

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A play within a space opera

Review of ‘Hamlet: Book One of the Post-Apocalyptic Space Shakespeare’ (2025) by Ted Neill and William Shakespeare

I strongly recommend Neill’s *Hamlet: Book One of the Post-Apocalyptic Space Shakespeare* series. While I wish it spoke more to our contemporary moment, it still presents Shakespeare’s Hamlet in a fun, engaging way that could be a useful teaching tool for first-time readers.

JONAH KENT RICHARDS

When I first learned about *Hamlet: Book One of the Post-Apocalyptic Space Shakespeare* by American novelist Ted Neill, I was immediately intrigued. While not the first science fiction Shakespeare, Neill’s attempt to produce a complete series represents a noteworthy Shakespeare project. As of September 2025, Neill has published his version of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Twelfth Night* with “many more” listed as planned. He appears to want to produce all 37 plays.

Neill prepared his text as a stage play, complete with an introduction, a dramatis personae, a description of the setting, and five acts. Indeed, an ambitious theatre company could and should put on a live production of the play. The text is best described as “a play within a space opera.” The story is set billions of years into the future in a distant galaxy where a powerful machine-based civilisation of sentient artificial intelligence entities created a human woman construct designated J-9, or Janine, and her robotic owl assistant Otto to evaluate a virtual construct of the play “Hamlet” to determine whether the now extinct human species is fit for revival.

However, the machines aren’t content for Janine to passively observe the human characters from the outside, they want her to live amongst the humans as one of them to truly get to know the species. Janine disguises herself as minor background characters while Otto transforms himself into

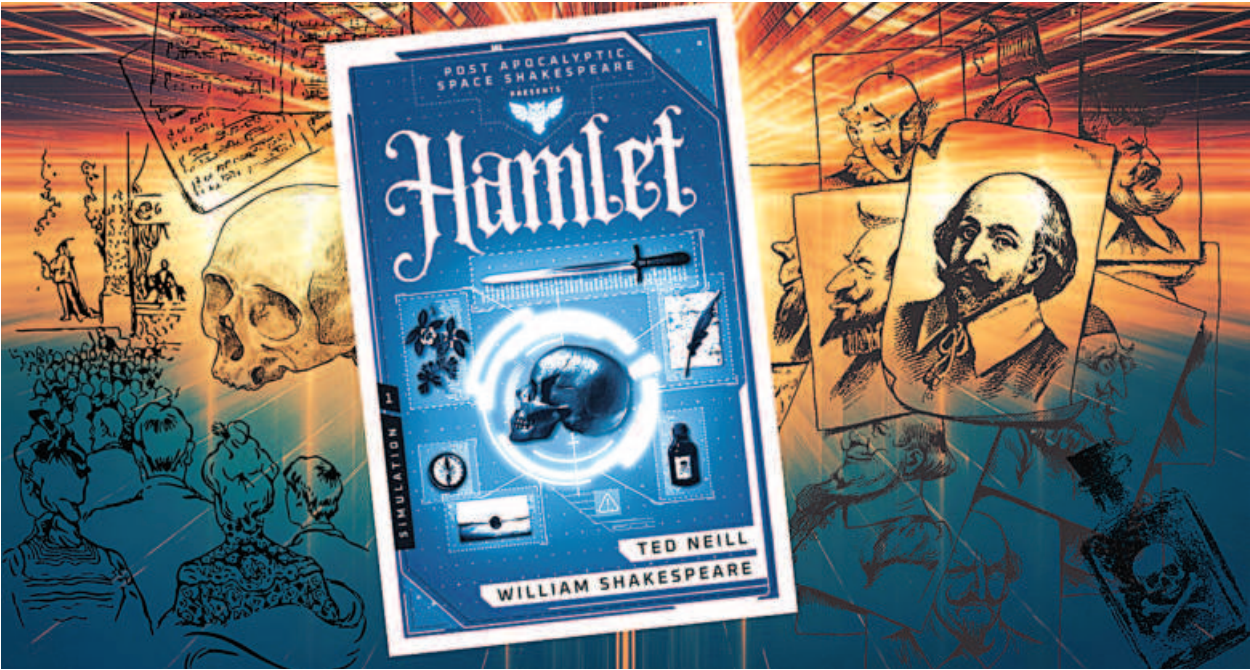


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

tools or pieces of clothing. Janine and Otto are visible to the other characters, but they generally try to stay out of the limelight. Though on occasion, they do directly interact with the other characters and sometimes attempt to alter events in the play. Janine and Otto can be seen as chorus figures from the ancient Greek and Elizabethan English theatre traditions.

Janine’s great strength as a chorus figure is that she is both an outsider and someone who the readers share

a familiar world view with. Despite her appearance, Janine is merely a construct of a human being. Everything she knows about humanity comes either from her programming, lessons from her monitor Monty, and assistant Otto. She is the objective outside observer who can pick up on the quirks and contradictions of human culture.

At the same time, Janine has been programmed with the language and the popular knowledge of the trends and practices of our contemporary

civilisation. She is an ideal guide for first-time readers of the text who will often share her questions and reactions to the play. For example, in Act 1 Scene 2 of the play, she was able to clarify the significance of Claudius and Gertrude’s speedy marriage and why it upset Hamlet. Most importantly, Janine is a compelling and charismatic protagonist. She cracks jokes, she has agency, and she expresses empathy. By the end of the play, she experienced Aristotle’s catharsis along with the

audience. She even begins to question her assigned role in the project to evaluate the play. In her own way, she has experienced a character arc as transformative as Hamlet’s.

While Neill’s adaptation speaks to the power of the theatrical nature of Shakespeare’s original play, it lacks a contemporary relevance. At the end of the play, Janine’s main takeaway is the theatre’s ability to allow audience members to experience the feelings of multiple lifetimes. The good, the bad, and everything in between. While these takeaways about Shakespeare’s ability to portray the human experience are unarguably true, I wanted to hear Neill speak more directly about our own contemporary post COVID world. In a time when we are increasingly digitally connected but more socially isolated, how do we come together through our common humanity? What insights can the play offer us to help avoid the decline and extinction that Neill imagines for us?

I strongly recommend Neill’s *Hamlet: Book One of the Post-Apocalyptic Space Shakespeare* series. While I wish it spoke more to our contemporary moment, it still presents Shakespeare’s Hamlet in a fun, engaging way that could be a useful teaching tool for first-time readers. I am eager to follow Janine and Otto on the rest of their adventures.

Jonah Kent Richards is a Shakespeare screen adaptation scholar, an English teacher, and contributor for Star Books and Literature.

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From sacred art to consciousness: A LEAP TOO FAR

Review of Dan Brown’s ‘The Secret of Secrets’ (Penguin, 2025)

KAZI RAIDAH AFIA NUSAIBA

When Dan Brown finally returned in 2025 with *The Secret of Secrets*—the sixth Robert Langdon adventure—the world that devoured *The Da Vinci Code* (Doubleday, 2003) had mixed reactions to the story.

Here, Robert Langdon finds himself embroiled in a conspiracy involving Katherine Solomon’s groundbreaking manuscript on noetic science. The research suggests human consciousness exists independently from the brain. When her book crosses an undefined threshold of dangerous knowledge, powerful forces mobilise to destroy it. Servers get wiped, manuscripts vanish, and Langdon careens through Prague, pursued by assassins and Czech intelligence alike.

On the surface, this reads like classic Brown territory. Short chapters punctuated by cliffhangers, strategic withholding of information to manufacture suspense, and a mythic villain drawn from Prague’s Jewish folklore, the Golem, reimagined as a metaphor for dangerous knowledge exceeding humanity’s capacity to control it. But something fundamental has shifted in Brown’s approach. The most obvious change is the pivot from religious symbology to consciousness research. Brown clearly wants this shift to represent evolution rather than mere substitution. Yet the scientific content never achieves the weight or coherence that Brown’s historical puzzles once possessed.

Previously, when he wove conspiracies through “The Last Supper” or Bernini sculptures, the visual symbols themselves became puzzle pieces readers could theoretically examine and decode. The art was real, the history was real, and Brown’s interpretations felt grounded in something tangible. Consciousness, by its nature, resists this treatment. Brown tries to manufacture the same sense of hidden-truth-in-plain-sight by referencing parapsychology experiments, invoking quantum mechanics, and linking them all through Katherine’s research as if they naturally align toward a singular revelation. But the connections remain superficial, decorative rather than structural. The book gestures repeatedly at profound questions, but rarely explores them with genuine depth or rigour,

Reading the book felt as though I was encountering pages of dense exposition about consciousness manipulation and noetic experiments, only to find myself skimming through excess information. The information doesn’t illuminate character or advance plot so much as it fills space, creating the illusion of substance without delivering actual insight.

Brown’s original formula worked because it tapped into a specific cultural anxiety about suppressed knowledge

recognition while attracting new readers who expect more modern sensibilities. He wants to write about consciousness and cutting-edge neuroscience while preserving the ancient-mystery-meets-modern-thriller structure that defined his earlier work. Most tellingly, he wants Robert Langdon to remain the bumbling academic while also being James Bond.

This last point cuts to the heart of the problem. The original Langdon was a claustrophobic professor who solved

creature from Prague’s Jewish mysticism, representing the danger of knowledge exceeding control, echoing earlier Brown antagonists who embodied mythic or religious archetypes. But the main antagonist in *The Secret of Secrets* lacks this menace and complexity. Mr. Finch and Dr. Brigita Gessner are described as more driven by genuine beliefs about national security and scientific progress rather than cartoonish megalomania. Yet this very reasonableness drains them of the mythic power Brown’s villains once possessed. They’re too grounded, too explicable, lacking the element of theatrical madness that made earlier antagonists memorable.

The plotting reveals similar contradictions. Langdon and Katherine become TED Talkers, existing primarily to deliver information. Every chapter opens with dialogue reading more like a screenplay than conversation. This has always been true of Brown’s work to some degree, but here the mechanism becomes more transparent. Katherine’s manuscript functions as the ultimate prize everyone chases but which never quite feels important beyond its structural necessity.

Brown tries to generate urgency around consciousness research, suggesting Katherine’s findings could revolutionise human understanding or be weaponised by intelligence agencies through projects like the fictional “Threshold” facility. But the stakes never feel concrete the way religious secrets did in earlier books. The possibility that Jesus fathered children with Mary Magdalene threatened fundamental Christian doctrine. The suggestion that consciousness exists outside the brain is interesting but lacks the same cultural voltage. It doesn’t challenge institutional power or shake civilisation’s foundations.

Perhaps the central issue is that Brown has written himself into a corner. He created a formula so successful and so distinctive that any significant deviation risks alienating the core audience. Yet continuing to repeat the same structure with diminishing novelty each time guarantees critical dismissal and reader fatigue.

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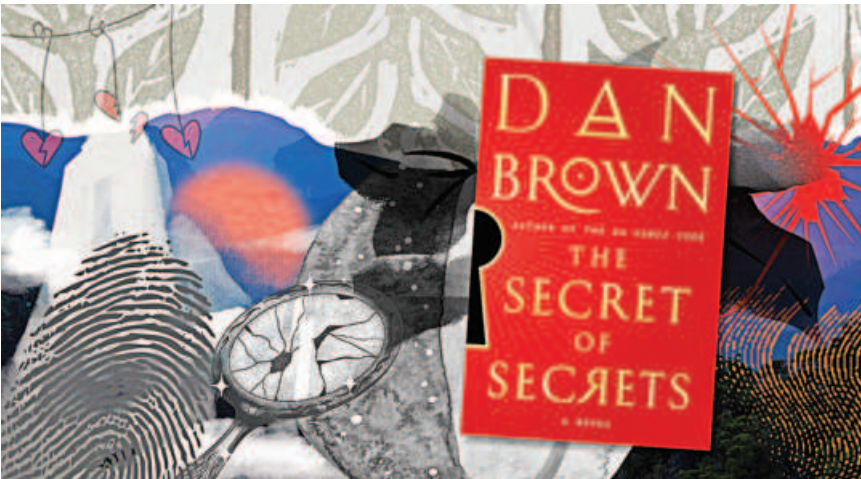


ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

and hidden history. The idea that earth-shaking truths had been concealed in religious art for centuries resonated with readers primed by conspiracy culture but seeking something more intellectually respectable. His infamous “FACT” pages at the beginning of novels created a deliberate blur between fiction and reality that made readers feel like they were accessing genuine secrets rather than just reading a thriller.

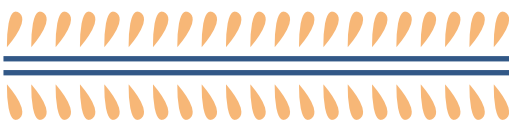
But by 2025, readers are drowning in conspiracy theories and misinformation. Everybody knows by now that Brown will never abandon his formula: the secret societies, the murdered key figure, the dash through landmarks while decoding symbols. The question is whether he can make them feel necessary rather than obligatory.

And here the novel reveals its core contradiction. Brown wants to maintain the formula while simultaneously proving he can evolve beyond it. He wants long time fans to experience nostalgic

mysteries through knowledge rather than physicality, whose prudishness and academic unworldliness created comic relief amid the violence, who bumbled his way through danger while making brilliant intellectual leaps. This Langdon is romantically involved, and he performs physical feats that would strain belief for a man his age, leaping and fighting with Bond-like competence.

Prague suffers from a flattening: the city should be a gift to Brown’s aesthetic; 700 spires, gothic architecture, and the weight of centuries pressing down on cobblestone streets. But the information arrives in chunks that feel pedagogical rather than atmospheric. Rome, in *Angels & Demons* (Pocket Books, 2000), became a character, its churches organically connected to the mystery Langdon solved. Prague here remains stubbornly a backdrop.

The villain structure further illustrates Brown’s difficulty evolving his formula. The Golem should work perfectly; a



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