

The Priest's Madonna

Amy Hassinger

Anna Fields, Narrator

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Audiobook \$24.95

978-1-59316-071-5

Treasure Quest. Hidden tombs and tunnels. An illicit love affair. Historical France. This audiobook offers an eclectic combination of suspense, romance, and history.

In the late nineteenth century, a French priest begins living like landed gentry. He keeps himself and his housekeeper dressed in the most recent fashions, and his home and gardens are more in keeping with royalty than a presbytery. The locals wonder where he acquired his newfound wealth. They wonder if his housekeeper, Marie, knows the answers—and they suspect that she is much more than his housekeeper.

Perhaps the answers lie in the past. In this part of France, the past is rich with tales of the Cathers, the Templars, treasure—and a way of life, lost. Perhaps Father Saunière found an ancient treasure, the townspeople speculate. Perhaps he found documents damaging to the Church and his wealth comes from blackmail money.

The author is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. The audio version of her previous book, *Nina: Adolescence*, won a bronze award in ForeWord's 2003 Book of the Year Awards. This novel is based on the true story of a priest in the town of Rennes-le-Château in southern France, who in 1896 suddenly came into a large fortune. He also had a housekeeper named Marie, known as his Madonna. Hassinger became intrigued with the story of Saunière's mysterious wealth and his relationship with Marie, and she spent years researching the history of France, from ancient times to the late nineteenth century. Hassinger's descriptions of the region vibrate with truth and beauty, as only a visit to Rennes-le-Château can provide.

One of the novel's biggest strengths is the author's ability to portray convincingly the thoughts, words, and emotions of the characters, to infuse them with so much spirit that they linger in the memory long after the book is done. In the audio version, the delightful reading further enhances the illusion, especially the narrator's French accent in her pronunciation of all the character and city names. The words flow as if meant to be read aloud.

Like the author, Marie also studies the history of this particular region of France and the role of the Catholic Church in it, and the more she learns, the more she questions the Church and her faith. Her questions push her and Saunière apart yet also draw them together. Entwined in the backdrop of their story is the story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, though Hassinger uses the Hebrew names Yeshua and Miryam.

Explored are the relationships between priest and parish, faith and belief, religion and government, and the many facets of love. Easy to read, yet thought provoking, this book will prompt many spirited debates on any one of Hassinger's themes.

JAMIE ENGLE (August 8, 2006)

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