

Tom, Thanks for Angels & Demons

May 6, 2020

ANGELS & DEMONS (2009)

Directed by Ron Howard

Written by David Koepp, Akiva Goldsman, & Dan Brown

Starring Ewan McGregor, Ayelet Zurer, & Tom Hanks as Robert Langdon

I have a theory that nobody reads the amount that they say they do. It's not necessarily a deception, I just think we all have a fundamental misunderstanding of our own relationship to reading. Some folks will tell you, frankly, they never read, either with a sense of shame or gleeful sufficiency. Others seem to stock their own personal worth in their ability to digest mammoth works of hefty lit in very short periods of time; these same people tend to point out, as often as possible, the works they've consumed, as if they're check-points on a race to the afterlife. Then there's most of us: a few books a year, many op-eds & essays, countless iterations of news stories, magazines, tweets, notes from loved ones, work materials, and subtitles, all making up a vast amount of reading which we tend to summarize as, "Not as much as I'd like." With all these elements having a daily incursion on the universal modern lifestyle, I just don't see how self-proclaimed voracious readers are reading as much as they say, or how self-proclaimed never readers are reading as little as they say. Look, if you dummied fifty-two books in the last fifty-two weeks, congratulations on all the wonderful factors that enabled such an achievement, but I wonder if you can tell me how Book #17 ended, or what Book #38's protagonist was called.

I was thirteen when I read *The Da Vinci Code* - I think we've discussed this already - and it was the longest book I'd ever read, at the time. I remember riding that scholarly, check-pointy sense of accomplishment right into the early pages of *Angels & Demons*, which quickly lost my interest and disrupted my book-reading trajectory for quite some time (or at least until the next Harry Potter came out). A&D was, in fact, written before DVC, but because the latter had so rocked the culture, suddenly all of Dan Brown's Robert Langdon adventures were newly popular. Even into adulthood, when I eventually saw the DVC movie and found it as enjoyable as I remembered the book to be, I never gave A&D a second try, and fifteen years went by before I managed to find out how that book ended... this past weekend, via Tom Hanks. Turns out, *Angels & Demons* is kind of a blast, and ends, possibly, even more explosively than its more exalted sequel.

Where DVC concerns itself with thousands of years of religious institutions concealing secrets, A&D is about such corruption on a more current scale. It begins with the announcement of the death of the Pope and the sense that it's undecided who among four cardinals will next be elected to the Papacy. To complicate things, foul play might have occurred, and thus begins one of the most reliable story structures for creating suspense and devotion-to-hero: "Something's happened and only so&so can crack the case!" Enter: professor of symbology, theistic Indiana Jones, Robert Langdon (TH with shorter hair than in the chronologically-later DVC, meaning Landon grows it out *after* these events).

Imagine you're the preeminent authority in a field that deals mainly in language, theory, and anecdotal mythology. You're a learned person and your passion for the subjects you study would incline you toward nearly endless curious opportunities. Now imagine your expertise forces you into the regular presence of dead bodies, at the top of investigators' lists of suspects, and in the cross-hairs of the world's dorkiest assassins. It's not easy being Robert Langdon, man, and I don't know where he found time to train with the ninjas in the League of Shadows, in and around writing historical texts and drawing ambigrams for fun, but I'm very impressed. That all said, this movie does imply Langdon isn't fluent in Latin, and of all the blind-spots I could forgive, I struggle with this one.

For the next installment in an established franchise, A&D is not a star-studded film. Ewan McGregor is the shiniest tack-on, in his role as Camerlengo Patrick McKenna. McKenna's in charge of facilitating the transition between Popes, and serves as a cooperative witness into the late pontiff's mysterious death. He reveals himself, with little provocation, to be the illegitimate son of the former Pope, and goes on to perform action stunts that make Landon look more like the bookworm he ought to. The cast member I'm most curious about is Nikolaj Lie Kaas, the unnamed assassin who roams the cobblestones of Italy, murdering the Church's foremost cardinals, one by one, in different elemental ways. This actor does not appear to have had an extensive career in high profile roles, but I wish he had - the guy's scary! Then there's Vittoria Vetra, antimatter specialist, with little to do, and thus, little to

influence. I vaguely remember her to be more significant in early parts of the book, but still as scarcely more than the archetypal female sidekick who eventually lays Langdon. A certain amount of formula is acceptable in a Dan Brown adaptation (we discussed this framing in the DVC entry), though I wonder if these adventures would be more thrilling in a greater Brown Television Universe. I'd watch a Professor Langdon Amazon Prime series in a heartbeat.

Do you suppose Robert Langdon laments not reading as much as he'd like? Everyone with a thirst for knowledge seems to have this personal shame, no matter how academically accomplished they are. On the other hand, we're all just faking knowing anything, right? The things we do or don't read in books define us only *to* us and no one else. When Langdon is called to a police investigation, as an authority on a certain subject, he shows up not knowing how to help or what exactly has happened. But he wants to learn, because he wants to get better. And that's why any of us read, right? To learn. To get better. Unless of course you read exciting action thrillers for entertainment, and if so, can you recommend any good authors?

Thx!