



THE INQUISITOR'S WIFE

Jeanne Kalogridis

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A Conversation with Jeanne Kalogridis

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What was the inspiration for *The Inquisitor's Wife* and its titular heroine?

I'd researched the Inquisition in 1300s France for my novel *The Burning Times*, and I'd always wanted to know more about the famous Spanish Inquisition (beyond the Monty Python sketch, "No one expects..."). So when I was casting about for an idea for a new novel, I decided to look at the origins of the Spanish Inquisition. I *thought* I already knew the basic facts, but the more I researched the topic, the more I realized that, like everyone else, I had major misconceptions about the Inquisition. I quickly became fascinated by the underlying politics, and by Queen Isabella's real reasons for engineering the Inquisition. She was not the frail, pious saint of legend. And her husband Fernando was king in name only; Isabella was the real power behind the throne, although in writing she always deferred to her husband, claiming that she was simply going along with the king's wishes. Although the two unquestionably loved each other, they regularly had knock-down, drag-out fights with much shouting and tears. And they all ended with Isabella getting her way. Interestingly enough, King Fernando had a Jewish ancestor, something that Isabella wasn't above pointing out during their squabbles.

Did you take any "artistic liberties" in telling this story? Could you share an example of how you altered a fact (or two!) for dramatic or thematic effect?

My heroine is fictional, although her father is based on a real person; her mother is representative of the Inquisition's targets. Everything else—detailed descriptions of Isabella and Torquemada, dates, places, names, historical characters—is as accurate as careful research allows. I did, however, take liberties: Queen Isabella probably never visited Seville during the period my novel takes place, so I had her make a "secret" visit because it made the story far



more exciting and allowed us a glimpse of Isabella as she really was. Many older biographies give us the inaccurate picture of her as small, quiet, pious, and dark-haired. I relied on an excellent recent biography by Peggy Liss, and learned that Isabella was auburn-haired, big-boned, taller than most men (including Fernando), and fond of bawdy jokes. Politically, she was incredibly shrewd and ruthless. The image of her as intensely pious and resorting to the Inquisition as a result of that piety is inaccurate—an example of Isabella’s brilliance at creating a consistent public image. She was a master at public relations.

My rule for writing a historical novel is this: I never contradict an established fact but will allow myself to create “situations that *might* have been.” Beyond that, I work obsessively to re-create eras and personas as carefully as possible. For example, I have a character hide a mezuzah inside a statue of a Madonna—a technique that had actually been used in Inquisitional Spain and Latin America. I fear I suffer from the phenomenon known as “research rapture”—details so delight me that I always do far too much research, never too little. Most of the heroines in my other novels, however, are based on actual historical figures. I departed from that with *The Inquisitor’s Wife*.

Can you tell us a bit more about your research? What was the most surprising—or shocking—thing you learned about this time period?

I managed to get my hands on some great resources. There’s a marvelous 1,500-page history by B. Netanyahu (father of, yes, *that* Netanyahu) regarding the origins of the Inquisition. It’s incredibly detailed, with documents and letters from the period.

The single most surprising thing I learned (outside of Isabella’s real appearance and personality) was that the

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Spanish Inquisition *did not persecute Jews*. Church law actually forbade the persecution of Jews and protected them; the Church had no legal jurisdiction over them (although civil authorities did). Therefore, the Inquisition focused on *Christians*, specifically those “new” Christians who were *conversos*—i.e., converts from Judaism. My story takes place in 1481, when the Inquisition first appeared in Spain; but back in the 1390s, prompted in part by hysteria over the plague, Spanish Christians slaughtered thousands of Jews. Those that survived the slaughter were forced to convert to Christianity at knifepoint.

The great majority of these *conversos* became sincere practitioners of their new faith. A few, however, continued to practice the rituals of Judaism in secret. This went on for generations. By Isabella’s time, many Old Christians still looked on *conversos* with suspicion. A very few *conversos* in Seville were blatant about their loyalty to their old religion, and this caused hostility and occasional violence.

Since the *conversos* were Christian, the Church had full authority to persecute them as heretics if there was any evidence that they were still practicing Judaism. Some of the *conversos* who were arrested and subsequently burned at the stake were in fact heretics by the Church’s definition, but many were falsely accused and completely innocent. Many fled Seville and settled south in Morocco, or east in Portugal (where the Inquisition took hold a century later).

I believe, as does Netanyahu and other historians, that Isabella shrewdly played on this antagonism between Old Christian and New in order to start the Inquisition. Before I did my research, I didn’t realize that the Spanish Crown seized the lion’s portion of any arrested *converso’s* wealth and property. Both the Church and the Crown made an obscene fortune off the Inquisition—at a time when Isabella was actively seeking money to fuel wars.



The most frightening thing about the Spanish Inquisition was that Isabella and Fernando insisted that the pope give them complete control over the Inquisition. That had never been done before; monarchs were always answerable to the Church. As a result, there was no third party oversight, and no legal rights for the accused. For the first time in any Inquisition, the accused had no right to confront his accuser or even know who he was, and one could denounce one's neighbor while remaining completely anonymous. Many innocents were denounced by enemies.

What parallels, if any, do you find between the politics of identity then and now?

Nothing has changed. Those seeking power still use racial, sexual, and ethnic divisions to their political advantage. They ruthlessly foment hatred for political purposes, dividing the world into "us" and "other." Look at how unscrupulous politicians today are fanning the fires of hatred over issues like marriage rights and immigration reform.

Do you personally know anyone who had to hide his or her Jewish identity during World War II, for example?

Not personally, but I read Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* when I was very young, and being a young girl who loved to write, I identified with her. It touched me deeply; it was hard for me to imagine that someone wanted her dead because of her DNA. I also grew up in the Deep South and witnessed the civil rights struggles firsthand; the Ku Klux Klan was very active in our little town, and even paraded in the streets. I remember the day that blacks were first admitted to our school—how truly terrified those children were, how very cruelly other children treated them. It was sickening and heartrending to watch.

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Are you currently working on another book? And if so, what—or who—is your subject?

I'm having a blast writing my current (untitled for the moment) book, which has a much lighter, fun feel and greased-lightning pace. It's about a young woman who grew up in Florence, in the Ospedale degli Innocenti, Italy's landmark orphanage. In those days, a fifteen-year-old girl in the orphanage was considered an adult, and had to leave. She was given two choices: Marry (usually an undesirable older man looking more for a servant than a real wife) or join a nunnery. Well, my heroine, Giulia, is too headstrong and independent to countenance either. She escapes to the street. Rather than become a prostitute, like most unmarried, uncloistered orphaned girls, she becomes a highly skilled pickpocket, giving most of her earnings to her fellow orphans.

The period is 1479-80, during Florence's war with the King of Naples and the Pope of Rome. And Florence was losing big-time. Lorenzo de' Medici, the first citizen of Florence, risked his neck by paying a secret visit to the King of Naples himself, and launched a one-man diplomatic campaign to save Florence using nothing but his wit and personal charm. It was an amazing, difficult time, and one of the most fascinating events of the Italian Renaissance.

My heroine Giulia will find herself entangled in the intrigue and espionage surrounding Lorenzo's famous visit to Naples, at which point her life changes forever. Lorenzo is a pivotal character. The story starts two years after Giulia's departure from the orphanage. We find her on page one with her hand in the pocket of a victim, just as an extremely attractive young policeman catches and arrests her....



Historical Perspective

Do You Know?

- The Spanish Inquisition did not persecute Jews. Instead, it targeted those Christians of Jewish ancestry who were suspected of practicing Jewish rituals. While there were, in fact, *conversos* who secretly practiced Judaism, they were few in number.
- The Jews in Spain had been living there for a thousand years when the first Visigoths (who ultimately became Spain's rulers) arrived to conquer them. When the Moors subsequently arrived to throw out the Visigoths, the Jews welcomed them. With the exception of a few individual rulers, the Moors tolerated the Jews well, allowing them more status and freedom than Christian rulers eventually would.
- Jews in Spain were not persecuted during the Inquisition, but they were expelled en masse from the country by Queen Isabella's decree in 1492, as she prepared to seize the last Moorish stronghold in Spain, Granada. Some think that Isabella expelled the Jews because she needed their wealth to fund her war against Granada.
- The famous Grand Inquisitor, Tomás de Torquemada, who was known for his vitriolic hatred of Jews and *conversos*, had Jewish blood on his grandmother's side.
- The Dominican order of monks ran the Inquisition and became the symbol of intolerance and racial hatred; however, many Dominicans were against the persecution of Jews and *conversos*. Torquemada's uncle, the respected scholar Cardinal Juan de Torquemada, also a Dominican, didn't hide his Jewish ancestry, and argued strenuously for tolerance for *conversos* and Jews.
- Just for fun: Certain varieties of orange trees in Seville hold ripe fruit at the same time they're blooming. (The same thing happens here in southern California, where the climate is very similar to Seville's.)

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- Three days after preaching a sermon of gratitude at the very first *auto-de-fé* (the term *auto da fe* would not come into use for another hundred years), the Jew and *converso* hater, Fray Alonso Hojeda—the man who single-handedly convinced Queen Isabella of the need for an Inquisition—dropped dead of the plague. (Maybe it's not a shocking fact, but I particularly like it.)

- Unlike their sumptuously dressed counterparts in Italy and France, married women in Renaissance Spain dressed in plain high-necked gowns, usually black; men wore tunics that fell to their knees while the rest of men in Europe were starting to ditch tunics in favor of farsettos and codpieces. Dress in Spain was so austere that Spanish visitors to other European countries were scandalized.

- Queen Isabella never wore jewelry (except for a small crucifix) in public, in keeping with her pious image. However, in private, she wore pounds of gold and dozens of precious jewels (including a ring on each finger), pushing the limits of good taste even for a wealthy monarch. At the same time, she didn't pamper herself where duty was concerned, and thought nothing of riding off pregnant to join her husband in battle.

- The Spanish Inquisition also took virulent hold in the New World, where many *conversos* had settled. Part of Columbus's crew on his 1492 voyage were *conversos*. Today in Latin America, there are Christian families who identify themselves as *conversos* and celebrate certain Jewish practices.

- I tried not to make Torquemada a cartoonish, one-dimensional villain, I really did. But I had an obligation to present the character accurately. He apparently really was as cold, heartless, power-hungry, sadistic, and one-dimensional as our culture has come to portray him. And astoundingly ugly, to boot. He was very secretive, with the result that court members and chroniclers of the period knew virtually nothing about him.



Recommended Reading

***Isabel the Queen: Life and Times* by Peggy K. Liss**

An in-depth, exhaustively researched, and sometimes startling biography of Isabella. Approachable, fascinating reading. There are several biographies of Isabella, but this is the most scholarly and well-researched, relying on original source materials instead of other biographies. It became one of my main sources.

***The Spanish Inquisition* by Joseph Pérez**

An overview of the Inquisition from its inception to its demise. It gives a brief background of the politics of the era, plus explicit explanations of the Inquisition's policies, procedures, and personae.

***The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth-Century Spain* by B. Netanyahu**

A massive, exquisite collection of research, containing many translations of letters, legal documents, public speeches, and essays from 1400s Spain. (A "research rapture" sufferer's dream.) Netanyahu put many misconceptions about the Inquisition to rest in this volume, supporting his opinions with a wealth of documents from the period. I relied on it heavily, and based my heroine's father on a real individual cited in one of the excerpts from a fifteenth-century historian. Not a casual read, but a masterpiece.

Seville & Andalusia: A DK Eyewitness Travel Guide

An in-depth guide to the area, containing hundreds of photographs, maps, and cultural and historical tidbits. One of the better travel guides. I always draw and refer to a map of whatever city I'm writing about (and of course, have to be sure I have a proper fifteenth-century map). I need to know whether my character's turning right or left, north or south, after all.

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The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision
by Henry Kamen

A defense of the Inquisition, from a churchman's point of view. Not very well-researched, but an interesting polemic from "the other side."

The Queen's Vow by C. W. Gortner

A fascinating novel about Isabella's early years, including her perilous ascent to the throne and her determination to marry Fernando of Aragon despite all opposition.

The Burning Times by Jeanne Kalogridis

My novel about one of the first appearances of the Inquisition in Europe: in Carcassonne, France, in the mid-1300s. The story of a midwife arrested for witchcraft.



Reading Group Questions

1. What did you know about the Spanish Inquisition—either from your own studies, or as portrayed in popular film/television adaptations—before reading *The Inquisitor's Wife*? How, if at all, did this book teach you about, or change your impression of, this important chapter in Spanish history?
2. How were Marisol and her family different from other Spaniards in fifteenth-century Seville? Do you think Marisol's attitudes were "ahead of her time"? What do you see as Marisol's most and least admirable qualities? Take a moment to talk about Marisol's evolution from a woman who hates her Jewish background to one who embraces it.
3. What parallels do you see between today's political events and those of fifteenth-century Spain? Is the "Inquisition" (i.e., persecutory institutions and attitudes) alive and well in the twenty-first century?
4. To what extent do you think Jeanne Kalogridis took artistic liberties with this work? What does it take for a novelist to bring a "real" historical period to life?
5. Discuss the nature of fact versus fiction in *The Inquisitor's Wife*. You may wish to take this opportunity to compare it with other historical novels you've read (as a group or on your own).
6. Why *do* modern readers enjoy novels about the past? How and when can a powerful piece of fiction be a history lesson in itself?
7. We are taught, as young readers, that every story has a "moral." Is there a moral to *The Inquisitor's Wife*? What can we learn about our world—and ourselves—from Marisol's story?

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