

Leonardo's other code

Spanish journalist Javier Sierra's Dan Brown-like mystery has sold into 35 countries. He talks to **Katherine Rushton** ahead of its March publication

Javier Sierra was already midway through researching *The Secret Supper* when *The Da Vinci Code* was published, but he claims not to mind that his book was trumped. Instead, he is grateful for the interest Dan Brown's bestseller has sparked in Da Vinci, whose depiction of the Last Supper lies at the heart of both novels.

The Secret Supper has sold more than 220,000 hardback copies in Spain, where Sierra already has a media profile, but he knows that without a link, "it's very difficult for a Spanish author to publish into English".

Simon & Schuster m.d. Ian Chapman read the book in Spanish ahead of last year's London Book Fair and made a pre-emptive offer for UK rights. Now, the publisher hopes to single Sierra's novel out from the glut of Da Vinci clones, with major investment in ad and publicity campaigns.

Although *The Secret Supper* is Sierra's seventh book, it's also his English-language debut, and therefore he's as excited as if it was the first: his website hosts a countdown of the number of days until publication in each of the 35 countries where rights have been bought. He and his wife spent their honeymoon last year visiting his Anglophone publishers.

We meet in an ill-sited café next to a building site in Malaga, southern Spain, where Sierra lives. The noise of electric drilling sporadically halts conversation at every other table, but even in imperfect English Sierra is unstoppable. He animatedly relates the sequence of his "discoveries" for *The Secret Supper*, veering off course to explain the other "historical mysteries" he has researched.

At the age of 12, Sierra secured his own radio show dissecting conspiracy theories on the local station in his northern Spanish hometown of Teruel. As a journalist, he continued the same narrative in print in the "mysteries" magazine *Más Allá de la Ciencia* (*Beyond Science*), and more recently on television, as presenter of the primetime Telemadrid show, "El Otro Lado de la Realidad" (*The Other Side of Reality*).

The Secret Supper started life as another non-fiction project but quickly grew into a novel. "With [history] you have the dates and you have the information, but if you want to go beyond, you enter in the field of speculation. For me it's an uncomfort-



Javier Sierra:
more hidden
messages

CV

1971 born in Teruel, northern Spain

1983 Début on 'Radio Heraldo'

1989-1995 Studied journalism at the Complutense University, Madrid

1992-2005 Reporter at *Más Allá de la Ciencia*, rising to editor

1995 Published first book, *Roswell, Secreto de Estado* (*Roswell, State Secret*). Subsequent works include *El Secreto Egipcio de Napoleón* (*Napoleon's Egyptian Secret*) and *Las Puertas Templarias* (*The Templar Doors*)

2004 Presented 'El Otro Lado de la Realidad'

La Cena Secreta (*The Secret Supper*) published in Spain

2005 Married and moved to Malaga. Remains editor-at-large for *Más Allá de la Ciencia*.

able field so I decided to solve this mystery using fiction," Sierra says.

The story is told by Father Augustin Leyre, a Vatican monk who is an expert in breaking codes. He is sent to infiltrate the Milanese Santa Maria delle Grazie monastery after a series of anonymous letters to the Pope accuse Da Vinci of concealing subversive ideas in his work. Element by element, Leyre breaks the Last Supper down into a series of Cathar messages that announce Plato and the philosophers as offering true enlightenment and denounce the hierarchy of the Church.

His coup de grâce is the figure of Peter, who sits with Judas and has one hand on John's shoulder and the other gripped around a dagger. "Leonardo made this with the purpose of pointing to the Pope as a traitor," Sierra says assuredly.

It's the theme made famous by *The Da Vinci Code*, but Sierra insists his work goes beyond Brown's. "My book is a historical novel, with Leonardo alive. I try to push my readers into Da Vinci's mind and to teach them how to read the art and not just to see it," he says.

While the two books are set in different eras, the key difference must be Sierra's slightly more literary appeal. S&S has billed *The Secret Supper* as "*Da Vinci* meets *The Shadow of the Wind*", but Sierra himself claims Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* as his primary inspiration. The end result is still very much a thriller, but it is less adrenaline-fuelled and more elegantly written than Brown's hell-for-leather prose.