

Pagan's Daughter by Catherine Jinks

I have long been an admirer of Catherine Jinks's writing, having devoured most of her novels (both those for children and teenagers and for adults) since first meeting Pagan Kidrouk in 1992. The depth and breadth of the scenarios portrayed in wildly differing subjects over the range of her books never ceases to amaze me. However, the Pagan series ["Pagan's Crusade", 1992; "Pagan in Exile", 1994; "Pagan's Vows", 1995; and "Pagan's Scribe", 1996] has really stood out, and, rather like the devotees of more recent, very popular series of children's & YA books (there have been many!) I have always hankered for MORE!, please!

Catherine Jinks's excuse for the ten year gap is that she had to work out how to kill off Pagan first, although Pagan's death was in fact announced in the final paragraph of the Epilogue in "Pagan's Scribe". Thankfully, she has retained her great talent for grabbing readers and transporting them into the thick of the Middle Ages. What a joy it was to revisit that world with the publication of "Pagan's Daughter". A world of violence and persecution, of corruption and evil, of valour and heroic deeds that was Languedoc in the early 13th century, is made real through characters who grab your attention and arouse your emotions. New readers need not have read the earlier books in order to enjoy "Pagan's Daughter". However, I would be surprised if they weren't tempted to go back to those earlier stories to read more of Babylonne's father, or of Isidore or Roland. For those who have already met Pagan Kidrouk, there is no doubt that Babylonne is his daughter; Pagan is reincarnated in the feisty young woman whose turn-of-phrase is so reminiscent of Pagan himself (albeit without the cream cheese sauce!). Other aspects of the earlier novels could also serve to heighten the reader's enjoyment of this latest book, particularly through the theme of mentorship and the use of argument and discussion among characters to inform the reader. Catherine Jinks's own obvious delight in the use of language and in the exploration of ideas and beliefs allows her characters to express themselves so well and in so many different ways that the reader too becomes engrossed in the outcomes. A new 'illustrative' technique appears in "Pagan's Daughter", designed no doubt to help fill in some of the historical detail without inflicting laborious passages of background explanation on the reader. As well as diagrams at the beginning of the book which fix the location of the novel, there are pages scattered between chapters, using a variety of text types in what could almost be the author's own research notes (or Babylonne's own 'journal?'): quotations, definitions, a genealogical chart, brief explanations, 'photocopies' of original documents with comments added, and even a labelled drawing ~ all with a distinct historical style.

In addition to the first person narrative, a parallel third person narrative is introduced at the start of Chapter 4 ~ a 'fairy tale' version of events that Babylonne intermittently re-writes until in the midst of the carnage at La Becece, it becomes a story that reflects who she really is and the hopes that are reflected at the end of the novel: "I don't want death anymore. I want life. I want to live." 'Come' says Isidore. And he leads her gently away from the bloody ruins, towards the open gate." With such an open ending and no mention of Isidore's or Babylonne's future in the 'Historical Epilogue', along with what I found to be a rather teasing, final illustration (the Cathar saying: "We are all spirits of angels, imprisoned by lust in bodies of clay") I'm rather hopeful that there is more to come!

"Pagan's Daughter" could be read on various levels: as the 'unforgettable adventure' promised on the cover; as the story of a young girl maturing and coming to terms with her heritage; or for the rich tapestry of history contained in the setting ~ the story of the persecution of the Cathars and the infamous Albigensian Crusade. Catherine Jinks explores themes of religion, politics and war, of stereotypes and human nature with a talent that results in a compelling, never a didactic, narrative.

This is obviously a book that would lend itself to intensive class study; there is so much history, sociology, language and literary technique layered into the novel that a Year 9 or 10 group could

spend the best part of their academic year exploring it all across the curriculum. An excellent set of Teachers notes by Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright (interestingly, 'recommended for ages 12-14') has already been made available on the Allen & Unwin website. However, this book is such a good read that my heart would rather heed the students who bemoan the 'deconstruction' of books that all-too-often ends in 'destruction'. This is one of those must-read books that is more likely to inspire its readers to read more if they could only read for pure enjoyment!

Jenny Medd, Kinross Wolaroi School, NSW

In "Pagan's Daughter", the fifth title in the "Pagan Chronicles", Catherine Jinks introduces us to a new narrator, who thinks and speaks in the unmistakable style of Pagan himself, the narrator of the first three stories. Babylonne not only resembles her father physically, but she also speaks in a voice she has inherited from him.

Babylonne never knew her father, but she blames him for seducing her mother and then abandoning her to face a violent death at the hands of the Albigensian Crusaders. Babylonne is now living in Toulouse with her cruel aunt Navarre, who is a Cathar Perfect. When Babylonne runs away, she is joined by her father's former scribe, himself now a priest, and intent upon watching over her. At first an unwilling companion, Babylonne comes to realise that Father Isidore is trustworthy, as they deal with situations and other travellers on their journey. She learns from him something of the truth about her father, and she is moved to tears when he offers her the plait of her mother's hair that her father had entrusted to him.

As usual, Jinks has created a detailed and vibrant tapestry of the period through the words of her frank and irreverent narrator. The rigours and squalor of daily life are made more immediate by the racy present tense and economic use of direct speech, interspersed with Babylonne's thoughts and explanations. No sides are taken in the long-running religious dispute, as both sides are presented as capable of sickening cruelty as well as honour and courage.

Some of the complicated names and places in the exposition of the early chapters may confuse young readers, but maps, diagrams, and explanations are inserted at regular intervals to help the twenty-first century teenager to fill in the gaps. The italicised, parallel, princess story is a charming contrast to the stark reality of Babylonne's life of hardship and danger, and one that readers will readily understand.

Jinks has again used the formula, which was so successful in the other Pagan stories, of the mentor/teacher/guide, whose clear understanding and strength of character and intellect make a powerful impact on the sometimes unreliable narrator. The two characters provide a colourful contrast as they travel together, pursuing their separate goals, along the roads of early thirteenth century Languedoc. As the ending is inconclusive, may we hope there will be yet another book in the "Pagan Chronicles"?

Aleyne Cameron, Cleveland District State High School, QLD

Babylonne, the protagonist of Catherine Jinks' "Pagan's Daughter", is a fiery, outspoken, fiercely independent sixteen year old whose parentage is shrouded in secrecy. Following her mother's death, Babylonne is raised by her female relatives, followers of a strict religious Christian sect who deeply distrust the male-dominated church. She is constantly humiliated and physically abused by her grandmother and eventually leaves. She is befriended by a priest who claims to have been a friend of her father's. He reveals that Babylonne's parents had a loving relationship. This is shock to the already deeply suspicious Babylonne, who had believed that her mother conceived her after being raped by a priest. The novel follows Babylonne's journey of self-discovery as she pieces together her sense of identity.

This is a narrative that many adolescent girls will identify.

The oppression of individualism, rigid moral code and the historical setting of the novel could be the springboard for numerous class activities:

Jinks weaves a fairytale throughout the narrative (p.54). Students could be asked to retell a favourite fairytale that they identify with and write an exposition arguing why the theme of their chosen fairytale is valid today.

Analyse female stereotypes in traditional fairytales

Discuss the tenets (p.53). Are they relevant in today's society? Do they disadvantage any groups within our society?

Read or view other narratives with strong female protagonists such as "Jane Eyre", Cathy in "Wuthering Heights", Jane Austen's "Emma" or the life of Joan of Arc.

Read profiles of saints in the novel (p.81). Research and write report, profile or biography of a modern 'saint', i.e. someone committed to helping others.

Debra Bristow, Mooloolaba State School, QLD

Feisty Babylonne is very much her father's daughter, though all his traits are inherited rather than learned, as she never knew him. (We met first Pagan in Jinks' four Pagan Chronicles, published 1992-1996). She was raised by her aunt among the Perfects, a strict Christian sect, who did not like their male-dominated world. All her life she has been beaten, starved and demeaned and, at 16, Babylonne is about to be betrothed to a crazy old man who believes he is a giant olive. She is rescued by Isidore, a mysterious priest who claims to be a friend of her late father's, and thus begin their adventures through a small part of the Albigensian crusade.

With a first person narrative, Jinks establishes Babylonne with a strong independent voice. Jinks has combined accurate historical details (as we would expect from a scholar of medieval history) with modern language structures, making this book easily accessible to contemporary readers. Extra fascinating historical details are given in the maps, diagrams and graffiti-style jottings interspersed between chapters. Not all this information is directly relevant to the story, but all add to the reader's knowledge of the period. We learn about siege fighting not only through the details given in the text of the siege of La Becede but also in these sketches.

Babylonne also creates her own fairy princess tale whose escapist longings help her to relieve some of the overwhelming hardships which she has to face. This is an interesting technique which Jinks has used and one which will lead students to a re-appraisal of fairytales.

In the classroom, this novel could be used to support the study of medieval history, not merely that of the Languedoc region, and the Crusades in general. The Allen & Unwin teaching notes, written by Robyn Sheahan-Bright provide extensive ideas for class study. Though it is suggested that the book is aimed at readers 12-14, older students will certainly be entertained and enlightened by it.

Can we expect another adventure? Jinks has certainly left the way open for it to come.

Maureen Mann

This is another well researched and highly detailed novel from Catherine Jinks. The central character, Babylonne, is easily loved, and from the opening she is positioned as our single unreliable narrator. However, this only heightens her maturity, and the first person narrative is embedded within the historical fact with some ease. In no way does this novel read like a medieval history, Babylonne could be transferred with ease into World War II, or the 20th century women's liberation movement. Throughout the scholarship of the novel can not be questioned, yet the historical elements do not obstruct the fact that with a strong characters and narrative history can come alive. The use of some visuals throughout the text only intensifies the proven ability of Jinks, as the Pagan's Daughter is in a long line of her historical pieces. I would enjoy Jinks expanding into a contemporary setting for her characters, perhaps in an attempt to explore how timeless human frailties, particularly the endless conflict between right and wrong, exist in every moment in history.

Troy Martin, Merriwa Central School, NSW

This is the latest page-turner by Catherine Jinks. Set against the backdrop of the crusades in France, readers are caught up in the adventures of a fearless sixteen year old, who is determined to play her part in history.

It all begins when Pagan's daughter, Babylonne, dresses as a boy and escapes the nunnery run by her nasty aunt, Navarre. The Roman priest, Isidore, an old friend of her father's, is determined to protect her from danger at all costs. The story develops into a medieval road trip, as the unlikely duo head south towards Aragon on dangerous roads in the summer of 1227. Together they encounter pesky pilgrims, Perfects, an advancing French army and the opposing faidit knights. The story climaxes at the siege of La Becede, where the battle scenes are tense and action-packed. Pagan's Daughter has all the elements which made the previous books in the series so entertaining, with some added extras. In this edition, illustrations, notes, timelines and historical tid-bits are slipped between chapters. These are beneficial for younger and older readers alike. (A Monk Spotting Chart always comes in handy.) This book also provides the reader with a deeper understanding of the historical conflict between the Cathars and the Catholics.

The other major diversion from previous books in the series is the introduction of the female protagonist. At the beginning of this story, Babylonne knows nothing of her father except his name and that he raped her mother. "I should never have been born, in case you don't realise. My body is an unclean cage..." In spite of this, she refuses to be beaten. She is a tough and tenacious heroine, who has inherited her father's biting wit and scathing commentary. As Isidore and Babylonne spend more time together, she learns more about Pagan and about her father's love for her mother. She learns that she was born from a union of tenderness and respect, and not violence. Her relationship with Isidore lifts Babylonne from the baseness of her surroundings and brings her a new awareness of her existence. At the end of the siege, the seventh she has experienced in her short life, she declares, "I don't want death anymore, I want life." We will have to wait for the next book to find out how this resolution will change Babylonne's future. Babylonne's journey has something that will appeal to all young readers: whether it is the action, humour, history or ideas of self-discovery. The novel could also be used in the classroom as an excellent way for students to get a deeper, more personal understanding of the crusades and would lend itself very well to an integrated unit on medieval history.

Emma Johnston, Shepparton High School