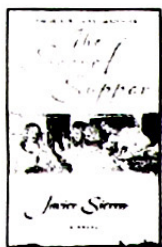


Fiction Sarah Vine

Guess who's coming to supper?

**THE SECRET SUPPER**by Javier Sierra
trans by Alberto Manguel

IS THERE A collective noun for conspiracy theorists? There ought to be. A connivance, a delusion or even a "Da Vinci". For Leonardo is at the centre of this latest frenzied tale of intrigue and murder hoping to grip readers' imaginations. At its heart is the "mystery" of Leonardo's *Cenacolo*, or *The Last Supper*.

The painting is supposedly an allegorical representation of his affiliation to the medieval cult of the Cathars, a persecuted Christian sect who rejected the Old Testament and believed in reincarnation. The book is essentially a puzzle leading to that revelation.

In common with *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Secret Supper* uses Leonardo's painting as some sort of historical message board. But it is not a direct spin-off. The author claims to have been working on it long before Dan Brown's book was published, and professes to be intrigued by the popularity of his rival's page-turner, even conceding that its theories have "merit". He claims that his book is more historically accurate, less a whodunnit, more a "whatisit", a scholarly exposé of the "truths" behind a masterpiece.

The Secret Supper is the first

of Sierra's novels to be translated from Spanish into English. His stock in trade is historical mystery – Knights Templar, mystical nuns, lost civilisations, Egyptian treasure. In keeping with all conspiracy theorists, he is adamant that his discoveries are absolute. His fans clearly believe that: the book has sold 300,000 copies in Spanish. But will it entrance foreign readers?

Sierra would reject the description conspiracy theorist, preferring to describe himself as a scholar and historian. And his book is far less of a romp than *The Da Vinci Code*. It is also less engaging. For the great secret of Brown's bestseller has less to do with Mary Magdalene, Catholic sects and hidden fertility symbols and everything to do with the style.

The Da Vinci Code is immensely flattering to its reader. Even those with the flighti-

'It is less a whodunnit and more a whatisit'

est of attention spans (and I count myself among them) are carried along by the sheer pace. The plot stays half a step ahead of the reader, just enough out of reach to keep you reading, yet close enough to enable you to guess the outcomes. It's wonderfully manipulative, flattering the reader into thinking that he or she is complicit in the various discoveries when the clues are so glaringly obvious that most six-year-olds would have little trouble divining them. Thanks

to *The Da Vinci Code*, thousands fancy themselves as historical detectives.

The same is most definitely not true of *The Secret Supper*. The pace is leisurely and although it opens with two gruesome deaths, the lengthy explanations of the meanderings of the Catholic Church in 15th-century Milan that follow re-

quire patience. Such detail might be fascinating to a Catholicised Spanish or Italian audience; but a more secular English readership will find itself stifling the odd yawn.

The book lacks the melodrama of *The Da Vinci Code*; there is no proper love interest, and our hero is not so much tortured as torturer (he

is a Catholic Inquisitor, albeit an open-minded one). The prose is more measured, indeed more literary. The real problem is that it lacks any self-knowledge. Sierra is so convinced of the legitimacy of his theory that he forgets, or omits, any of the trashier elements that made *The Da Vinci Code* such an enjoyable read. If

you thought that was a shameless rip-off of the undeniable truths in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, this is a good one for you. If you want a jolly medieval romp, perhaps not.

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