature not only help the story be more credible but also glorify Dante’s work in the eyes of the readers.

While studying the locations used by Brown, the differences in *Origin* become notable. Unlike the past novel, *Origin* locations do not contain as many secrets as the past locations. As a result, the novel is not as suspenseful as the others. Most of the past locations are rich with secrets and hidden passageways; however, in *Origin* the locations do not have any ancient secret passageways. For example, in *Angels and Demon*s there is the Passetto di Borgo, *Lost Symbol* the underground passage of the Capitol Building, and I*nferno* the Vasari Corridor. Without the use of such secret passageways in *Origin,* the escapes of Langdon and the heroine lose some of the enchantment and suspense that was so present in Brown’s earlier novels.

Understanding geography in a novel has always played a very important part in analyzing the novel’s meaning and effect on the reader because geography connects the setting to the reader. Furthermore, as we move into a more technologically driven world in the 21st century, geography becomes even more notable. No longer do readers have to just sit and wonder what the Barcelona skyline looks like or how the Passetto di Borgo runs through the Vatican city; now readers can instantly look up these iconic locations on the Internet to see real, vivid images instantly. Brown can be seen as a modern-day author that cleverly uses geography to his advantage; his tales are convincing thrillers that provoke thoughtful debate.

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6. [www.barcelonatouristguide.com](http://www.barcelonatouristguide.com) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
7. *The Golden Book of Rome and the Vatican (English Edition).* Centro Stampa Editoriale Bonechi. Page 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)