

William Terence Deary

## The Fire Thief (Fire Thief Trilogy, 1)

United Kingdom (2006)

TAGS: [Chimera](#) / [Chimaera](#) [Epimetheus](#) [Hera](#) [Hermes](#) [Pandora](#) [Pegasus](#) [Prometheus](#) [Zeus](#)



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General information	
Title of the work	The Fire Thief (Fire Thief Trilogy, 1)
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2006
First Edition Details	Terry Deary, <i>The Fire Thief</i> . London: Kingfisher, 2006, 253 pp.
ISBN	9780753417027
Genre	Action and adventure fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Children (juvenile (recommended age range 9–12 years))
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, <a href="mailto:mrivierlea@gmail.com">mrivierlea@gmail.com</a>
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## Creators



### **William Terence Deary , b. 1946 (Author)**

Terry Deary is a bestselling British children's author. He is also a professional actor and singer, and has written for the stage, television, radio and film. He was born in Sunderland, England, UK. His father was a butcher and he worked in the shop as a boy. He attended Monkwearmouth Grammar School, which he hated. In his mid-twenties, he worked as head of drama in a comprehensive school, an experience that shaped his way to engage with children: 'I wrote my own curriculum – I was able to tell my students things that were relevant to them. I was able to explore their thoughts, their feelings and way of communicating, and I learnt a hell of a lot from them' (Preston 2013). Now he is a prolific British author, also known as an actor and a writer of popular non-fiction and TV, theatre, radio, audio and new media scripts. Terry Deary is the creator of the hugely popular *Horrible Histories* book series, which includes *Groovy Greeks* and *Rotten Romans*. In 2009 CBBC Television launched a *Horrible Histories* TV series. A set of *Horrible Histories* theatre plays have also been created in collaboration with Birmingham Stage Company, and a film is planned. Terry Deary's other fiction includes the *The Fire Thief* trilogy, a comedic retelling of the myth of Prometheus, and *True Time Tales*; both have been adapted and will be televised – *True Time Tales* as a children's animation created by Canada's Eggplant Media. His 2010 novel *Put Out the Light* (published by A&C Black) won the 2012 Sheffield Children's Books Award. Deary has published over 300 books, spanning the genres of fiction and non-fiction and both child and adult audiences. His books have sold over 30 million copies worldwide and have been translated into 40 languages, and in 2012 he was listed as the tenth most borrowed author in British children's libraries.

Terry Deary's *Best Ever Greek Legends* develops the concept in his *Greek Legends* (Twisted Tales series, 2004), and *Best Greek Legends Ever* (2009).

Sources:

Preston, Richard, "Horrible Histories: 20 years of entertaining children", *The Telegraph* (February 21, 2013), available at [telegraph.co.uk](https://www.telegraph.co.uk). (accessed: August 15, 2019).

Official [website](#) (accessed: August 15, 2019).

Sample of relevant interviews:

[telegraph.co.uk](https://www.telegraph.co.uk) (accessed: August 15, 2019)

[theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com) (accessed: August 15, 2019)

[timeoutdubai.com](https://www.timeoutdubai.com) (accessed: August 15, 2019)

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### Additional information

**Adaptations** According to the [author's website](#) (accessed: October 14, 2018), television and movie adaptations of *The Fire Thief* and its sequels are under discussion.

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**Translation** French: *Le voleur de feu*, trans. Guillaume Labbé, Saint-Constant, Québec: Broquet, 2008.

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**Summary** *The Fire Thief* opens in Ancient Greece, at "The Dawn of Time" (or, as the first footnote concedes, "Yes, all right, maybe not the very dawn. Not the first hour of the first day." (p. 5)). As a punishment for giving fire to mortals, Prometheus has been chained to the side of a rocky mountains, and is tormented by Zeus' cruel eagle. Known as the Fury, each day the bird visits the immortal Titan to devour his liver, which then grows back during the night. But Heracles has secretly broken the Titan's bonds. After snapping Fury's neck Prometheus flees down the mountain, but Zeus has seen him escape.

The story then shifts to Eden City, in the year 1858. A young orphan named Jim and his blustering Uncle Edward have arrived in the city to swindle its wealthy residents. They are travelling performers; while Edward entertains the audience with poetry and tricks, Jim steals their valuables. They find lodgings at the Storm Inn, where Jim befriends the proprietor's daughter January Storm.

The narrative returns to ancient Greece, and then alternates between the two timeframes. As a way of earning his pardon, Zeus sets Prometheus a challenge: to find a human hero. The Fury, who has survived its injury and is bent on revenge, will continue to pursue him, and to avoid its clutches the Titan travels far into the future. He must conceal his immortal powers if he is to remain undetected. Arriving at the Storm Inn, he is taken in by January and introduced to Jim and Edward. After hearing that they perform stories about heroes, Zeus joins their troupe, unaware of their true intentions. Under false pretences, they gain entry to Master George Mucklethrift's manor, where Jim robs the house while Edward delivers his melodramatic performance. Mayor Tweed, who is at the party, discovers what they



are up to, and threatens to expose them if they do not give him a share of the takings. But Theus inadvertently gives the game away, and the Mayor summons the police. They are brought before Judge Coot, who sentences Edward to be hung, but shows mercy towards Jim.

With the help of a mysterious English gentleman (who turns out to be Charles Dickens), they hatch a plot to disguise Theus as Edward, and he is hung in his place. Being immortal, he returns to life, and they smuggle the real Edward out of Eden City in a coffin. In an Epilogue, set five years later in 1863, Jim and January return to Eden City and are amazed to find it transformed into a place they barely recognise. The streets are clean, factory workers are well paid, and corruption has been eradicated. Mr Mucklethrift has orchestrated the change, donating the profits from his factory to worthy causes and establishing institutions to support the sick and needy. He is a changed man following 'a visit from a spirit' (244) – Zeus in the form of the ghost of Uncle Edward – who, like the spirits who appear to Dickens' Scrooge, show him the suffering of his city and his own afterlife in Hades.

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## Analysis

Like the *Horrible Histories*, *The Fire Thief* blends humour with historical detail in a text that is witty, clever, and subversive. Nearly every page features a footnote with additional commentary. Together with the italicised scene setting at the start of every chapter, these paratextual elements disrupt the flow of the narrative with metafictional moments. Jim, an aspiring writer, recounts the tale of his childhood, frequently championing his own talents as a storyteller. The details of the myths of Prometheus and Pandora are interwoven with the depiction of a Victorian era industrial city. An informed reader is rewarded for their recognition of mythological tropes and historical details, from the cameo by Dickens, to Zeus' desire for more art on the walls of his Olympian palace: "A bunch of sunflowers would be nice...or a woman with a strange smile on her face." (p. 77).

The text has a strong environmental message. When he arrives in the smoggy, industrial city, Prometheus is horrified to see the impact of his gift of fire. Every time a mortal dies, the gods see a blue spark rising up into the sky. The text paints a bleak portrait of the nineteenth century, in which "cities glowed as blue as the battlefields; crushing machines crashed down on workers, then the foul and fetid water finished off the widows and children. The smoke charred children's lungs. Empty plates and emptier bellies sent the weakest wearily into



the gutters to splutter out like fading candles." (p. 194). The comic elements of this story are balanced against an honest portrayal of human suffering.

Zeus predicts the problems of our own time: "One day the world will be filled with their flames and choked with their smoke. Birds will fall from the sky because the air will be poisoned with those fumes. The earth will be smothered by a blanket or fog that will hold in the heat and melt the iciest wastes. The old earth will flood and drown. And it's all your fault, Theus. Why did you give them fire?" (p. 26). The text engages with the notions of responsibility, authority, and status, both in the immortal and mortal realms.

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Classical, Mythological,  
Traditional Motifs,  
Characters, and  
Concepts

[Chimera / Chimaera](#) [Epimetheus](#) [Hera](#) [Hermes](#) [Pandora](#) [Pegasus](#)  
[Prometheus](#) [Zeus](#)

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Other Motifs, Figures,  
and Concepts Relevant  
for Children and Youth  
Culture

[Authority](#) [Environment](#) [Friendship](#) [History](#) [Humour](#) [Other literary figures, texts and writers](#) [Social class](#) [Storytelling](#)

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