

CULTURE

HOW THE DA VINCI CODE CRACKED FRANCE

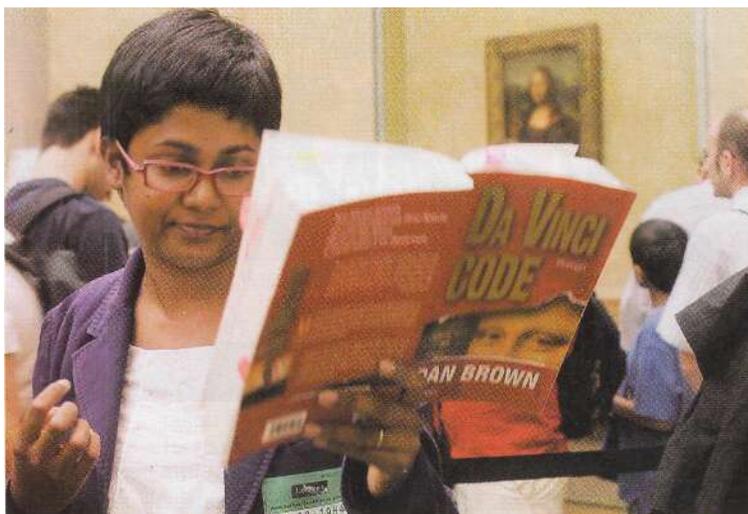
The best-selling novel in the nation's history is rewriting the rules of French marketing

BY MATT VELLA

PARIS HAS gone *Da Vinci Code* crazy. From the Arc de Triomphe to the Place de la Concorde, the city is plastered with posters for the just-opened movie, which is based on the best-selling thriller by Dan Brown. The French press is filled with stories on everything from ecclesiastical debates over the book's religious themes to profiles of the two French movie stars, Jean Reno and Audrey Tautou, who appear, speaking in English, in the film. Bookstores all over Paris are stocked to the rafters with copies of the novel in French, English, hardcover, paperback, special illustrated editions, you name it.

The movie premiered on May 17 at the Cannes Film Festival, where critics gave it a lukewarm reception. Yet even with its convoluted plot, and imperfect French translation, the novel has become by far the top-selling commercial book of all time in France, with more than 5 million copies already purchased. Add pass-along readership, and analysts estimate a quarter of the French reading-age population has read *The Da Vinci Code*.

Still, *Da Vinci Code* mania is about a lot more than book sales. It's inspiring all sorts of entrepreneurial spirit among the French.



There are *Da Vinci Code* walking tours, playing cards, calligraphy sets, music CDs, a video game, vacation promotions, and more. "This is the first example of derivative product marketing in French publishing ever," says Isabelle Laffont, president of JC Lattes, publisher of the hardcover version of the book. "It's totally new for us—another product of globalization."

MONA LISA SMILES
Even the Louvre is trying in with the book to draw crowds

Indeed, the arrival of the Sony Pictures film, starring Tom Hanks and directed by Ron Howard, is spurring a new wave of commercialization. JC Lattes is issuing 200,000 copies of a special French edition timed to the release. It carries a new dust-jacket with images taken from the movie. Lattes also sells a popular companion guide to the novel, called *The Investigation of The Da Vinci Code*, by Marie-France Etchegoin

and Frederic Lenoir. Sales from the paperback edition of *The Da Vinci Code* accounted for 10% of overall revenue last year for France's second-largest paperback publisher, Pocket Books.

Everyone, it seems, is getting into the act. Much of the book takes place in the British capital, and Eurostar, the trans-Channel train service between London and Paris, says it has seen a growing number of riders making *Da Vinci* pilgrimages between the two cities. "One thing we noticed was that the No. 1 lost-and-found item on the trains was Brown's book," says Eurostar Marketing Director Greg Nugent. To tap into the craze, Eurostar has kicked off a lavish marketing promotion dubbed "Join the Quest," a contest with *Da Vinci*-style codes and puzzles. A half-million people have visited the promotional Web site, whose design echoes the movie's parchment-and-pentagrams esthetic. The grand prize? Complimentary Eurostar travel for life, free vacations for five years in London and Paris, \$20,000 for shopping at Harrods and Galeries Lafayette, and \$258,000 in prize money.

Even the staid Louvre is getting a lift. For years after *The Da Vinci Code* came out, the museum distanced itself from the book and its avid following. But now it has decided to go with the pop-culture flow. Last year, the Louvre admitted a record 7.5 million visitors, up nearly 20% from 2004, thanks in part to *Da Vinci Code* notoriety. On May 18, the Louvre unveiled a new audio tour called "Step Inside the *Da Vinci Code*" that will be available for rental or purchase on site and via the Louvre Web site and Apple's iTunes store for \$13.

Business is booming, too, for the dozens of tourist operations that offer guided tours of the Louvre, St. Sulpice, and other locales cited in the novel. The weak dollar? Anti-French sentiment, once-rampant in the U.S. at the outset of the Iraq war? *Pas de probleme*. For many Americans and French alike, retracing the steps of *The Da Vinci Code* is the thing to do these days. Now, all those budding French entrepreneurs are just praying the jeers and shrugs at the movie's premier in Cannes don't signal a flop. •

-With Andy Reinhardt

