Amy Arezzolo, "Entry on: The Shadow Thieves (The Cronus Chronicles, 1) by Anne Ursu", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2022). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1471. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Anne Ursu

The Shadow Thieves (The Cronus Chronicles, 1)

United States (2006)

TAGS: Charon Hades Harpies Hermes Persephone Prometheus Thanatos Underworld





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	The Shadow Thieves (The Cronus Chronicles, 1)
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States, United Kingdom, Australia
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2006
First Edition Details	Anne Ursu, *The Shadow Thieves*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2006, 432 pp.
ISBN	9781416905882
Genre	Fantasy fiction, Fiction, Teen fiction*
Target Audience	Young adults (Middle Grade)
Author of the Entry	Amy Arezzolo, University of New England, aarezzol@myune.edu.au
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Creators



Anne Ursu (Author)

Anne Ursu is an American writer of both adult and middle-grade novels within the mystery and fantasy genres. She is based in Minneapolis, Minnesota and in addition to writing is a member of the faculty at Hamline University's MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults. Her books include *Spilling Clarence* (2002), *The Disappearance of James* (2003), the three books of the *Cronus Chronicles* trilogy (2006–2009) and more recently, *Breadcrumbs* (2011), *The Lost Girl* (2019) and *The Troubled Girls of Dragomir Academy* (2021).

Source:

Official website (accessed: July 28, 2022)

Bio prepared by Amy Arezzolo, University of New England, aarezzol@myune.edu.au

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Additional information

Adaptations

Shadow Thieves was adapted into an audiobook in 2013 and is narrated by Cassandra Morris and published by Aladdin Paperbacks.

Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs

Shadow Thieves is the first book in the *Cronus Chronicles* trilogy.

It is succeeded by:

The Siren Song (2007) and

The Immortal Fire (2009).

Summary

The Shadow Thieves is the first volume of Anne Ursu's *The Cronus Chronicles* trilogy. It revolves around thirteen-year-old Charlotte Mielswetski who is in the throes of teenage anxiety and self-doubt when it is announced that her cousin from England, Zachary (who prefers to be called Zee) will be coming to live with the Mielswetski family and attend school with Charlotte. At first a horrifying prospect to Charlotte, the readers shortly find out that this international move is under ominous circumstances, not only is Zee grieving his recently deceased grandmother, but he also finds himself at the centre of a mysterious illness afflicting the majority of children around him.

However despite the move and, despite Charlotte not finding Zee as intolerable as she imagined, the illness is now affecting students at Charlotte's school including several of her friends such as Maddy. It is not long until the illness becomes an epidemic that causes both Charlotte and Zee to have days off from school to ensure that the small number of students remain healthy.

It is during this time that both Charlotte and Zee consider the root of this illness plaguing their demographic. Zee expresses concerns that he is the cause and Charlotte initially laughs this off before the two conduct their investigations, theorising that this may be linked to some of the children seemingly not having a shadow. These suspicions are further consolidated when Charlotte noticed that a child being attacked by tall, elongated men (that, as Charlotte will later realise, are from the underworld and sent by the antagonist, Philonecron) had

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no shadow. This is further confirmed by the pair when they visit Charlotte's friend Maddy. Visiting her on the premise of providing her with homework she has missed from school, as well as photos of Charlotte's new cat, Mew, Zee adjusts the lamp and discovers that Maddy doesn't have a shadow either. Just as the cousins come to terms with this revelation, they are chased on their way home by several of the aforementioned elongated men that Charlotte saw earlier.

However, this pursuit is interrupted when a car careens around the corner. In it, Mr Metos, the school's English teacher urges Charlotte and Zee to get into the car quickly. After driving in silence back to Mr Metos' home, the trio enters his house and are given several expository revelations. First, Greek mythology is real and that the men that attacked Charlotte and Zee are from the Underworld, employed by Philonecron, a grandchild of Poseidon who was born in the Underworld and now is a disgruntled employee in this realm plotting to overthrow Hades by stealing shadows and blood to form an army that he can command and control at will. In addition to this news, Mr Metos also reveals himself to be a descendant of the titan, Prometheus and as a result, informs Charlotte and Zee that he will go to the Underworld and try to find out more information and tell Hades of the plot against him.

While Mr Metos is away, Charlotte and Zee reluctantly wait at home. However, it becomes clear that something has gone awry when several days have gone by waiting for their English teacher with no response. This, coupled with the event of Zee's sleep-walking down their residential street, compels the pair to find their way to the Underworld. When a giant crow appears near their window, with a note from Mr Metos, the children take this as the push they need to go. Accordingly, they follow the crow and make their way through the Underworld, via a door at the Mall previously introduced to readers earlier in the book.

Once in the Underworld, Charlotte and Zee are almost immediately captured where it is revealed that Philonecron has lured them down here so that Zee can cause the shadow army to rise as it is his blood that animates them and thus, it is Zee who controls their actions. It is also at this point they see Mr Metos chained to a rock and given a regenerative liver in the vein of his ancestor so that harpies can attack him endlessly. Following some quick thinking, Charlotte manages to escape and seeks out Hades to tell him of Philonecron's plans while

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Zee, appearing to be under the mind-control of Philonecron accompanies him to see the shadow army for himself.

In the final act of this novel, Charlotte eventually makes her way to the centre of the Underworld where she is confronted with a disbelieving (and detached) Hades who is unaware of any issues with his bureaucrats running the realm. However, Hades soon comes to his senses as the shadow army and Philonecron arrive and begin to destroy the palace. Here, there is a final battle between the shadows and Hades. The tide eventually turns when it becomes clear that Zee can control shadows and coerce them to stop the attack. Hades, having gained the upper hand then punishes Philonecron to roam on the mortal plane (Earth) while both Charlotte and Zee, emerging victorious go see Mr Metos (alongside Mew the cat who appears in the Underworld, having followed Charlotte and Zee) who has been released from his chains to make their way back up to their homes on the mortal realm.

In a brief epilogue to the narrative, Ursu provides more information on the whereabouts of Hades' wife, Persephone is briefly mentioned throughout the novel. Here, in this section, it is revealed that Persephone is in hiding and disguised as a mysterious witch who seeks to help souls. Among these souls is Grandmother Winter, who after traversing the Underworld comes across the witch and to Persephone's surprise, can recognise despite the disguise. Grandmother Winter begs Persephone to find a way to ensure that she keeps her promise to Zee and always be there with him. In the final words of the book, Persephone reveals that she can turn Grandmother Winter into an animal, and despite being unable to retain her human intelligence, she will retain her memories and develop an instinct that should help her find her grandson. As for the animal she selects; Grandmother Winter decides that she would like to be a cat and in doing so, Ursu heavily implies that she becomes the cat that follows Charlotte and Zee to the ends of the earth (and the Underworld), Mew.

Analysis

As a middle-grade adaptation of Greek Mythology (and very much in the same vein as Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series), Ursu's novel is a blend of familiar tropes relatable to this age group between 8 and 12 years and reception choices that understandably reflect a toned-down interpretation of mythology.

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Among the tropes and themes in *Shadow Thieves* are ideas such as self-confidence, identity, grief, friendship, and support. This is demonstrated through Charlotte, Zee and collectively, the cousins together. At the beginning of the novel, Charlotte experiences self-doubt but throughout the novel, she finds her confidence to steer Philonecron's shadow army to Zee so that he can regain control of them while in the Underworld. Similarly, Zee is grieving the loss of his grandmother at the beginning of the story and with this, is also struggling with a sense of guilt for being indirectly responsible for the mass illness of children across England and the United States. This event, or pandemic is a familiar trope among Young Adult literature (*Wilder Girls* by Rory Power (2019) and *The Lunar Chronicles* by Marissa Meyer (2012–2015) are two instances of this motif) and often provides the conditions for protagonists to define their identities amid diversity. In *Shadow Thieves* this is first underlined by Zee's loss of agency by being under the control of Philonecron and further through the theft of the children's shadows.

However, by the end of the novel, Zee through the support and encouragement of Charlotte can (literally) find his voice/identity and avert disaster and Hades' overthrow. Through this light, Ursu anchors the fantastical adventures of this text with relatable themes that the target audience, on the cusp of adolescence are either experiencing or about to experience. This is further amplified through the racial and cultural diversity prevalent in this book. For example, establishing protagonists that reflect different ethnicities (Zee is biracial and Charlotte, American) themes such as identity, self-confidence and belonging are conveyed to a wider readership who are then able to see themselves in these characters.

Understandably then, the reception choices in this novel are limited by the type of audience and themes communicated by Ursu. Taking place primarily on the mortal realm with minor incursions by mythological figures, the majority of the reception takes place within the Underworld itself which has, due to the ever-increasing population growth caused the realm to become a bureaucracy with countless departments chaired by a range of different figures. In doing so, Hades is represented as wanting nothing to do with the Underworld and wishes only to spend more time with his beloved wife, Persephone. While Ursu does depict Persephone as a reluctant spouse, allusions to her abduction are only lightly addressed (which is both understandable for the age group but simultaneously misleading the audience about this story). Further, it is not until the end of the

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	novel that Persephone achieves any substantial agency or agenda of her own. This takes place in the epilogue where it is revealed that she is a mysterious witch intent on helping various deceased figures, including Zee's grandmother. While this is a promising end to the novel and allows the readers to be intrigued by Persephone's role going forward in future novels in the series, it is problematic that is ultimately left this late, and at the expense of other receptions addressed throughout earlier sections of the books that are primarily based on the male figures of mythology such as Hades, Thanatos, and Mr Metos as the descendant of Prometheus. Thus, while there are some inspired receptions in *Shadow Thieves*, both the storyline and the target audience hinder the full extent to which Ursu can explore these directions in more detail.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Charon Hades Harpies Hermes Persephone Prometheus Thanatos Underworld
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Emotions Friendship Identity Teenagers
Further Reading	Brown, Sarah Annes, “The Classical Pantheon in Children’s Fantasy Literature” in Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens, eds., *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 189–209. Castleman, M., *Meeting Gods: The re-presentation and inclusion of figures of myth in early twenty-first-century young adult and middle-grade children's novels*, Ohio State University, Doctoral dissertation, 2011. Cerqueira, T., "Pandemics in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction: Rethinking the (Post) Human", *SFRA Review* 51.2 (2021): 191–198.

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Lauve, R., *"I am offered a quest": Percy Jackson and the Olympians as a tough, accessible text and a way to reach reluctant readers*, Hons. Thesis, Ball State University, 2017.

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