

# The Secret Familiar

## Catherine Jinks

### Author Background

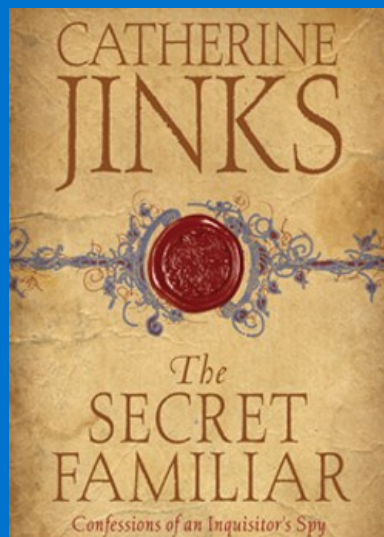
- Birth—1963
- Where—Brisbane, Queensland
- Awards—Children's Book Council Book of the Year, Victorian Premier's Literary Award, Aurealis Award, IBBY Australia Ena Noel Encouragement Award, Daviitt Award for Crime Fiction
- Currently—lives with her family in Leura, NSW

Jinks was born in Brisbane, Queensland, and grew up in Papua New Guinea where her father worked as a patrol officer. She went to Ku-ring-gai High School in Sydney, where the library was named after her in 2006. From 1982 to 1986, she studied at the University of Sydney, graduating with an honours degree in medieval history. She then worked on Westpac Banking Corporation's staff magazine for approximately seven years. In 1992 she married Peter Dockrill, a Canadian journalist; in 1993 they left Australia for a brief spell in Nova Scotia, where she began to write full-time. They returned to Australia in 1994, where their daughter Hannah was born in 1997. Since 1998 the family has lived in Leura, New South Wales. To date she has written 41 books.

*(from Wikipedia)*

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.

*(from the publisher)*



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### Book Summary

***The Secret Familiar: confessions of an inquisitor's spy***

Catherine Jinks, 2006

Allen & Unwin

320pp.

ISBN: 9781741750508

Beautifully crafted historical fiction set in medieval France, *The Secret Familiar* is a page-turning murder mystery and a fascinating moral tale of betrayal, faith and ultimate truth.

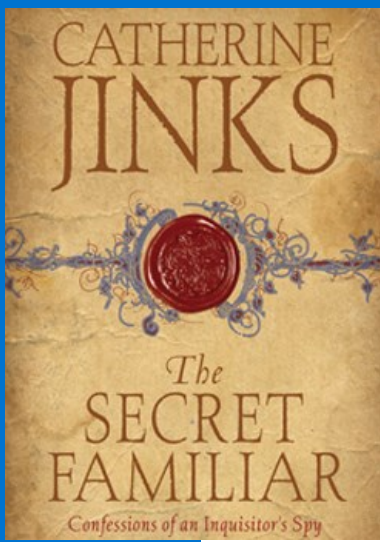
*He is my master, and a great man. Yet I would have preferred to escape his notice. 'Hide yourself,' he told me, and I obeyed - perhaps too well. No inquisitor likes to be outwitted. I just want to be left alone. Is that too much to ask, after so many years of faithful service?*

Helie is a former spy of the famous fourteenth-century inquisitor Bernard Gui. Now he is living under an alias, trying to forget his past life of deception and intrigue. But a chance meeting once more brings him to the notice of the Inquisition; he is obliged to infiltrate a new heretical group, and find out what happened to the last spy sent to do so. Was he murdered or did he flee?

Helie soon finds himself caught up in a dangerous conspiracy involving outlawed beliefs and human remains. The trouble is he no longer has the stomach for such an investigation - because his heart is beginning to betray him.

Set in a period when France was rocked by religious strife, *The Secret Familiar* is a tense and thrilling tale of treachery, faith and ultimate truths.

*(from the publisher)*



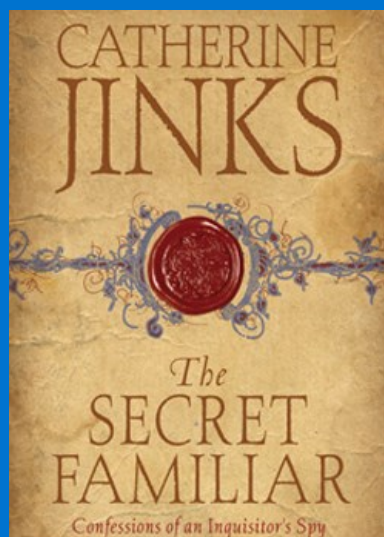
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### Discussion Questions

1. Catherine Jinks suggests the style of her novel is reminiscent of Le Carre'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?
2. Because this novel is written in a confessional style, Helié is immediately familiar with us, the reader, in his tone; what difference does this make to how we experience the action of the novel?
3. 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?
4. As Catherine Jinks points out, the Cathars are of increasing interest these days. What is it, do you think, about this particular religious group that readers find so compelling?
5. The church wielded real power in the middle ages—possibly more than the ruling nobility—as reflected in Helie's statement "For it is never wise to annoy a priest. I have made a point of buying the good opinion of most priests in my neighbourhood" (p54) How did this power structure make you feel about life in the middle ages? How does this compare to places of religious strife today? What power structures have replaced the church in the west and is our modern power structure any more just?
6. In chapter 3, when talking about his childhood, Helie says "I did not hesitate to betray her though she had never done me any harm." (p28) How does Helie feel about his role as a spy? Does his need for fatherly approval justify the betrayal anymore than the simple need to survive?
7. Consider Helie's reaction to Martin's question: "But she is a heretic...you said that the Beguins are wrong, and sinful. How could she then be good?" (p 283). How have Helie's feelings about betraying the Beguins changed by the end of the book ?

(adapted from questions supplied by the publisher)



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### Reviews

Following on from *The Inquisitor* (1999) and *The Notary* (2000) *The Secret Familiar* continues Catherine Jinks' thrilling exploration of the European inquisition. The particular strength of *The Secret Familiar* is its complicated hero, Helie Segulier, a spy for the historical figure of the Dominican inquisitor, Bernard Gui. A man who insinuates himself into groups of heretics and then betrays them should be a despicable baddie, yet in Jinks' hands Helie is deeply attractive. As a young boy he

was in thrall to Gui but there gradually developed a relationship of grudging respect between the two men. They may question each other's values and beliefs, but not so their intelligence. Gui finally concedes to Helie's request to retreat from the world of burning heretics but years later Gui tracks him down again, in Narbonne, France. Once more Gui sets Helie to work, asking him to find another inquisition spy who has disappeared after infiltrating a group of Beguin heretics.

Jinks' mastery of her research is more than evident as she describes the harrowing world of the Beguins who defied the church, believing it had eschewed Christ's tenets of poverty and had become a more carnal and less spiritual institution. Also evident is Jinks' mastery of characterisation. She creates a world of subterfuge, revealing Helie as a man who is more moral than first supposed and yet utterly ruthless.

#### ***The Age***

If this tale of spying, deception and persecution is anything to go by, medieval France does not sound like it would have been a particularly pleasant place to live during the time of the Catholic Church's unrelenting search for heretics.

Through the past and present actions of just one man Catherine Jinks has constructed a vivid and darkly intriguing account of the intense paranoia and cruelty of the inquisition in France during the 1300s.

Helie, a former spy for the inquisitor Bernard Gui, is again recruited to infiltrate a group of accused heretics in his town of Narbonne to find out the fate of another spy who has gone missing in their company.

Helie may have spent many years as an efficient inquisitor's spy but his latest mission leaves him questioning who he can trust and whether he still has the fortitude to deceive and inform.

Jinks' love and study of medieval history is apparent as she brings vividly to life the sights, sounds and repulsive smells of the crowded town of Narbonne in the 1300s in her eighth novel for adults. Her knowledge of smaller details also adds depth and colour to Helie's narrative.

It took me a few chapters to become used to Helie's narration and although I would not normally pick up this sort of book I very much enjoyed the history lesson throughout the well-constructed plot.

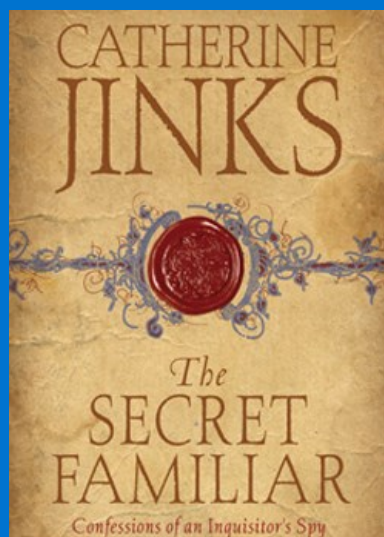
#### ***The Courier-Mail***

*This is a gripping psychological study of how fear, deceit and paranoia trigger a psychic maelstrom.'*

#### ***The Sun-Herald***

*'It's a delicious set-up, involving blackmail and intrigue, corruption and moral ambiguity, not to mention rotting corpses, retching and a range of human depravity.'*

#### ***The Australian***



# The Secret Familiar

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### On writing the Secret Familiar

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 side-tracked by other projects, and didn't even consider adding any more 'sequels' until after the first two novels had become quite successful in Europe.

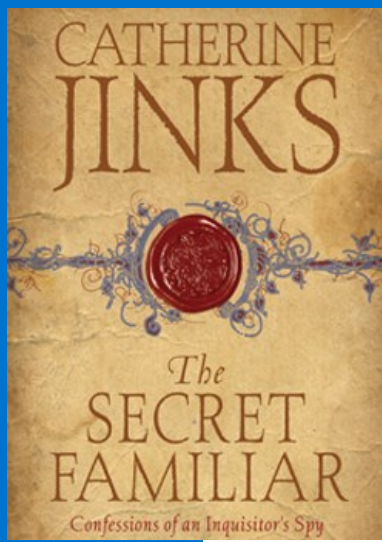
You might notice that *The Secret Familiar* is dedicated to someone named Sebastian Ritscher. He is my German agent, and he was also the one who urged me to write another inquisitorial mystery. It would, he said, be easy to sell in Germany, because the other two had done so well. (And he was right.) 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 Hélié'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,





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### On writing the Secret Familiar (continued)

or what he was told. Helié shared the same characteristic – though, in a way, Helié had an advantage over his master because Helié 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.

Helié 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 Helié'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 Helié'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. Helié, 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 Helié. 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 Helié. Who knows?

He certainly deserves one.

*(from the publishers)*