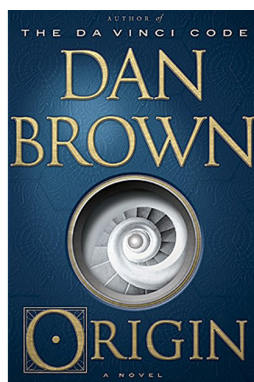


BOOK REVIEW

**Origin**

Author: Dan Brown

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In 2017, Dan Brown, a famous author, wrote his seventh novel, *Origin*. His previous work was *Inferno*, Brown's fourth novel that features Robert Langdon, published in 2013. Dan Brown's first novel in Langdon series was *Angels & Demons*, but his popularity rocketed when *The Da Vinci Code*, Langdon's second journey, published in 2003. There was a great controversy to the book, particularly in some inaccuracies of the facts provided in the novel. Despite of the controversy, Brown gained a big success. The book has been adapted into movies and parodies, and it has been translated to various languages, including Bahasa Indonesia.

Going back to *Origin*, he inserts arts facts, symbols, and a 'misguided' Christian sect in the book. The novel is about the atheist IT geek who plans to kill himself in a dramatic way. The atheist, Kirsch is helped by his Artificial Intelligence secretary named Winston. Their plan to make Kirsch dies without covering his own hands with blood leads to a big controversy in Spain, including the indication of the cardinal (Valdespino)'s relationship with the anti-Pope sect. Langdon and the Prince's fiancée, Ambra Vidal, have an adventure to reveal Kirsch's discovery and to know the one who sends an ex-navy to kill Kirsch.

The cover is quite simple, apt, and functional. It has a vignette blue background, Brown's name put on the top of cover, a whirling circle on the center, and the title, *Origin*, on the bottom. *Origin of what?* This question may pop up in your mind when you read the title. If you have watched or read *The Da Vinci Code* or *Inferno*, you might remember the famous "Mona Lisa" is used as the main hint for finding Holy Grail and other Christian stuffs or Dante's 'experience' with

Hell. Like in his previous novel, Brown writes *Origin* with the title as the core of the story. In real life, we may sometime ask ourselves where we came from or where we will go after we die. These fundamental questions lead to theories from science and religion point of view. Yes, a thrilling adventure that features some interplay between religion and science happens from these simple questions, which is why the cover is not that fancy.

The novel uses know-it-all third person point of view, which makes the readers automatically position themselves as distant people who can't interact with Langdon or other characters, or simply a viewer. One reason why Brown uses this point of view is to make him able to show more than one event happening at the same time before the characters meet each other. Besides, it will be easier for him to explore the characters' thoughts to certain events, usually Langdon and an antagonist's mind, and the plot itself. The point of view helps the reader build their imagination to follow the story.

Like Brown's previous novels, Langdon faces a thrilling adventure which is closely related to religion, especially Christianity. In *Origin*, he inserts anti-Pope church to add the suspense. The Pope of misguided sect does not appear as much as in *The Da Vinci Code*, but he certainly has an important role in giving false doctrines to Luis Avila, the ex-navy, through Marco, making him building a strong intention to kill Kirsch. As some of you may guess, with conspiracy spice, people are led to believe that the cardinal, Valdespino, probably has a secret relationship with the misguided sect and secretly arrange the killing. It becomes worse when there are coincidence between his acts and the

current scene. It is proven that he has nothing to do with the killing and does not have any relationship with the misguided church. Brown often inserts Christianity in his novels because he was close to Christianity before he decided to be gravitated away from Christianity.

If you have read Brown's previous novels, you may not be surprised with the appearance of another smart, beautiful woman who holds an important position. Before, you may remember Sophie Neveu, in *The Da Vinci Code*, Dr. Brooks in *Inferno*, or Vittoria Vetra, an adopted child of a murdered CERN physicist and also Langdon's romantic interest. This time, you will meet Ambra Vidal, the director of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and Prince Julian's fiancé. If you have read Brown's novels before *Origin*, you may notice that Langdon rarely has a romantic interest with the women—except Vittoria—and never do sexual activities with these women. Here, in *Origin*, you will not likely to find any signs of Langdon's sexual/romantic desire to Vidal. There is an obvious reason: Vidal is the Prince's fiancé. Besides, like his other novels, there is only one woman involved in the whole story. If there is another woman, this female character, most certainly, will have higher chance to be dead. It has no clear evidence that Langdon's sexual preference has something to do with Brown as Brown has married. However, it does not mean that Langdon has no sexual orientation at all. He is a hetero, but it seems that he lacks of sexual desire. It is shown in *Origin* that he never imagines Vidal naked nor has any wild thought about having sex with Vidal, despite her status with the Prince.

Langdon is described as a symbologist who helps local polices solving crime scenes. He also has a big interest in arts, which explains that most of the places are in art museums or churches with detailed decorations. It also explains that he has deep knowledge of painters from the middle centuries. In this novel, you will find another 'hide and seek' with finding the password in order to open Kirsch's discovery. The codes are closely related to arts and literature. There is one picture that is claimed as Winston's 'physical look'. It turns out that Winston's 'portrait' is actually a 'treasure hunting map' to locate his position. The main background why Brown describes Langdon as a symbologist who can decipher codes that are unthinkable by polices is his fascination with puzzles, secrets, codes, and mathematics. For Langdon's interest in arts, particularly in paintings, I do not have any trivia that leads Brown to describe

Langdon's interest in such field. The only trivia I know about his relationship with arts is the fact that Brown's mother was a church organ player.

Let's change our topic to technology developments in the story. If you have read *The Da Vinci Code*, you may remember the newest version of jet with features you cannot find in conventional airplanes. In recent years, AI has good development, although it has limitations. For humanlike AI, the robots/programs can respond to simple questions, statements, or commands with its own will, but its response is not as complicated as Natural Intelligence. Here in *Origin*, you will 'see' advanced Artificial Intelligences (abbr. AIs) working as tour guide in the museum. AI has been fully developed and able to make conversations with humans as if they were humans themselves. Not only that, they can do certain task by themselves. In the story, Winston can make fake calls from the Palace to another place, disguise himself as 'The Regent', even make fake e-mail to send fake news to a conspiracy lover website. Current AI has not yet reached this level, although it is possible in the future.

Let's move to the accuracies of the facts he provides in the story. The facts he uses in *Origin*, as well in his other novels, might be technically true, but it's not supposed to be taken seriously. In my view, he does not practically correlate the facts to the story, so I accept these 'facts' as fictional details. It is advisable to note down the 'facts' in the story and make an attempt to check whether the 'facts' Langdon and Winston share are valid or not. If you are planting your feet to the facts, you are not going to enjoy this work of fiction. If you consider them as facts from Langdon's world, you can enjoy it. Regardless of the validity of the facts, I can say that the plot is well-played.

What's more, I feel like Brown is glorifying Langdon. I'm not saying that Brown over-glorifies Langdon like Fahri in *Ayat Ayat Cinta*, but sure he does. Along the story, you will 'see' that he is the center of his world. In many novels, the main character has their own will. They have their own thoughts, which sometimes contradict with the society's norm and thoughts. However, they are part of the society. They do not possess features that make people listen to him. In some cases, there are wise characters, yet they live in a normal life: respected by their relatives, friends, and neighbors, join events in the neighborhood, and they do common activities. Nothing's special. Here, in *Origin*, you will see how Langdon is super

famous. His name as a symbologist from Harvard is already known worldwide. His famous make people recognize him easier. People think of him as a very smart person, because he is a professor in Harvard and has a fascinating track record in helping local police to solve crimes. Besides, dominant characters often ask for his advices. Not only that, the narration makes us feel that he can crack those codes in a couple of minutes, although the reality shows otherwise. He needs longer time to crack codes and is not as smart as he looks.

Last but not least, I would like to point out fake news issue. As technology develops, hoax is easily spread than it was in previous years. You can hardly point out which one is hoax. I assume that Brown wants to point out the issue by adding fake updates in *Origin*. Besides, he may give an implicit message that we have to be more aware to information we receive. Before we accept the information as true, we have to double check its reliability. If you notice the 'news' in the conspiracy website, there is a mysterious netizen using a fake e-mail, *monte@iglesia.org*, who give the site dubious information. However, neither does the

site nor the readers seem to suspect the information. They just receive the information as it is. Throughout the story, Langdon is the only one who realizes that the e-mail is fake, which is quite ridiculous. In real life, one does not have to be a genius nor a professor in order to spot hoax.

For Brown's fans or people who like mind-blowing stuffs, they can give a shot to read this book. However, some other people may not enjoy reading this book, not because the story is fast-paced or looking erudite, but because of inaccuracies, conspiracy logic, a female sidekicks with almost zero intimacy, and glorifying the main character. These points are what I experienced when I first reading *Origin*. I managed to finish it because I change my mindset. I try not to question every detail and regard them as purely fictional facts. I suggest you to read with a mindset of taking all of the 'facts' as fictional details. It will help you enjoy the story and finishes it.

REFERENCE

Brown, Dan. (2017). *Origin*. Doubleday.