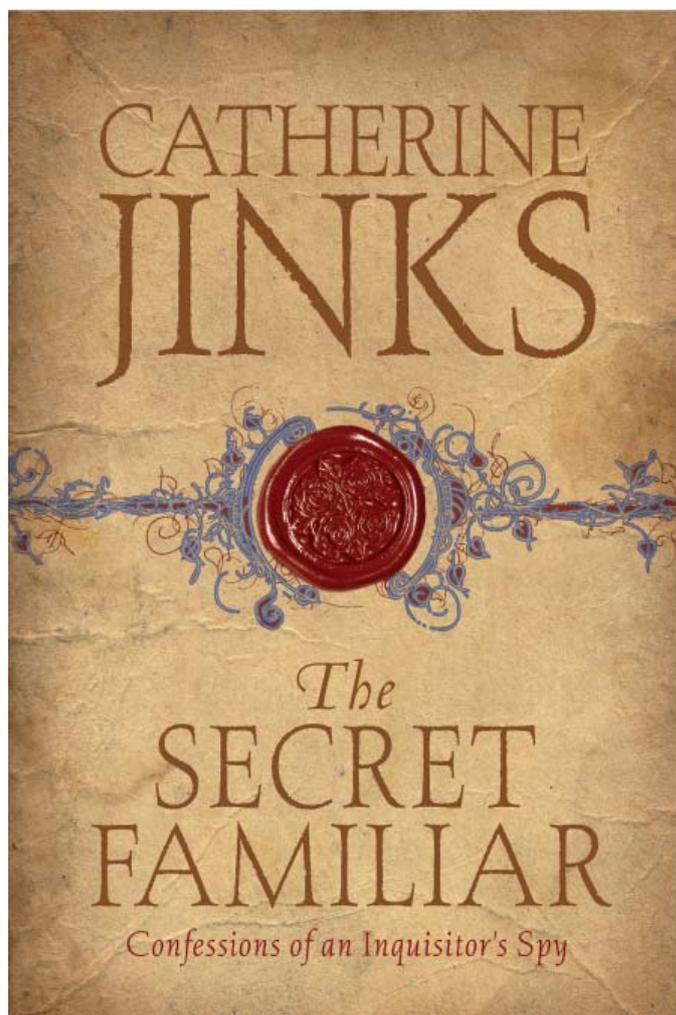


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About Catherine Jinks (2)
On writing *The Secret Familiar* - Catherine Jinks (2) Reviews (4)
Some suggested points for discussion (4) Suggested further reading (4)

About Catherine Jinks

Catherine Jinks has won critical acclaim and a growing international audience for her literary talent, her versatility, and her compelling storytelling. Her medieval thrillers *The Inquisitor* (1999) and *The Notary* (2000) have earned favourable comparisons with *The Name of the Rose* and *The Da Vinci Code*. She has published more than thirty books across a wide range of genres and is regularly invited to speak about her work; *The Secret Familiar* is her eighth novel for adults. She lives in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales with her husband and daughter.

On writing *The Secret Familiar* – Catherine Jinks

The Secret Familiar had a long gestation period. Back in 1999, I published *The Inquisitor*, followed by *The Notary* a year later. Both were murder mysteries set in the 1320s, and revolved around the inquisition of southern France. In each case, however, the narrator was different, and the action took place in different cities. My original intention was to write two more books in the series, one dealing with an inquisitorial spy working among the Cathar heretics of the Pyrenees, and one dealing with a Beguin heretic in Narbonne. But I was sidetracked by other projects, and didn't even consider adding any more 'sequels' until after the first two novels had become quite successful in Europe.

You might notice that *The Secret Familiar* is dedicated to someone named Sebastian Ritscher. He is my German agent, and he was also the one who urged me to write another inquisitorial mystery. It would, he said, be easy to sell in Germany, because the other two had done so well. (And he was right.) If Sebastian hadn't encouraged me, I probably wouldn't have considered adding to the series. Sometimes all it takes is a little outside enthusiasm to get your wheels turning.

But by the time I started thinking about a third novel, *The Da Vinci Code* had exploded onto the publishing scene, and the Cathars were no longer as obscure as they had once been. In fact, they were suffering from over-exposure. There were now books about Cathars everywhere, and I decided that it wasn't time to add to the pile. So I abandoned the idea of placing my inquisitorial spy amongst the Cathars of the Pyrenees, and decided to have him investigate the Beguins of Narbonne, instead – thus combining the two story ideas into one. I think it was the right thing to do. Apart from anything else, the poor old Beguins were even less offensive in their beliefs than the Cathars were. So Helié's moral quandary is more difficult than it would have been if Bernard Gui had asked him to betray the Cathars. The Cathars, after all, had some pretty depressing ideas about pregnancy, and reaching heaven by starving yourself to death. The Beguins, in contrast, simply thought that wealth was a bad idea.

Thanks to all the research I'd done for *The Inquisitor* and *The Notary*, I didn't have to do too much research for *The Secret Familiar*. I simply had to build on what I'd already discovered about the Dominicans, and the inquisition, and the Cathars, concentrating instead on such unexplored subjects as 14th century Narbonne, and the Beguins. Most of my research was done at the University of Sydney library, though I also had help from my old history lecturer, John O. Ward, and from one of my brother's friends – a lecturer in cryptography and security – who gave me some tips on medieval number codes.

Once I'd done my research, I realised that I could base my plot around a handful of real people, whose stories had been recounted in contemporary inquisitorial records. The mystery surrounding the fate of Pierre Olivi's bones struck me as a good plot point, too, as did the burning of 17 heretics in Narbonne in 1321. So I put together a fairly thorough synopsis using these elements (while listening to Enya's greatest hits), and started work on the actual writing of the book in the second half of 2005.

My job, basically, was to translate John Le Carré into a medieval idiom. For Hélié, as for Le Carré's spies, life is all about concentrating on the kind of details that can sometimes be hard to come by in medieval records. What's more, a mind attuned to that sort of concrete detail was probably quite rare back in the Middle Ages. What you notice about many medieval intellectuals was their inability to see what was directly under their noses, simply because they were filtering it through an understanding of the world derived from the Bible, and from ancient authority. Bernard Gui was quite unusual in that, for the most part, he recorded what he actually saw, and not what he was meant to see, or what he was told. Hélié shared the same characteristic – though, in a way, Hélié had an advantage over his master because Hélié was uneducated. He wasn't looking at the world through eyes other than his own.

That quality also made his narrative easier to write. My two previous narrators were well educated men, and therefore felt the need to keep quoting from renowned texts, and using Biblical metaphors that demonstrated their learning. Hélié was different. His style was pretty straightforward; I didn't have to keep flicking through the Bible, or through Boethius, while I was writing. For this reason, perhaps, I only spent about five months completing the book. It was a lovely, easy ride – once I'd finally nailed Hélié's voice. I'd already learned how to mimic a medieval rhythm by making my prose very, very slightly awkward, as if it had been translated from another language. In all three medieval murder mysteries, I've used the same technique. But I also had to find Hélié's tone, and that wasn't at all similar to those of the other two narrators, both of whom were very charming, outgoing and generous. Hélié, of course, was the exact opposite. Yet I did become enormously fond of him as we became better acquainted. I found that there was something rather compelling about Hélié.

In fact he's so interesting that he probably has another book in him, though I don't know if I could wring another book out of the subject matter. It's been hard enough, since Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* covered such a vast amount of material from that period. Nevertheless, despite the fact that I've explored most aspects of the medieval inquisition, there were an awfully large number of heresies during that period. So perhaps I can still find myself another plot for Hélié. Who knows?

He certainly deserves one.

Reviews

'*The Secret Familiar*, by adult and children's author (and medieval scholar) Catherine Jinks, is an exciting medieval mystery ... based on real events and people. Some of the historical detail is quite confronting (heretics carelessly and torturously burned at the stake), but the overall tone of the novel is light. [... This] is a well-paced, unchallenging and entertaining novel along the lines of Ellis Peter's 'Brother Cadfael' mysteries or the work of Candace Robb.'

Angela Meyer, *The Australian Bookseller & Publisher*

'Jinks returns with a medieval marvel.'

Gold Coast Bulletin

Some suggested points for discussion

☞ Catherine Jinks, writing above, suggests the style of her novel is reminiscent of Le Carré's espionage novels. Do you agree this could be likened to a spy novel? What elements of *The Secret Familiar* might she have been thinking of?

☞ Because this novel is written in a confessional style, Hélié is immediately familiar with us, the reader, in his tone; what difference does this make to how we experience the action of the novel?

☞ In this period of French history, the Cathars and the Beguins are clearly on different sides – does Catherine Jinks, through her writing, seem to be more on one side than the other? Does she take a moral stance on the events of the novel, or not?

☞ As Catherine Jinks points out, the Cathars are of increasing interest these days. What is it, do you think, about this particular that readers find so compelling?

Suggested further reading

Labyrinth by Kate Mosse

The Doomsday Book by Connie Willis

The Inquisitor by Catherine Jinks

The Notary by Catherine Jinks