
Riddling *The Da Vinci Code*

Terry Beck, Guest Columnist

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A major event in the publishing world, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* inspired a stream of books reacting to its subjects and presentation. Readers became caught up in the mix of fiction and fact, often confused the two, and looked for non-fiction titles to shed light, support ideas, or further debate. Readers also asked for books that read like Brown's novel, and fiction authors scrambled to capture some of his audience, creating a slew of fiction works riffing off of his themes and approach.

Terry Beck has gathered a rich list of works that inform Dan Brown's novel. As the outgoing chair of the ALEX Awards (an award from the American Library Association [ALA] and the Young Adult Library Services Association [YALSA] honoring the best adult books for teen readers), she has a unique view of what captures readers' interest and what sustains reading pleasure. Certainly the books included in this column are highly appealing and fascinating, but what makes this column so interesting is Beck's look at how readers approach such a keystone title through public library collections and how they think about such bedrock academic subjects as religion, art, history, and symbology.

All types of librarians can find myriad uses for her annotated bibliography, that is, if they don't give into temptation and duck into the stacks for some reading of their own!— *Editor*.

Dan Brown's breakout bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code*, continues to create controversy more than three years after its initial publication. Rarely has a work of fiction ignited such furor over its plot, background, or premise. The book seemed to offend many, garnering criticism from theologians, church groups, fraternal organizations, and scholars. Yet readers were hooked, and it maintained a two-year presence on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for hardcover fiction, sold more than sixty million copies (in both hardback and paperback formats), and changed our collective culture.

The novel relates the story of Robert Langdon, a Harvard professor called upon to interpret symbols drawn in blood on the floor of the Louvre—cryptic messages left by a murder victim, Jacques Saunière, a noted curator of the Louvre's collection. Langdon quickly finds himself chasing one of history's greatest mysteries. It's the conspiracy theory of all time: the Holy Grail, which has supposedly been secreted in a place known only to the chosen few, members of select secret societies. Throughout centuries, elaborate shields and intricate plots reportedly have been concocted to keep its location hidden. But the greatest mystery is defining what the Grail

actually is—a cup, or something so unbelievable that if it were known, the Christian world would be forever changed. With lightning-paced speed and a fabulous mix of history, legend, art, and puzzles, Brown takes readers on a ride millions have found addictively enjoyable and compelling.

At first the book was treated as a thriller, a work of fiction, and no one seemed to look at it as anything but highly entertaining. Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* deemed it a “riddle-filled, code-breaking, exhilarating brainy thriller,” while the *Booklist* reviewer declared “the story is full of brain-teasing puzzles and fascinating insights.”¹

That “nothing more than a thriller” perception soon changed however. Brown culled a mix of information from books, monographs, documents, and art to create a work of fiction that many readers took as fact. While he was careful to note “all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate,” many readers carried this statement a step further and assumed that the theories being discussed by characters were accurate as well.² The line that distinguishes fiction and nonfiction just simply wasn’t present for these readers, caught up as they were in the tantalizing mix of real and pretend that Brown created. Passion, emotion, and fervor erupted from all sides, with books, television programs, and Web sites all promoting what each group perceived as true. At this point the entertainment factor seemed to collide with reality and the controversy began.

Today, three years later, readers are still hungry for books similar to *The Da Vinci Code* and are still fascinated by its subjects: early Christian history, Biblical interpretation, art, symbolism, and architecture. The immense interest has spawned a bit of an industry, leading not only to a major Hollywood movie, but also to a bevy of fiction and nonfiction titles related to the novel’s ideas and themes. Rarely do we see such an enormous impact by a work of fiction on the world of nonfiction, or so many novels trying so hard to match another author’s approach.

This guide seeks to collect the best of these titles, allowing librarians to build a collection that is responsive to reader demand and that facilitates deeper exploration of the multiple topics arising from the novel.

NONFICTION

Gnostic Gospels

King, Karen L. *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*. Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge, 2003 (ISBN 0-944-34458-5).

Harvard Divinity School professor King is a renowned Gnostic scholar. Mary’s gospel is not complete, but what remains in the ten known pages is a picture of the early Church and its attempts to organize.

Meyer, Marvin W., and Esther de Boer. *The Gospels of Mary: The Secret Tradition of Mary Magdalene, the Companion of Jesus*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004 (ISBN 0-060-72791-8).

Meyer is considered one of the real authorities on the topic of the gnostic gospels. In this work, he provides the translation of the gospel of Mary and other gnostic gospels. Esther de Boer’s commentary supplements Meyer’s translation and interpretation of Mary Magdalene as Jesus’ closest disciple.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random, 1979 (ISBN 0-394-50278-7).

Long considered the ground-breaking work in the study of the gnostic gospels, Pagels’s work is a fascinating examination of the development of early Christianity. It also influenced the resurgence of the Gnosticism movement in the twentieth century.

Witherington, Ben. *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Da Vinci*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 2004 (ISBN 0-830-83267-X).

A well-known author and commentator, Witherington is a New Testament scholar who provides an Evangelical counter to *The Da Vinci Code* by examining the Biblical texts, the theology, and church history.

Holy Grail

Baigent, Michael, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail: The Secret History of Jesus, The Shocking History of the Grail*. New York: Delacorte, 2005 (ISBN 0-385-34001-X).

Dan Brown borrowed heavily from this work of nonfiction, even going so far as to mention the book in his novel. (Two of the authors unsuccessfully sued Brown for copyright infringement.) All this aside, it’s a fascinating book about the bloodline, the mystery, and the secret society. *Da Vinci* fans will love it.

Barber, Richard. *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr., 2004 (ISBN 0-674-01390-5).

Barber traces the history of the Holy Grail through literature, including cinema treatments, from Lancelot to *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. There’s even a discussion of Monty Python’s treatment of the Grail in a chapter called “Irreverent Grails.”

Goering, Joseph. *The Virgin and the Grail: Origins of a Legend*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Pr., 2005 (ISBN 0-300-10661-0).

Where did the idea of the Holy Grail come from? Years before Chrétien de Troyes wrote *Perceval*, the first work of literature to mention the Holy Grail, images of the Virgin Mary were painted in small towns in the Spanish Pyrenees. In each image, there is a radiant bowl or dish, which in the local dialect is called a “grail.” Though written for an academic audience, this is a very readable account of Grail legend.

Griffin, Justin E. *The Holy Grail: The Legend, the History, the*

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Evidence. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2001 (ISBN 0-786-40999-1).

The mystery of the Holy Grail is examined in this short introduction to the lore of the Grail, citing the Biblical origins and the historical possibilities. Is it a cup? Or is it some other relic? Griffin's approach is both scientific and historic.

Mary Magdalene

Chilton, Bruce. *Mary Magdalene: A Biography*. New York: Doubleday, 2005 (ISBN: 0-385-51317-8).

Chilton, a professor of religion at Bard College, presents a portrait of Mary Magdalene based on his interpretation of sacred texts, including the gnostic gospels. His examination of her life portrays a woman possessed by demons who is a central figure in Jesus' ministry. He also examines the myth and mystery surrounding Mary Magdalene and her place in both the church and history.

Erhman, Bart D. *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2006 (ISBN 0-195-30013-0).

Erhman, chair of the Department of Religious Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill, is known for his scholarly yet approachable work, and this does not disappoint. He examines the Biblical texts and legend behind Mary Magdalene with a writing style that should appeal to both sides of the "was she really a disciple?" argument.

Lahr, Jane. *Searching for Mary Magdalene: A Journey through Art and Literature*. New York: Welcome Bks., 2006 (ISBN 1-932-18389-2).

The image and myth of Mary Magdalene has inspired artists and writers for thousands of years. Lahr's study of this body of work is presented in a larger format to accommodate some of the art reproductions.

Leloup, Jean-Yves. *The Sacred Embrace of Jesus and Mary*. Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2006 (ISBN 1-594-77101-4).

Probably the most controversial element of *The Da Vinci Code* is the idea that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were lovers. Leloup, founder of the Institute of Other Civilization Studies and the International Council of Therapists, argues that Jesus was not celibate and that Paul's writing was more a reflection of his own thinking than of Jesus' teaching.

Malachi, Tau. *St. Mary Magdalene: The Gnostic Tradition of the Holy Bible*. Woodbury, Minn.: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2006 (ISBN 0-7387-0783-X).

The gnostic gospels are not accepted by mainstream Christianity, but they are studied by scholars and theologians for clues to early Christianity. This work is a compilation of the life and sayings of Mary Magdalene. And this is a Magdalene who is both disciple and wife to Jesus.

Markale, Jean. *The Church of Mary Magdalene: The Sacred Feminine and the Treasure of Rennes-le-Chateau*. Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2004 (ISBN 0-892-81199-4).

A remote village in southern France is the site of a medieval castle and village. Does it really hold the key to the proof of Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene? How did a lowly priest amass the funding for a multimillion dollar construction project? The great mystery of the church in a remote village in southern France is explored in this compelling work.

Schaberg, Jane. *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*. New York: Continuum Pub., 2002 (ISBN 0-826-41383-8).

Was Mary Magdalene really Jesus' intended successor? This feminist look at early Christianity delves into the suppression of women in the early church and the attempts of the male-dominated hierarchy to discredit Magdalene.

Starbird, Margaret. *Magdalene's Lost Legacy: Symbolic Numbers and the Sacred Union in Christianity*. Rochester, Vt.: Bear and Co., 2003 (ISBN 1-591-43012-7).

———. *Mary Magdalene, Bride in Exile*. Rochester, Vt.: Bear and Co., 2005 (ISBN 1-591-43054-2).

———. *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail*. Rochester, Vt.: Bear and Co., 1993 (ISBN 1-879-18103-7).

Margaret Starbird's response to Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* began with her attempt to refute the claims that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married and that their descendents have carried on in Europe. Instead, after an exhaustive study of history, heraldry, symbolism, art, mythology, and the Bible, she reached the same conclusion. Her subsequent books have focused on Magdalene and the sacred feminine. Starbird's works are noted on the resource list on Dan Brown's Web site www.danbrown.com/novels/davinci_code/resources.html.

Secret Societies

Allen, John L. *Opus Dei: An Objective Look behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday, 2005 (ISBN 0-385-51449-2).

The Vatican analyst for CNN and NPR has written a detailed account of the history and structure of this secretive and somewhat controversial organization. And it answers many questions that have been raised about its theological background, its ties to the Vatican, and Vatican financial structures.

Fanthorpe, Lionel and Pamela. *Mysteries of the Templar Treasure and the Holy Grail*. Boston: Weiser, 1992, revised 2004 (ISBN 1-578-63315-X).

The Fanthorpes, members of a contemporary Templar Order, have written an exhaustive account of the symbolism

and mystery surrounding Rennes le Chateau. Updated since *The Da Vinci Code's* publication and with a new forward by Tim Wallace-Murphy.

Hahn, Scott. *Ordinary Work, Extraordinary Grace: My Spiritual Journey in Opus Dei*. New York: Doubleday, 2006 (ISBN 0-385-51924-9).

A very positive and personal account of Opus Dei, written by a renowned professor of theology at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, this work received high praise from Church authorities.

Hutchinson, Robert. *Their Kingdom Come: Inside the Secret World of Opus Dei*. New York: Thomas Dunne, 2006 (ISBN 0-312-35760-5).

A reporter's investigation of Opus Dei, this focuses on financial machinations, political intrigue, and alleged ties to the Mafia. The most recent edition of this title includes an exploration of the current pope and his ties to this organization.

Olsen, Oddvar, ed. *The Templar Papers: Ancient Mysteries, Secret Societies, and the Holy Grail*. Franklin Lakes, N.J.: NewPage, 2006 (ISBN 1-564-14863-8).

Olsen, founder and editor of *The Temple*, a periodical about the Knights Templar, has assembled a panel of mostly British experts to unravel some of the mystery about the Knights Templar.

Picknett, Lynn, and Clive Prince. *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ*. New York: Touchstone, 1997 (ISBN 0-684-84891-0).

This is a background investigation of the Knights Templar, Freemasons, and the Priory of Sion, written by researchers who specialize in historical and religious mysteries. Its focus is on the symbolism in Da Vinci's art and its relevance to the bloodline of Jesus.

Walsh, Michael. *Opus Dei: An Investigation into the Powerful, Secretive Society Within the Catholic Church*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004 (ISBN 0-060-75068-5).

Walsh, a renowned Church historian, explores the influence of Opus Dei on the Church. He also provides background on the founder, St. Josemaria Escriva, and his rapid canonization.

Young, John K. *Sacred Sites of the Knights Templar: Ancient Astronomers and Freemasons at Stonehenge, Rennes-le-Chateau, and Santiago de Compostela*. Gloucester, Mass.: Fair Winds Pr., 2003 (ISBN 1-592-33017-7).

This is an unusual approach to the history of the Knights Templar that links them to the Freemasons through an examination of their astronomic themes in rituals.

Truth or Fiction?

Burstein, Dan, ed. *Secrets of the Code: The Unauthorized Guide*

to the Mysteries behind The Da Vinci Code. New York: CDS Bks., 2004 (ISBN 1-593-15022-9).

Burstein, a journalist, has created a compilation of essays and interviews of theologians, archaeologists, art historians, philosophers, and scientists, all designed to help readers of *The Da Vinci Code* who want to know more.

Ehrman, Bart D. *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2004 (ISBN 0-195-18140-9).

Ehrman, scholar and commentator, carefully leads the reader through an examination of the documents and explains their historical significance to the early Christian Church.

Newman, Sharan. *The Real History behind the Da Vinci Code*. New York: Berkley Bks., 2005 (ISBN 0-425-20012-4).

Noted medievalist and author Newman has created an encyclopedia of *The Da Vinci Code*. Her examination of the art, documents, history, and people is fascinating reading.

Welborn, Amy. *Decoding Da Vinci: The Facts Behind the Fiction of The Da Vinci Code*. Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 2004 (ISBN 1-592-76101-1).

Welborn, a columnist and book reviewer for *Our Sunday Visitor*, presents a textbook-like approach to decoding *The Da Vinci Code*. Each chapter presents a concept that she explains and provides suggestions for follow-up reading. She takes the reader through a series of questions that reinforce what she's explained in the essay.

FICTION

Fiction finds more imitators, or publishers who are hoping to capture the readership by either launching new titles or re-packaging older ones. As with nonfiction, there are elements or appeal factors that each reader is seeking in a read-alike novel. And some of the elements are similar to the nonfiction subjects, particularly Mary Magdalene, secret organizations, and the Holy Grail.

Ashcroft, Mary Ellen. *The Magdalene Gospel: Meeting the Women who Followed Jesus*. New York: Doubleday, 1995 (ISBN 0-385-47855-0).

This carefully crafted work, mixing fiction and scripture, tells the stories of the women at the crucifixion and at the tomb on the day of Jesus' resurrection. It is a feminist account of the relationships of Jesus with his mother, Mary Magdalene, and other female followers.

Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1994 (ISBN 0-156-00131-4).

Considered by many to be one of the best religious historical mysteries, this medieval whodunit has all the elements of a great mystery, including a missing manuscript, poison, and a series of murders. Should appeal to those who like the religious history and mystery combination of *The Da Vinci Code*.

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Frederiksson, Marianne. *According to Mary Magdalene*. Charlottesville, Va.: Hampton Roads Pub., 1999 (ISBN 1-571-74120-8).

First published in Sweden, this novel is considered a serious work of “visionary” fiction. It’s the story of Mary Magdalene, from her early years as a blonde, blue-eyed child whose family is torn apart during the wars between Greece and Rome. Her relationship with Jesus and the apostles is the framework for this story and while as a work of fiction it is speculative, it is also a very human picture of Jesus.

George, Margaret. *Mary, Called Magdalene*. New York: Viking, 2002 (ISBN 0-670-03096-1).

Margaret George recreates daily life in Judea through the eyes of Mary Magdalene and gives the reader a sense of a woman’s experiences. Mary, in this novel, is possessed by demons and seeks out a prophet named Jesus, who drives them out. She becomes one of his disciples, joining three other women and twelve men.

Hassinger, Amy. *The Priest’s Madonna*. New York: Putnam, 2006 (ISBN 0-399-15317-9).

The mystery surrounding Rennes le Chateau and its relationship to the Priory of Sion is at the center of this complex novel. In parallel stories, the relationship of priest Bérenger Sauntière and his housekeeper Marie Denarnaud is contrasted with Jesus’ relationship with Mary Magdalene.

Hunt, Angela Ewell. *Magdalene*. Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Pubs., 2006 (ISBN 1-414-31028-5).

This more traditional story of Mary Magdalene presents a convincing picture of a woman seeking revenge for the death of her family. She’s a follower of Jesus, who walks beside the disciples but is not considered one of them. Through her relationship with Jesus, she finds a path to forgiveness.

Joyce, Graham. *Requiem*. New York: Tor, 1996 (ISBN 0-312-86088-9).

Set in contemporary Jerusalem, a high school teacher mourning the death of his wife seeks comfort. Haunted by mysterious spirits, he comes into possession of fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls that identify Mary Magdalene as the wife of Jesus. Full of fantasy and magical realism, this is also a thriller.

Kazantzakis, Nikos. *The Last Temptation of Christ*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960 (ISBN 0-671-40710-4).

Written more than forty-seven years ago and considered one of the most controversial novels of its time, this book follows the stories of the gospels to the climax at the crucifixion when Jesus imagines his final temptation in life: marriage and family.

Lira, Gonzalo. *Counterparts*. New York: Putnam, 1997 (ISBN 0-399-14312-2).

Why is someone trying to kill Sister Marianne? This fast-paced thriller takes the reader from New Hampshire to the

Vatican through the world of Opus Dei and the catacombs of Rome.

Malarkey, Tucker. *Resurrection: A Novel*. New York: Riverhead, 2006 (ISBN 1-594-48919-X).

The gnostic gospels play a major role in this thriller, set immediately after the Second World War, when the papyrus codices containing the gnostic gospels were found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt.

McGowan, Kathleen. *The Expected One*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006 (ISBN 0-743-29942-6).

Two thousand years ago Mary Magdalene left a series of scrolls that chronicled her life with Jesus. And now a journalist must try to find them, hidden in the secretive area of the French Pyrenees called Languedoc. First of what could be a series about the Magdalene line.

Morrell, David. *The Fraternity of Stone*. New York: St. Martins, 1985 (ISBN 0-312-30360-2).

Religious intrigue and revenge combine to make this conspiracy thriller. A former terrorist is trying to repent for his past and find a peaceful life in a monastery that is the target of a right-wing religious group.

Reich, Christopher. *The Patriot’s Club*. New York: Delacorte, 2005 (ISBN 0-385-33728-0).

A conspiracy that began with the Founding Fathers of the United States is now a super-secret organization of political and economic leaders whose machinations could bring about the fall of the republic.

Ricci, Nino. *Testament*. Boston: Houghton, 2003 (ISBN 0-618-27353-0).

A picture of Jesus, told from four sides: Judas, Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of Jesus, and a poor shepherd named Simon (not to be confused with Simon Peter).

Silva, Daniel. The Gabriel Allon Novels: *The Kill Artist*. New York: Random House, 2000 (ISBN 0-375-50090-1); *The English Assassin*. New York: Putnam, 2002 (ISBN 0-399-14851-5); *The Confessor*. New York: Putnam, 2003 (ISBN 0-399-14972-4); *A Death in Vienna*. New York: Putnam, 2004 (ISBN 0-399-15143-5); *Prince of Fire*. New York: Putnam, 2005 (ISBN 0-399-15243-1); *The Messenger*. New York: Putnam, 2006 (ISBN 0-399-15335-7).

Gabriel Allon, Silva’s hero, is a former Israeli agent who works as an art restorer. He is haunted by his past and tries in vain to stay out of his former life. But he’s constantly challenged by events that bring him back into this world of terror, espionage, and conspiracy.

Van Lustbader, Eric. *The Testament*. New York: Forge, 2006 (ISBN 0-765-31463-0).

A mysterious group called the Order of Gnostic Observations is out to save secret documents (lost gospels) whose contents will rock the Christian world. A rival organization

called the Knights of St. Clement is hot on their tracks. Quick-paced and full of action, the theology takes a back seat to the thriller in this one.

WEB SITES

The places named in the novel, such as Rosslyn Chapel, have seen tremendous growth in their count of both visitors and donations.³ London and Paris tour operators have created special *Da Vinci Code* tours that take devoted readers through Westminster Abbey, Temple Church, the Louvre, and other landmarks. The opportunity to look for clues and signs from the novel is a major selling point for the tour operators. An Internet search for “*Da Vinci Code* tours” reveals that even a traditional travel Web site, such as Fodors, created an itinerary for *Da Vinci Code* fans.⁴ The following Web sites highlight the works of art and architecture mentioned in the novel.

Louvre Museum, www.louvre.fr/llv/commun/home_flash.jsp?bmLocale=en

The story begins and ends at the Louvre, the original structure of which was built in the late twelfth century as a fortress and palace. The twentieth-century renovation that added I. M. Pei’s pyramid takes on new meaning in the novel.

Rosslyn Chapel, www.rosslynchapel.org.uk

This church, which was founded in 1446, is filled with intricate and mysterious carvings that many identify with Freemasonry and the Knights Templar.

Temple Church, London, www.templechurch.com

This London church was built by the Knights Templar in the twelfth century, the reason that Langdon’s first guess led him there.

Westminster Abbey, www.westminster-abbey.org

Although it is not a parish church or a cathedral, it is “Royal Peculiar” under the jurisdiction of a dean and chapter, subject only to the sovereign. It is also the site of the tomb of Sir Isaac Newton.

References

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2. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Anchor Bks., 2003).
3. Stuart Beattie, “Farewell from Stuart Beattie.” www.rosslynchapel.org.uk/rss/latest.php?action=fullnews&rid=16 (accessed Jan. 1, 2007).
4. Chris Culwell, “A *Da Vinci Code* Tour.” www.fodors.com/features/nfdisplay1.cfm?name=si/040420_si_davincicode.cfm (accessed Jan. 1, 2007).

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As always, I look forward to hearing your thoughts and, eventually, your reactions to this program.

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7. Davis, “Mind the Retail,” 66.
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