

Dan Brown, *Inferno*. London: Bantam Press, 2013. 463pp (Hardback). RRP: £20. ISBN: 978-0-593-07249-3.

‘[U]nless we face world population head-on, we are doing nothing more than sticking a Band-Aid on a fast-growing cancerous tumor’¹

Dan Brown’s latest best-selling though critically unacclaimed novel *Inferno* (2013) is the fourth in the series to feature the protagonist Robert Langdon, a Harvard Professor of Art History and Symbolology. Like its three predecessors - *Angels and Demons* (2000), *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), and *The Lost Symbol* (2009) - *Inferno* follows a familiar plot whereby Langdon is on a quest alongside an attractive female sidekick: this time, Dr. Sienna Brooks. Fulfilling the expectation that Langdon’s adventure will act as a guided tour through a culturally vibrant city, having travelled through Rome, Vatican City, Paris, and Washington D.C. in earlier instalments, *Inferno* meanders through three locations, focusing on the paintings, sculptures, and architecture to see in Florence, Venice, and Istanbul. While his previous pursuits have entailed successfully finding the last living descendant of Christ and preventing the Vatican from being destroyed by antimatter, this time Langdon is faced with a problem he cannot solve: the creation of a virus causing infertility in a supposedly random third of the population. This virus is designed by the “villain” Bertrand Zobrist in a bid to tackle population overgrowth. Thus, *Inferno* is an apocalyptic text that, more so than Brown’s previous quests, participates in a moral debate on a current global issue, providing a cautionary social commentary on overpopulation, the novel’s key theme.

Langdon has been hired by Dr. Elizabeth Sinskey, the director of the World Health Organization (WHO) and Zobrist’s adversary, to prevent the outbreak of the virus, which is initially thought to be a plague. When the WHO put Zobrist under

surveillance, regarding him as a ‘bioterrorist’² on the basis of his vision to curb the global population, Zobrist is provided the privacy to carry out his research and formulate the virus by an organisation known as the Consortium. The philosophy of the Consortium’s provost is to ask nothing about his client’s work, giving Zobrist the ideal solitary circumstances needed for his vision to be actualised, enabling Brown to critique the company’s morals. Zobrist, however, entrusts the provost to do two things on a specific (though unrevealed) date, before which Zobrist commits suicide. These are to give Sinskey a device containing a projector, which displays his adaptation of Botticelli’s *La Mappa dell’Inferno* – a map of hell – and is the catalyst for Sinskey employing Langdon to help decipher Zobrist’s intentions; and to release a video online.

The 9-minute film shows the green-eyed Zobrist in an underground water-filled cavern dressed as a Venetian plague-doctor; a transparent, soluble bag containing the virus – his ‘masterpiece’ and ‘gift’³ for humanity; and a plaque bearing the inscription: ‘IN THIS PLACE, ON THIS DATE, THE WORLD WAS CHANGED FOREVER’.⁴ The date is the next day. Unsurprisingly, though with much deliberation, the provost refuses to upload the video, going against his organisation’s protocol of not interfering. Langdon, Sinskey, and her colleagues initially think that they have to find this location by this date in order to prevent the anticipated plague from being released and spreading, a plot which provides the driving force of the narrative. When they discover the site, however – the Yerebatan Sarayi cistern beneath Istanbul – it is revealed that the date on Zobrist’s plaque does not refer to this. Instead, this is the ‘global-saturation date – a mathematical projection

¹ Dan Brown, *Inferno* (London: Bantam Press, 2013), 139.

² *Ibid.*, 140.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

of the date after which his virus will have propagated across the world...and infected every individual'.⁵

As the title indicates, *Inferno* uses the work of the Florentine poet Dante Alighieri as its foundation, particularly his 14th century poem *Divine Comedy*, which depicts his 'brutal descent into the underworld, journey through purgatory, and eventual arrival in paradise'.⁶ The novel engages with Dante's influence on the arts, especially his 'enduring vision of hell'⁷ portrayed in the poem's opening section called *Inferno*. Zobrist's digitally altered version of Botticelli's *La Mappa dell'Inferno* – a map of hell inspired by Dante's work – exemplifies this. In Brown's text, however, "Inferno" is the name of Zobrist's sterility-inducing virus, designed to curb global population and stabilise future population levels.

Thus, at the heart of *Inferno* is a battle between Zobrist and Sinskey, between opposing ideologies and perspectives on how to combat the issue of overpopulation. Brown's epigraph highlights the moral dilemma inherent in his discussion in Dantean terms, using 'a famous paraphrasing of Dante's text':⁸ 'the darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis'. This epigraph encapsulates Zobrist's standpoint, and is later revealed to be cited in his video.⁹ It is also written on a note he gives to Sinskey in the form of a threat, accusing her of doing nothing to conquer the problem of overpopulation.¹⁰ He condemns the WHO for being irrational, saying that 'madness is the WHO staring into the abyss and denying it is there. Madness is an ostrich who sticks her head in the sand while a pack

⁵ Ibid., 432.

⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁷ Ibid., 64-65.

⁸ Dan Brown, "Voyage to the Underworld: An Interview with Dan Brown," *Barnes and Noble Review*. May 14, 2013. Accessed 2 August, 2013, <http://bnreview.barnesandnoble.com/t5/Interview/Voyage-to-the-Underworld-An-Interview-with-Dan-Brown/ba-p/10517>

⁹ Brown, *Inferno*, 319.

¹⁰ Ibid., 163.

of hyenas closes in around her'.¹¹ Brown also returns to the epigraph in his epilogue when Langdon realises that he is guilty of a neutral standpoint and promises not to be plagued by denial in the future, noting that 'denial had become a global pandemic'.¹²

In an interview shortly after the publication of *Inferno*, 'his darkest novel yet',¹³ Brown argues that 'a good thriller must teach me something about the real world' and says that, 'to my taste, a great thriller must also contain at its core a thought-provoking ethical debate or moral dilemma'.¹⁴ These definitions apply to *Inferno*: the real world issue is overpopulation, while the moral dilemma surrounds the problem of how to ethically deal with this. Using graphs and population growth statistics, Brown emphasises that this is a current problem that needs addressing. Zobrist shows Sinskey a graph depicting 'World Population Growth Throughout History' which illustrates the population's alarming rate of acceleration,¹⁵ and the fact that 'it took the earth's population thousands of years – from the early dawn of man all the way to the early 1800s – to reach *one* billion people,' but that between the 1920s and 1970s the population doubled from two to four billion.¹⁶ The population is currently just over seven billion, but by 2050, *both* Zobrist and the WHO predict, the world population will reach *nine* billion. However, as Zobrist states, 'any environmental biologist or statistician will tell you that humankind's best chance of long-term survival occurs with a global population of around four billion'.¹⁷ While ideal population numbers and predictions of population growth vary, Brown's depiction of Zobrist urges the reader to consider that 'we are on the brink of the end

¹¹ Ibid., 137.

¹² Ibid., 463.

¹³ Dan Brown, Interview with Matt Rudd, "Murder, he Wrote," *The Sunday Times*, May 12, 2013. Accessed 1 July, 2013, <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/Magazine/Interviews/article1254161.ece>

¹⁴ Dan Brown, "By the Book," Interview in *The New York Sunday Times*, June 20, 2013. Accessed 1 July, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/books/review/dan-brown-by-the-book.html?_r=0

¹⁵ Brown, *Inferno*, 103.

¹⁶ Ibid., 101.

¹⁷ Ibid., 105.

of humanity’ and acknowledge that ‘ozone depletion, lack of water, and pollution are not the disease – they are the *symptoms*. The *disease* is overpopulation’.¹⁸ Langdon’s sidekick Dr. Sienna Brooks, who is later revealed to be Zobrist’s lover and a follower of his ideology – although she is vehemently against his methods of dramatically decreasing the exponentially growing population – encourages Langdon to accept that ‘the mathematics is indisputable’ saying ‘it’s quite normal for a species to go extinct simply as a result of overpopulating its environment’.¹⁹

Therefore, unlike Langdon’s previous adventures, *Inferno* is a dystopian narrative that critiques a real world problem and allows the apocalypse – in the form of the global spread of *Inferno* – to happen. The novel therefore fits Sharon Stevenson’s definition of dystopian fiction: ‘the dystopia is not an exposé of a current condition, but a warning about some condition that might develop from a tendency in the readers’ contemporary world or about a past condition that might re-emerge’.²⁰ However, while Zobrist ventriloquises Brown’s warning against passively allowing the global population to continue increasing on the basis that our species is predicted to become extinct this century if nothing is done, he critiques the widespread feeling of denial in the ‘current condition’. Heather Urbanski’s distinction between social commentaries and cautionary tales, where the former ‘are criticisms focused on the now’ while the latter ‘are warnings that focus on the future’²¹ therefore applies to the novel. *Inferno*, however, obscures this differentiation: it provides a social commentary

¹⁸ Ibid., 139.

¹⁹ Ibid., 214.

²⁰ Sharon Stevenson, “The Nature of ‘Outsider Dystopias’: Atwood, Starhawk, and Abbey,” in *The Utopian Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Twentieth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts* ed. Martha Bartter (USA: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 135.

²¹ Heather Urbanski, *Plagues, Apocalypses and Bug-eyed Monsters* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2007), 111.

on contemporary societal views towards overpopulation, while simultaneously offering a cautionary tale of what would happen in the future if this was ‘unchecked’.²²

Langdon is initially in a state of denial regarding overpopulation but Brooks encourages the hero to be sympathetic to her and Zobrist’s beliefs. As Stevenson argues, in dystopian fiction, ‘the more plausible the ideology and working of the evil fantasy system, the greater the paranoia the reader will feel’.²³ Zobrist and Brooks’ argument that ‘a culling is a necessary evil to save the planet’²⁴ is portrayed as highly plausible, *because* Langdon and the WHO accept Zobrist’s aim at the novel’s conclusion. *Vis-à-vis* Dante, Langdon diagnoses his denial and learns that ‘[sic] *in dangerous times, there is no sin greater than inaction,*’ while Sinskey and Brooks unexpectedly join forces, ‘meeting the future head-on and navigating the complexities of a changed world’.²⁵ Both Sinskey and Brooks agree, in relation to the Florentine thinker Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), that the ends do not justify Zobrist’s means. But Sinskey ponders, in relation to her expectation that a countervirus will be suggested as a cure to Zobrist’s virus, that ‘we might not even *want* to counteract it,’²⁶ to Brooks’ surprise. Sinskey argues, in line with Brooks, that ‘I may disagree with Bertrand’s methods, but his assessment of the state of the world is accurate. This planet is facing a serious overpopulation issue. If we manage to neutralize Bertrand’s virus without a viable alternate plan... we are simply back at square one’.²⁷ Thus, the novel ends with a (random) third of the world’s population infertile, and no plan to reverse his controversial, inhumane method of culling. This seems to fulfil Zobrist’s Transhumanist desire to improve the species using revolutionary genetic technology

²² Brown, *Inferno*, 144.

²³ Stevenson, “The Nature of ‘Outsider Dystopias,’” 131.

²⁴ Brown, *Inferno*, 218.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 463.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 451.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 452.

in the form of his vector virus – a virus that modifies DNA – and create a posthuman species: as Zobrist states in his video, ‘I am the gateway to the Posthuman age’.²⁸

Brown’s latest Dante-inspired novel, therefore, fulfils some of the controversial expectations associated with his series of Langdon-quest narratives, but unlike the previous instalments, discusses a real world problem which Langdon cannot solve. Instead, Zobrist problematically (and potentially eugenically) deals with the issue of overpopulation, an end that is endorsed by Langdon and the World Health Organization at the novel’s conclusion. *Inferno* provides a social commentary and cautionary tale regarding the increasing global population, encouraging the reader to take this issue seriously and not be in denial, like the hero. Via Zobrist, it raises the hypothetical question that Langdon initially refuses to answer, due to denial: ‘would you kill half the population today in order to save our species from extinction?’²⁹ Brown discusses the moral dilemma surrounding this crisis, while arguing that, as the epigraph suggests, remaining neutral is not a viable option. Although *Inferno* is a dystopian narrative, it is suggested that a utopian society is on the horizon. Both Zobrist and Langdon repeatedly emphasise that ‘the sudden arrival of the Black Death, while horrific, had effectively “thinned the human herd,” creating an abundance of food and opportunity, which, according to many historians, had been a primary catalyst for bringing about the Renaissance’.³⁰ On this basis, Zobrist believes that ‘the best thing that ever happened to Europe was the Black Death’.³¹ In his video, dressed as a plague-doctor, he discusses his *Inferno* in these terms, saying that ‘Renaissance’ and ‘rebirth’ follow the Black Death, and that, in relation to Dante’s

²⁸ Ibid., 145.

²⁹ Ibid., 219.

³⁰ Ibid., 177.

³¹ Ibid.

Divine Comedy, 'to reach Paradise, man must pass through Inferno'.³² Maybe Brown's next best-seller will reveal whether Paradise awaits.

³² *Ibid.*, 48.