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THE DA VINCI VICTIM: OBSESSED ART EXPERT TOOK DEADLY OVERDOSE

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A painter fascinated with best-selling conspiracy thriller *The Da Vinci Code* committed suicide after becoming convinced she was the subject of a real-life murder plot.

Caroline Eldridge, 38, moved to Italy to pursue her interest in Leonardo Da Vinci, but her mind became "muddled" by the mysteries surrounding his work, her father said.



Caroline Eldridge, a Da Vinci scholar and artist, who killed herself

after becoming obsessed with the mysteries surrounding the artist and the best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*

She suffered paranoid delusions that she and her family were in danger "because of the knowledge that she had" of Leonardo after working on an exhibition about his paintings.

After repeatedly telling her family, "I'm not going to let them take me alive," she took an overdose of paracetamol.

The Da Vinci Code, which has sold more than 60 million copies, centres on a sinister plot by Catholic organisation Opus Dei to kill the book's hero Robert Langdon before he discovers, via clues in Da Vinci's paintings, that Christ was married to Mary Magdalene and had a son.



Her parents believe her mind became muddled

On Friday Caroline's father, retired headmaster Roger Eldridge, said: "She was particularly interested in Da Vinci's interpretation of perspective, and because of that interest she had read *The Da Vinci Code*."

"The nature of the illness that she had would create fear, and the *Code* itself, I think it did create a muddle in her mind in terms of fears."

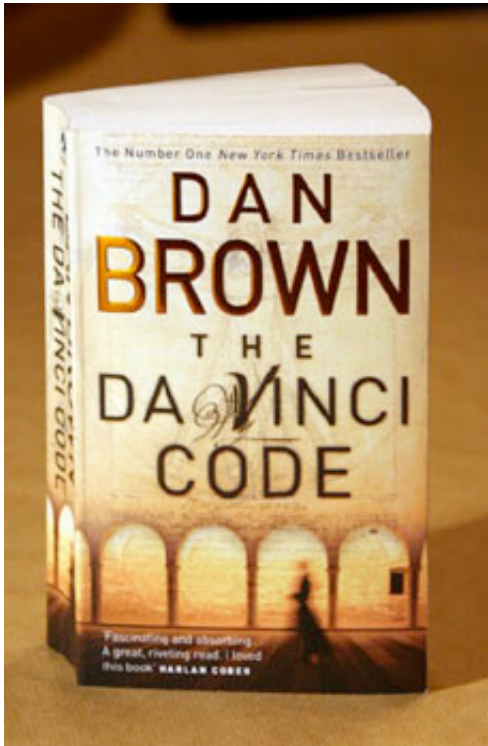
"She was very fearful for her own safety and she felt that because of the work she had been doing and because of the knowledge that she had, she had put us in danger."

"She had put herself under tremendous pressure with work and I think that pressure and stress was to blame for the paranoia."

Ms Eldridge, a graduate of the Wimbledon College of Art, worked for years as a costume designer for the English National Opera on productions including *The Magic Flute* and *Medea*, and later went freelance.

But her passion in life was painting, and during a trip to Venice to stay with a friend in 2004 she got a job working on a six-month exhibition about Leonardo.

One of the visitors was Professor Rocco Sinigalli, a Renaissance art specialist from the University of Rome, who struck up a conversation with Caroline and asked her if she could help him translate a book he was writing about the artist Leone Battista Alberti.



She agreed to do it in return for the chance to attend the professor's lectures on art, and moved to Rome where she found work designing costumes for an opera festival.

While there she continued to study Leonardo, and had a particular interest in his famous Vitruvian Man drawing, which features on the cover of *The Da Vinci Code*. A dying murder victim in the Dan Brown novel also arranges his body in the shape of the drawing as a complex clue for investigators.

Prof Sinisgalli later dedicated a book on Vitruvian Man "To the painter Caroline Eldridge" and sent her parents a copy with a note saying Caroline "had always shown a deep interest in this particular drawing and in Leonardo himself".

Ms Eldridge, who had no history of mental illness other than a brief battle with anorexia as a teenager, had what her father described as a "paranoid attack" whilst in Rome, and he flew to Italy to bring her home.

"She was working long hours, designing costumes and trying to get the book translation finished, and she rang us in a state of considerable panic and we realised that she wasn't well," said Mr Eldridge.

"I was in Rome by 10am the next day.

"She was very distressed and fearful for her own safety. She was so frightened that she wouldn't get on the plane, but I managed to bring her home in the end."



Actors Tom Hanks and Audrey Tautou in a scene from the movie based on the novel

Mr Eldridge and his wife Susan referred her to a doctor and she was sectioned under the Mental Health Act and sent to a psychiatric unit at Wotton Lawn hospital in Gloucester.

A month later she was discharged and went to live with her parents in the Cotswold village of Edgeworth, near Cirencester.

But Mr Eldridge said his daughter's paranoia continued. "She was receiving care in the community but because her fears were so real to her she didn't accept she was ill so she didn't really engage with the help that was being offered to her.

"She said she was putting us in danger and said on more than one occasion: 'I'm not going to let them take me alive.'"

On May 25 last year, whilst staying with friends, Caroline complained of feeling unwell and later admitted she had taken an overdose.

She was taken to Cheltenham General Hospital but died of multiple organ failure on May 31.

At an inquest last week Gloucestershire coroner Alan Crickmore said: "I am driven to the conclusion that it was her intention that she brought about her death, but when she did that she was beginning to suffer from a paranoid episode."

He recorded a verdict of suicide while the balance of Caroline's mind was disturbed.

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Astonishing that someone should criticize those who let fictional things have an influence in their lives and then invoke the name of God in sincerity!

- Adam, Washington, DC

This is one of the saddest things I have ever seen. Deepest condolences to the family.

- Ben, Palm Beach,USA

Seems like mental illness to me. Such a shame. Too bad also that the conspiracy loons will grasp onto the sad story of this unfortunate young woman's demise. Owen, get a life.

- Tom, NJ US

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