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THE EVOLUTION OF THE THRILLER GENRE IN TWENTIETH- AND TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY AMERICAN POPULAR LITERATURE: DAN BROWN AND THE RISE OF THE INTELLECTUAL CONSPIRACY THRILLER

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the thriller genre in American popular literature at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries on the material of Dan Brown's fiction. The study argues that Brown did not simply continue an existing commercial formula. He reconfigured the thriller into an "intellectual conspiracy thriller" in which danger is produced not only by pursuit, violence, and speed, but also by interpretation, code-breaking, religious controversy, and the collision of scientific and symbolic systems. The research combines genre analysis, narratological observation, and comparative reading of Brown's novels from *Digital Fortress* through *Origin*. Particular attention is paid to the changing nature of suspense, the role of intertextual references, the use of historical and religious discourse, and the movement from localized institutional conflicts toward global civilizational anxieties. The findings show that Brown's work registers a major shift in mass-market thriller writing: from the techno-political paranoia of the late twentieth century to transnational conspiratorial plots, and then to bioethical and technological scenarios characteristic of the twenty-first century. In this sense, Brown occupies an important place in the development of the contemporary American thriller as a hybrid, highly readable, and culturally resonant genre form.

Keywords. American popular literature, thriller, Dan Brown, conspiracy narrative, suspense, genre evolution, mass literature.

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Introduction

The thriller has long been one of the most elastic branches of crime and suspense fiction. It easily absorbs elements of espionage, detective investigation, political fiction, religious mystery, adventure writing, and catastrophe narrative, while preserving its core structure: urgency, danger, deferred knowledge, and movement toward a high-stakes revelation (Glover, 2003; Scaggs, 2005; Worthington, 2011). Because of this flexibility, the thriller often becomes a sensitive register of historical anxiety. Different periods feed it with different fears: espionage during the Cold War, serial violence in late modern urban culture, conspiracy in postwar political life, and technological risk in the digital age (Cawelti, 2004; Knight, 2000).

Dan Brown's fiction emerged precisely at the point where these anxieties began to reorganize themselves. His early novels inherited the late twentieth-century fascination with intelligence systems, encoded communication, and institutional secrecy. His later fiction, especially the Robert Langdon cycle, transformed the thriller into a new mass-market format built on religious controversy, symbolic interpretation, compressed chronology, and spectacular transnational movement. Brown's novels are often described as commercial page-turners, but such a label is too narrow. Their importance lies in the way they reorganize genre conventions for a new reading public. Brown makes the act of interpretation itself suspenseful. The hero does not simply chase a criminal. He reads paintings, monuments, rituals, secret archives, digital interfaces, and mythic structures under extreme pressure.

This article investigates how Brown's fiction reflects the evolution of the American thriller from the late twentieth century into the twenty-first. The aim is not to elevate mass literature by ignoring its formulaic features. On the contrary, the study treats formula as a productive literary mechanism. As popular fiction scholars note, genre writing survives by repeating recognizable patterns while continuously adjusting them to new ideological climates, reader expectations, and media environments (Cawelti, 2004; Murphy, 2016). Brown's achievement lies exactly in that adjustment. He turns conspiracy into pedagogy,

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historical fragments into engines of pursuit, and intellectual decoding into emotional suspense.

Materials and Methods

The research is based on close reading and comparative genre analysis of Dan Brown’s novels *Digital Fortress* (1998), *Angels & Demons* (2000), *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), *The Lost Symbol* (2009), *Inferno* (2013), and *Origin* (2017). The corpus was selected because it reveals Brown’s movement from late twentieth-century techno-thriller structures to the broader ideological and civilizational concerns of the twenty-first century. The analysis uses concepts from crime fiction studies, popular fiction studies, conspiracy narrative theory, and narratology (Glover, 2003; Knight, 2000; Murphy, 2016; Rabkin, 1973; Scaggs, 2005). The central analytical categories are suspense, temporality, knowledge distribution, spatialization, intertextuality, and the cultural function of conspiracy.

Results and Discussion

Table 1

Dan Brown’s fiction and the dominant direction of thriller transformation

Novel	Year	Dominant anxiety	Dominant thriller mode
Digital Fortress	1998	surveillance, code-breaking, state secrecy	techno-political thriller
Angels & Demons	2000	science versus religion, secret society violence	religious conspiracy thriller
The Da Vinci Code	2003	historical suppression, sacred femininity, institutional secrecy	intellectual puzzle thriller
The Lost Symbol	2009	national myth, esotericism, hidden power	symbolic-national thriller
Inferno	2013	bioethics, overpopulation, pandemic threat	techno-apocalyptic thriller
Origin	2017	artificial intelligence, futurism, media spectacle	philosophical-technological thriller

From Techno-Political Secrecy to Symbolic Conspiracy

Brown’s late twentieth-century entry point is *Digital Fortress*. Even before the Langdon cycle, this novel shows the matrix from which Brown’s later thriller

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poetics develop. The text is built around encrypted information, state surveillance, and the fear that secret institutions may exceed democratic accountability. At this stage Brown still works inside a recognizable techno-thriller tradition. The driving conflict concerns intelligence infrastructure, privacy, and computerized control rather than art history or theology. Yet the novel is already significant because it relocates suspense from physical combat to epistemic instability. What produces fear is not only the threat itself, but the inability to know who controls information and how codes organize power.

That movement becomes more sophisticated in *Angels & Demons*. Brown introduces Robert Langdon and simultaneously changes the temperature of the genre. The thriller no longer depends only on secret agencies or national security. It now stages the collision of science, religion, Renaissance memory, terrorism, and visual symbolism. The novel's Vatican setting is not decorative. It becomes a semiotic battlefield in which every church, statue, inscription, and ritual object may function as a clue. Glover (2003) notes that the thriller traditionally thrives on compulsion and accelerated narrative consumption; Brown radicalizes that tendency by making the reader process symbolic data at the same speed as the protagonists. The result is a hybrid form in which interpretive labor itself becomes kinetic.

The *Da Vinci Code* marks the full consolidation of this model. Brown fuses murder investigation, chase narrative, art criticism, biblical apocrypha, cryptography, and revisionist history into a highly consumable form. The novel belongs to the thriller, but it also borrows from the detective story, the treasure hunt, and the academic mystery. Its originality lies in the fact that danger is inseparable from hermeneutics. Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu survive by reading. The thriller is therefore reorganized around a striking formula: the body is pursued through space because the mind has pursued forbidden meaning.

This is also the point at which Brown becomes inseparable from conspiracy culture. Knight (2000) argues that conspiracy narratives gained special force in late modernity because they respond to a world that feels globally connected and yet cognitively unmanageable. Brown's fiction exploits exactly this condition. His conspiracies are readable enough to be exciting and vast enough to feel

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historically overwhelming. The Priory of Sion, Opus Dei, and the hidden archive of sacred history all function not merely as plot devices but as imaginative solutions to the fragmentation of modern knowledge. They promise that scattered signs can still be joined into one master pattern. This pattern-seeking desire is one of the central energies of Brown’s thriller design.

At the same time, the religious dimension of *The Da Vinci Code* helps explain its place in American mass literature. Turner (2011) observes that in modern culture the boundary between religious fact and religious fiction becomes porous, and that popular texts increasingly shape the “religious imaginary.” Brown’s novel is exemplary in this sense. It does not ask readers to become theologians; it invites them to feel that history itself is suspenseful, incomplete, and manipulable. Jennie S. Knight (2005), writing about the novel’s popularity in relation to myth and gender, also shows that Brown’s fiction gained broad cultural force because it linked controversy to narrative pleasure. The book was not consumed only as a puzzle. It was consumed as an argument about memory, authority, and the sacred feminine.

The Spatialization of the Thriller

One of Brown’s most important contributions to the genre is spatial. Traditional thrillers often use travel, pursuit, and exotic locations. Brown goes further by turning space into a text. Paris, Rome, Washington, Florence, Venice, and Bilbao are not merely backdrops. They are arranged as archives that must be deciphered. In Brown’s fiction architecture stores ideology. Urban space is narratively activated through codes, historical references, inscriptions, museum layouts, tunnels, tombs, and liturgical pathways. This technique gives his novels a museum-like density while preserving commercial pace.

The Lost Symbol demonstrates the next stage of this development. If *The Da Vinci Code* transformed European sacred geography into a chase structure, *The Lost Symbol* relocates the same logic to the symbolic core of the United States. Washington, D.C. is treated as a monumental script written in obelisks, Masonic imagery, hidden chambers, and civic ritual. This move is important for genre history. Brown shifts from church secrecy and medieval continuities toward

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national mythology and esoteric state power. The thriller becomes less ecclesiastical and more civic-symbolic. It asks what invisible narratives support national identity, and whether political modernity itself is built on ritual concealment.

Such a move expands the ideological range of the American thriller. Brown suggests that modern public institutions are readable in the same way as cathedrals. This is a distinctively twenty-first-century gesture, because it blurs the line between secular authority and symbolic performance. The state in Brown's fiction is never merely administrative. It is theatrical, encoded, and haunted by secret traditions. In that respect, Brown extends the thriller beyond physical jeopardy into the cultural analysis of institutions.

Suspense, Chapter Rhythm, and Reader Management

Brown's fiction is often criticized for its formulaic chapter endings, repetitive exposition, and simplified characterization. These features are real, but they should also be understood functionally. Rabkin (1973) demonstrated that suspense is not reducible to plot alone; it emerges from the management of expectation across multiple levels of narrative experience. Brown's short chapters, abrupt cutaways, postponed explanations, and repeated symbolic triggers generate precisely such management. He writes for forward propulsion. His chapter architecture resembles serial broadcasting, where each segment must produce enough tension to guarantee continuation.

From the perspective of popular fiction studies, this architecture is not a weakness in itself. Murphy (2016) emphasizes that contemporary popular fiction is shaped by readability, circulation, and genre recognizability. Brown's prose often works as a delivery system for narrative momentum. He minimizes stylistic opacity in order to maximize transfer: clue to clue, site to site, threat to threat. What matters in this system is not psychological subtlety in the realist sense, but velocity of comprehension. Brown's readers are asked to process a heavy load of historical, religious, artistic, and scientific material without losing narrative orientation. The thriller becomes an educational machine, though one driven by cliffhangers rather than by scholarly argument.

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This rhythm also helps explain Brown’s global mass appeal. His novels rely on what may be called modular suspense. Each chapter offers a discrete puzzle or danger, but each also belongs to a larger architecture of revelation. Readers therefore experience both immediate tension and long-form anticipation. This double structure is central to the evolution of the contemporary thriller, especially in a media environment shaped by episodic television, digital fragmentation, and high-speed information consumption.

From Conspiracy to Civilizational Risk

Inferno and Origin reveal a further transformation of the thriller in the twenty-first century. Here Brown moves beyond church secrets and Masonic codes toward planetary questions. Inferno revolves around population pressure, biotechnology, plague, and the ethics of survival. The text still uses Brown’s familiar devices: cryptic objects, historical intertexts, compressed chronology, and iconic European settings. Yet the scale of anxiety is no longer institutional or confessional. It is species-level. The thriller begins to absorb the language of systems risk.

This shift is significant. Earlier Brown novels derive energy from hidden pasts: documents, brotherhoods, murdered curators, suppressed lineages. Inferno adds another temporal orientation, namely the threatened future. Suspense now depends not only on what has been concealed, but on what may soon happen to humanity. That movement corresponds to broader changes in popular fiction, where ecological, epidemiological, and technological fears increasingly reorganize plot. Brown does not abandon conspiracy, but he embeds it inside bioethical debate and global mobility. The result is a techno-apocalyptic thriller in which art history and Dante function within a networked discourse of catastrophe.

Origin continues this trajectory. Its central conflict involves artificial intelligence, futurism, mediated spectacle, and the public staging of scientific revelation. The opposition between religion and science remains, but Brown rewrites it for the platform age. Revelation is now digital, instantly reproducible, and globally distributed. The threat does not emerge from a monastery archive

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or cryptic brotherhood alone. It emerges from algorithmic intelligence, information systems, and the crisis of authority in an over-mediated world. If *The Da Vinci Code* asks who controlled the past, *Origin* asks who will control the story of human beginnings and human destiny.

This movement from concealed archive to live-streamed revelation is one of Brown's clearest contributions to thriller evolution. The genre becomes increasingly entangled with media performance. Knowledge is no longer simply discovered. It is staged, interrupted, hacked, broadcast, and weaponized. Brown's later work therefore registers a broader transformation in American mass literature: thrillers now compete not only with other books but with networked spectacles of crisis.

Dan Brown and American Mass Literature

Brown's significance should be located not only in sales or controversy, but in genre mediation. Cawelti (2004) argues that popular forms remain culturally revealing precisely because they condense collective desires and anxieties into repeatable narrative structures. Brown's novels do this with unusual clarity. They transform abstract cultural tensions into readable dramatic patterns: faith versus science, archive versus screen, institution versus individual interpreter, history versus innovation, secrecy versus dissemination.

His fiction is also a particularly American form of global writing. Although much of the action unfolds in European settings, the narrative logic is shaped by American mass-cultural expectations: speed, accessibility, spectacular stakes, serial recognizability, and the democratization of elite knowledge. Langdon is not a slow academic; he is an action-intellectual. This hybrid protagonist allows Brown to bring the university, the museum, the cathedral, and the laboratory into the circuitry of commercial suspense. Such a figure would have been far less central in earlier thriller traditions dominated by spies, policemen, or private investigators.

In this respect Brown expands the social image of the thriller hero. Expertise no longer belongs only to state agencies or forensic institutions. It belongs to the readerly mind under pressure. That change matters because it redefines what

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kind of intelligence mass literature celebrates. Brown’s thrillers flatter interpretation. They imagine that the ability to connect fragments across disciplines may itself be heroic.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that Dan Brown occupies a consequential position in the evolution of the thriller genre in American popular literature from the late twentieth century into the twenty-first. Beginning with techno-political secrecy in *Digital Fortress*, moving through the religious-symbolic conspiracies of *Angels & Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code*, and culminating in the civilizational risks of *Inferno* and *Origin*, Brown systematically widens the thematic and formal reach of the thriller. He preserves the genre’s traditional dependence on speed, danger, and revelation, but he intensifies these elements by making interpretation the central motor of suspense.

Brown’s fiction demonstrates that the contemporary thriller is no longer defined only by pursuit and violence. It is increasingly structured by information overload, contested expertise, symbolic decoding, and global anxieties about institutions, media, science, and the future of humanity. His novels therefore reveal a major turn in mass-market writing: the thriller becomes an arena where high-density cultural material can be converted into popular narrative energy without losing readability.

For this reason, Brown should be read not only as a bestselling novelist, but also as a genre mediator who helped reshape the thriller for a new century. His work stands at the intersection of conspiracy culture, transnational mobility, religious debate, digital media, and intellectualized suspense. In that intersection one can see the broader evolution of the American thriller itself.

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