Ursula Salter, "Entry on: The Thief (Queen's Thief, 1) by Megan Whalen Turner", peer-reviewed by Babette Puetz, Elizabeth Hale and Elzbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2023). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1568. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Megan Whalen Turner

The Thief (Queen's Thief, 1)

United States (1996)

TAGS: Ancient Temples Architecture Fate Gods Greek Art Maze





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Thief (Queen's Thief, 1)
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1996
First Edition Details	Megan Whalen Turner, *The Thief*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1996, 219 pp.
ISBN	0688146279
Official Website	Megan Whalen Turner official Website (accessed: May 4, 2023)
Awards	1997 – Newbery Honor for *The Thief*; 2007 – finalist for Andre Norton Award for *The King of Attolia*; 2010 – Horn Book-Boston Globe Honor for *A Conspiracy of Kings*; 2011 – LA Times Book Award for Young Adult Literature for *A Conspiracy of Kings*; 2011 – Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Children's Literature for the series.
Genre	Action and adventure fiction, Fantasy fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Ursula Salter, Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington, salterursu@myvuw.ac.nz

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

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Creators



Photo of Megan Whalen Turner by Jeannette Palsa. With kind permission.

Megan Whalen Turner , b. 1965
(Author)

Megan Whalen Turner is an American author, mostly writing fantasy fiction for children and young adults. She is a graduate of the University of Chicago, where she completed a BA with honours in English Literature. Prior to her career as an author, she worked for bookstores as a buyer of children's books. She is best known for her *Queen's Thief* series. Its other titles include: *The Queen of Attolia* (2000), *The King of Attolia* (2006), *A Conspiracy of Kings* (2010), *Thick as Thieves* (2017) and *Return of the Thief* (2020). She has also published a collection of short stories set in the same world, *Moira's Pen* (2022).

Whalen Turner's decision for the setting of *The Thief* was influenced by a visit to Greece. Her short memoir *A Trip to Mycenae*, exclusively published in the 2017 edition of *The Thief*, describes the ancient cistern which was her inspiration for the underwater temple in this book.

Source:

"About the Author", Megan Whalen Turner Official Website (accessed: September 6, 2022).

Bio prepared by Ursula Salter, Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington, salterursu@myvuw.ac.nz

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Additional information

Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs

The Queen of Attolia, 2000;

The King of Attolia, 2006;

A Conspiracy of Kings, 2010;

Thick as Thieves, 2017;

Return of the Thief, 2020;

Moira's Pen, 2022.

Summary

Set in a fictional world reminiscent of the ancient Mediterranean, the novel follows the titular thief, Eugenides and his reluctant companions in their adventure hunting a legendary treasure. Their journey takes place in the regions closely resembling ancient Greece. The story begins in the coastal kingdom of Sounis, where Eugenides is imprisoned after he was caught bragging about a recent theft. The magus of Sounis, an advisor of the king, releases him on the condition that he aid him in his quest for the mythical artefact, Hamiathes' Gift. The Gift, a stone imbued with immortality, is said to have been given to a king of Eddis by the goddess Hephestia. The magus seeks it out for his king as possession of the stone signifies a right to rule Eddis. Eugenides joins the quest party, along with the magus, his apprentices, Ambiades and Sophos and the soldier, Pol.

They travel through the land towards where the magus believes the Gift resides. Along the way, he teaches his apprentices about the historical, cultural and political climates of the places they pass through. On the journey they tell each other their versions of myths of the old gods.

Eventually, they reach the hidden underwater temple which holds the Gift. Eugenides enters, finding a maze of tunnels and locked doors he must investigate. Inside a secret chamber, he finds a court of the gods and their leader, Hephestia. The gift rests on her lap, Eugenides takes it, escapes the temple and hands it to the magus.

Shortly into their journey back, they are attacked and, in the chaos,

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the Gift is lost. They continue but are captured and imprisoned by Attolian soldiers. Led by Eugenides, the magus and Sophos escape and make a run for it, ending up at an Eddisian military outpost. They are taken to the court of Eddis where it is revealed that Eugenides is the Queen's Thief of Eddis, and he gives her Hamiathes' Gift. We discover he had stolen it from the magus in the midst of the earlier fighting, and that his initial appearance and imprisonment in Sounis were part of his own plan to retrieve the Gift for his queen.

Analysis

The first book in the *Queen's Thief* series, *The Thief* is a fantasy adventure novel for young adults with a strong foundation of ancient Greek inspired geography. Whalen Turner forms a web between the tangible world, its history, culture and the myths attributed to it, through these creating a setting clearly resembling ancient Greece. The journey which takes up a large portion of the book facilitates a significant amount of commentary by the characters on the world. This affords the setting a prominent focus within the narrative so that its connection to antiquity is drawn out in full force. The natural landscapes' resemblance to ancient Greece in *The Thief* is supplemented with a map which features vast coastlines and mountainous terrain.

The setting is not intended to represent a specific time period, instead, it combines various features of the ancient past to suit the story. Part of the appeal of an ancient Mediterranean setting for Whalen Turner was its familiarity, as well as the political relationships between *poleis* and different empires, which becomes a greater focus in subsequent books.

The classical references in *The Thief* are realised through a combination of Greek (or phonetically similar) language and visual elements. These references are understood by the characters as remnants of their past and this historical identity is reinforced with almost every interaction. Buildings and natural landmarks are described by the context of their formation and how they have changed or simply deteriorated over time. The king of Sounis lives in a *megaron*, though it no longer resembles a true Mycenaean *megaron* as it has been subject to renovations by invaders. Likewise, the *agora* of Sounis is now a prison. The gate of Sounis' Sacred Way features stone carvings "weathered by the centuries" (p. 22), distorting their intended appearance. Mythical explanation is often supplied when the

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historical context is not known. Walls too large for men to have built are attributed to the old gods, or to figures like Polyphemus, a one-eyed giant. Through these instances, Greek culture is positioned as no longer dominant, though it still lives on in the memory of the people. However, this memory is presented as fragile through instances where the characters know of something's connection to the ancient past but no details are preserved.

Echoes of the old religion remain in the landscape and minds of the people. The religion of the old gods is very similar to the practice of ancient Greek cult. The people offer the gods animal sacrifice, libations, prayer and precious dedications. The gods have temples, which house statues of the deity and an altar. The architecture of their temples resembles ancient Greek convention, constructed with marble and featuring fluted pillars. The typical temple layout includes a *naos*, *pronaos*, altar and *opisthodomos*. The attire of the gods also draws on ancient Greek culture, with the goddess Moira wearing an ancient *peplos*. These physical features firmly ground the old religion in the aesthetic of ancient Greek cult. The old religion is consistently characterised in terms of its decline in popularity, now only practised in Eddis. The magus explains it as a heathen religion to Sophos. Even Eugenides, who is from Eddis, comments on his and others' lack of belief in the gods – though he still participates in the religion. By placing the material culture associated with ancient Greek cult within this frame of questioned belief, its historical decline is alluded to on both a tangible and ideological level.

The treatment of the classical references as historical within this fantasy world causes the characters to have a similar relationship to them as we do in the real world. This parallel relationship to the ancient past allows Whalen Turner to delve into topics which have deeper resonance with a young modern audience. Through the characters' commentary on the historical and classical features of their world, she poses epistemological questions, as well as what the role of myth is in an increasingly secular world. That Whalen Turner chose to pose these questions in relation to an ancient Greek setting has the natural consequence of readers considering them in relation to ancient Greek culture. For young readers, this means they are encouraged to consider the value of myth in modern society and to consider their relationship with the classical past. The consistent historical lens applied to the majority of classical references emphasises the fragility of historical memory. Eugenides shows an awareness of his lack of agency over what will become the historical

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narrative of his own time. The magus expresses his intention to take credit for Eugenides' work, causing Eugenides to remark how "His name would be carved in stone on a stele outside the basilica, and mine would be written in the dust" (p. 72). This simultaneously draws attention to the fickle nature of preservation of the memory of people and events and the means through which history is constructed, how it is controlled and distorted. This encourages an appreciation of what does remain, as well as approaching interpretation of material culture through a critical lens. This interrogation of history is given a positive realisation at the end of the book when it is confirmed that Eugenides has written his own account of the adventure.

The emphasis on visuality which characterises the classical references in *The Thief* creates a recognisably ancient atmosphere for the young readers to enjoy. This would make it appropriate as a first introduction to classics as it succeeds in creating a world reminiscent of the ancient past without providing overwhelming historical detail. By focusing on providing a visual translation of antiquity, even when this worlds' pantheon and myth differ from ancient myth, the relationship to the classical past is maintained through the reinforced attention to the setting and its past.

Myth and specifically oral storytelling associated with them are placed prominently within *The Thief*. The myths do not directly correlate with classical myths, instead, they feature recognisable story patterns. There is a cosmogony, theogony, anthropogony, a succession of the gods, and an apotheosis myth. The conflict and resolutions within their myths are more concerned with relationship dynamics and emotional states of being than violence, war and patriarchal succession. Hephestia gains her status as ruler of the gods after she convinces her parents (Earth and Sky) to bestow their powers on her because their relationship is too volatile, causing unfair harm to the humans. The morals entwined within the myths are therefore modified towards values more appropriate for modern life and young readers, like communication and repair of relationships.

The characters tell each other these myths within the story, generating discussion on the nuances of ownership and authority over a text through conflicting versions which are told. Eugenides argues in favour of regional variance while the magus argues there are singular most accurate versions of myths. Through this the variability and flexibility of myth-telling is demonstrated to the readers, challenging the necessity for authoritative versions of myth. The

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confirmed existence of the gods is the sole fantastical feature of the world. This revelation forms a significant part of Eugenides' narrative in this book, as prior to this he did not believe in them. The prominence of myth within the story demonstrates the value the culture and these characters still place on the myth, even when they do not necessarily believe in the gods within the narratives. Their continued enjoyment of myth is centred around tradition and enjoyment of stories, mirroring the way we tend to enjoy myth nowadays.

The classical references provide a suitable environment for the themes Whalen Turner explores within *The Thief*. They contribute to the effectiveness of the construction of a world that feels full, complete with its own history and impacted by the passage of time. By grounding some of the classical references to the tangible world, and others to the oral storytelling tradition, Whalen Turner initiates an interrogation into the role both of these have in making sense of the past. In response to doubts over the existence of Hamiathes Gift based on its mythical identity, the magus points out the difficulty in ascertaining myth from reality. He explains there is a possibility of some truth within it, but admits it is not possible to confirm. The magus concludes that the myths' influence on history cannot be denied, as the invaders' belief in the Gifts' existence and power prompted their initial invasion of Eddis. This articulates the significance of myth from a historical perspective. Even if attitudes towards it change, myth maintains its value through the visible influence it has on the actions of historical people. It also portrays to the reader an example of how history can still be reliably interpreted even without extensive evidence. Through the dual focus on material culture and mythical tradition, the classical past is portrayed as something which necessitates engagement from a variety of angles. Classical antiquity is framed in *The Thief* in terms of the legacy it leaves for the characters, which is shown to be impacted by a variety of factors. Without the link to classical reference, these themes and the discussion around them would not be as impactful.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Ancient Temples Architecture Fate Gods Greek Art Maze

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Past Religious beliefs Social class Storytelling Treasure-hunting Tricksters
Addenda	Edition used for entry: Megan Whalen Turner, *The Thief*, New York: Greenwillow Books, 2017, 279 pp.

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