The Queen of Attolia Short Guide

The Queen of Attolia by Megan Whalen Turner

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Overview

In a genre crowded with series whose heroes and adventures seem much the same from one book to the next, The Queen of Attolia stands out. It is a sequel to the author's much acclaimed previous novel The Thief. While it has the same protagonist—Eugenides, the Thief of Eddis—the young hero has changed significantly since his quest for the legendary Hamiathes' Gift. He is not so apt to spout off wry comments or insults simply to get a reaction, and he has learned that the world does not revolve around him. He still has a healthy pride in his work and his judgement, however. In the sequel, this trait both gets him into worse straits than he has ever been in before and leads him to an exquisite revenge— or redemption. After having his hand cut off by the cold, beautiful Queen of Attolia, he manipulates affairs of state so that he can do the incredible—first kidnap the Queen, then marry her.

This book is full of political intrigue and military plans, but even those readers not fascinated by such topics can appreciate Eugenides' quicksilver wit, the mystery of a beautiful queen whose evil deeds mask her fear, and a group of other unique characters first met during Gen's quest for the Gift.

These characters and courts are seen from a different angle this time too, as the book's scope widens and a third person narrative replaces the young thief's personal-viewpoint tale.

Behind it all, but integral enough that it colors every scene vividly, is the background, a sort of alternate-universe ancient Greece. The book will be most meaningful to those readers who are already familiar with its prequel, but even those who are not will easily fall under the spell of this intriguing story and world.

About the Author

Megan Whalen Turner was born on November 21, 1965, in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, when her father, Donald Peyton Whalen, was stationed there with the United States Army. As a child, Megan read widely.

Like many would-be writers, when she ran out of stories she wanted to read she decided to write her own. Unfortunately, she did not quite know how to get started at this point. She tried Roald Dahl's advice to young writers to keep a notebook of story ideas, but in her case "the idea just sat there on the page. It did not magically turn into a story the way it was supposed to." So she gave up on writing books for quite a while, turning her attention back to reading them instead.

At the University of Chicago she was an English major. For a senior project she decided to work on children's literature and wrote children's stories as part of it.

She claims they turned out "almost uniformly horrible." This she attributes to her perfectionism. She thought everything was supposed to come out perfect the first time around, a trick which very few writers can accomplish. Her efforts were not wasted, though, earning a bachelor's degree with honors.

When she married Mark Bernard Turner in 1987, she found that his research as a professor meant frequent relocation. For several years she worked as a children's book buyer in bookstores in Chicago and Washington, D.C. On a summer trip to Greece, the landscape caught her imagination as a setting for a book, but she did not start writing The Thief, which like The Queen of Attolia uses a fantasy world setting based on ancient Greece, until later.

Then, living in California, the state's olive groves provided a reminder of the book she wanted to write. This young adult fantasy adventure, The Thief, was an immedi ate success and received a Newbery Honor in 1997. Meanwhile, a book of her short stories for children, Instead of Three Wishes, had been published and drawn praise from reviewers.

Turner credits her mother, Nora Courtenay Whalen, for giving her high standards in her writing. Her mother always supervised her written homework and even made sure she wrote thank-you notes. Her father's profession perhaps influenced her writing too, judging by the focus on military and geopolitical strategy in this latter novel.

Turner and her husband have two sons, John and Donald. She continues to work on fiction for young adults.

Setting

Like most fantasy novels, The Queen of Attolia takes place in an imagined world which shares some features with a real place and era in history. The historical setting it draws on is the ancient Mediterranean world, especially ancient Greece.

The terrain bears a marked resemblance to that of Greece and Asia Minor. Eddis, Attolia, and Sounis, the three countries where the story's actions take place, share a rugged peninsula. Attolia and Sounis have seacoasts and harbors, enabling both countries to deploy naval forces and prosper from seaborne trade. Most of Eddis's territory lies at the top of mountain ranges; only one province seems to be lowland and have coastal frontage. Eddis has other resources.

Its capital and environs, located on the heights, are easily defensible. The one pass and land route between the other two countries runs through Eddis, which can easily inspect or delay traffic at its Main Bridge.

Eddis also controls the dam across the Aracthus River and can lock the sluice gates so that no water flows to irrigate the farmlands of Attolia. Because of the importance of such geographic features to the story, they are described in much detail.

The plot revolves around war and threats of war among the three nations, complicated by the threat of the Mede Empire, which has ambitions to control the peninsula. Eddis uses all her resources in the course of the hostilities, as well as destroying ships in Sounis's harbor and taking an Attolian coastal fortress by stealth. A map on the inside covers or frontispiece would have helped the reader visualize these operations, but unfortunately none is given.

The landscapes and cityscapes also evoke ancient, and in some cases, archaic, Greece.

All the larger cities have grown up around a megaron or royal fortress, which has been expanded from a one-room stronghold built in ages past. Now they are much roomier, but they still keep up their dungeons and raised walks behind battlements. The countryside has forests and olive groves, and Attolia has a wasteland of volcanic ash called the dystopia. Ocean water laps mysteriously in coves along the Attolian coast at night. All these images add to the book's atmosphere and sense of place, although they are not described as fully as the strategic factors.

If the physical setting reflects the ancient world, the cultural landscape makes some rather large departures from it. Both Eddis and Attolia are governed by queens. The queen of Eddis inherited her throne without struggle. The Attolian ruler came to hers by a more devious and bloody route.

There is no hint of Athenian democracy in the book, but neither is there the aura of state militarism that is associated with Sparta. The various courts seem to function more like

those of medieval Europe, with royal relatives, unrelated barons, and other councilors providing input—and sometimes headaches—to the monarch.

The greatest discrepancies occur in technology. Many aspects of this world's material culture are standard low-tech: horses and carts for land transport, oil lamps for light, and so on. But some material objects postdate ancient Greece by many centuries.

Among these are pocket watches, cannon and guns, and matches. Except for the cannon, which is used in a military ruse, these items play no great role in the story. Most fights and battles are still fought with swords, as guns are said to be less reliable.

(This was true in "real" history too for many decades.) It is hard to tell whether these anomalies are just curiosities or if they will prove important in a later volume.

Given the author's penchant for surprises, the latter is definitely possible.

Names in the novel are often drawn from ancient Greece. Sometimes there is a rough parallel between a character's name and its original holder. For example, Eddis's court physician is named Galen, and an army commander is called Xenophon. Other names simply "sound Greek," without connections to actual historical personages.

The religions are partly derived from Greek sources but with many unique twists.

There are two pantheons, of the old gods and of the new, and which group is worshiped seems to be a matter of political choice. The head deity, at least in Eddis, is the goddess Hesperia. She is a goddess of fire and volcanoes; her sacred mountain is the holiest place in Eddis. The deities do manifest themselves to mortals, but rarely.

When they do, they provide the "magic" or otherworldly element that is otherwise lacking in this fantasy world.

Despite the mix of historical and invented elements, this world "works" quite well.

The reader is shown enough to build a vivid mental image of places where the book's exciting events are happening. Often the "why" of events depends upon the setting too. The author has shown considerable skill in interweaving the two. It is a talent uniquely important to writers—and readers—of fantasy and science fiction. Even within these fields, it is rare to find a story where so much of the plot revolves around setting.

Social Sensitivity

Two story threads raise perplexing questions of ethics and human behavior. First, the Queen of Attolia has committed many acts that would usually be considered evil.

Eddis's queen, who has not had to use violence to keep her throne, nonetheless says that in the other queen's place, she would have done the same. Modern democracies pride themselves in believing that their political leaders reject such drastic means of holding power. Yet a case can be made that a ruler needs a touch of ruthlessness to be effective. Some parts of the world still sometimes impose the death penalty for treason, which is in essence what Attolia's rebel barons were accused of. Readers must ask themselves whether they use different standards in judging state actions (like the queens') than those of individuals.

Similarly, Eugenides says that the Queen of Attolia is "like a prisoner within stone walls" herself. Is this a natural consequence of being afraid and emotionally suppressed, and having to live with the aftermath of her acts? Her biggest worry about marrying Eugenides is whether she could ever trust him to tell her the truth. Is this because of his character or her own reputation for revenge?

There are no easy answers to these questions; they raise profound philosophical and psychological issues. Parallels can be found in current events, in the many public debates over cases of police brutality, the death penalty, and character assassination in political campaigns.

The other perplexing question is how Eugenides could love a woman who ordered his hand cut off. Occasionally a similar case happens in the real world—a woman marries a man who has earlier attacked and blinded her with acid, for example. There are also women who repeatedly marry abusive men, and, occasionally, men who are drawn to abusive women. Some readers may find the novel's love story too reflective of such unhealthy matches. Others may wonder if the Queen represents the fascination of evil.

These reactions may well be valid. The arguments against them include Eugenides' belief—also psychologically valid—that without him, she will never break free of her self-imposed prison of coldness and calculation. To be able to love, one needs to receive love. In many ways she needs him more than he needs her. After all, Eugenides can always return to his place at Eddis's court. The Queen would have a hard time finding another husband she can trust even as much as Eugenides.

Readers who are very literal about rules might stumble on the book's hero being a liar and a professional thief. But the skillful and likeable thief is a frequent character in fantasy tales. Like Robin Hood, Eugenides never takes from those who cannot afford it; in fact at one point he brags that he only steals items which their owners do not need.

He also illustrates how even a thief can have pride in his work.

Literary Qualities

In structure the book is a departure from its prequel as well as from the majority of fantasy novels. The Thief is a fast-moving quest-adventure tale in which the suspense centers around "Will they get the magic artifact?" and "What danger lurks just ahead?" The Queen of Attolia starts off with a tense, suspenseful opening, but when Eugenides returns to Eddis, the story's focus widens. He is still the main character, but the novel begins to deal with the affairs of state of at least two countries.

This shift results in a change of pace.

Whereas the first part of the book is headlong action, the rest of it mixes ordinary scenes of dialogue and event with two other, quieter types of narrative. A great deal of information is given on strategic factors and the shifting alliances among the countries. Some of it comes out in conversation, but the author also uses flashbacks and straight explication for this purpose. There are scenes where Eugenides walks the halls of Eddis's palace in the dead of night, struggling to come to terms with his loss. There are other scenes in which Attolia's queen looks out over the water, brooding in painful solitude. Although it may seem that nothing much is happening in these passages, the plot twists that follow show them as incubators for a change of heart or direction. The story sometimes jumps abruptly to a new locale and event in progress, without the usual foreshadowing or transition.

Again, the earlier text does not wholly fail to give cues, but they are subtle. Altogether, in this book the author has chosen to build tension in ways other than a simple sequence of increasing dangers. That she succeeds so well in doing this is a tribute to her skill.

The point of view is a limited thirdperson. Most scenes are shown either from Eugenides' perspective or that of the Attolian queen. Unlike The Thief, which is told in first person with readers privy to Gen's every ache and hunger pang, a fair amount of distance is maintained between the unseen narrator and the point-of-view character.

Indeed, if the novel has a fault, it is the way its characters' emotions stay masked or underplayed. Clearly Eugenides is suffering from the loss of his hand. But on most other matters, the reader must look for tiny clues to figure out what a character is feeling.

Such a "flat affect" style has been standard in many circles of twentieth-century "serious" literature. However, it is unusual in fantasy fiction, and even more so in young adult literature. Given Turner's very different approach in her previous novel, it is likely she uses the technique for its effect in heightening the surprise value of her characters' changes of heart.

Even after these unfold, the author springs other surprises. Mede soldiers "rescue" Attolia's queen after Eugenides captures her. She then orders her own troops to ally with the Eddisians, and sends the oily Mede ambassador fleeing across the sea. Then the proposed marriage almost falls through, over the small issue of Eugenides wanting

an altar to the goddess Hesperia. Like every other development in the book, this point has multiple interpretations and offers room for unpredictable plot twists in the next volume. As the book closes, it leads to a spectacular scene where Eugenides accuses the Goddess's messenger of betraying him.

Glass shatters and a future volcanic explosion erupts around him. When he regains consciousness, Eugenides is amazed to find himself alive, with the Queen of Attolia keeping watch over him. The one touch of magic in a fantasy story otherwise devoid of the supernatural, it is a fitting ending for a novel that revels in the unexpected.

Themes and Characters

Eugenides, the Thief of Eddis, is the book's main character. Almost equally important is Irene, the Queen of Attolia. In the course of the story, the two go through a complex dance of hate and love, intrigue and longing that carries out the book's major themes.

At first glance, there seems no reason the two would have much to do with each other. Eugenides is a cousin of Eddis's queen.

The office he holds has been in his family for generations. His proudest boast is that he can steal anything. This is close enough to the truth that his very presence makes many people uneasy. It is also a trait that makes him useful to his own queen, who values him both as a friend and a somewhat disreputable member of her court.

So what is he doing hiding in Attolia's palace as the story begins? The text never says for certain. Discovered, he flees through flues and across rooftops, under the city's walls, and into the countryside. The desperate chase ends with him cornered by dogs and then imprisoned. This opening sequence is riveting enough that only later is a reader likely to wonder why Eugenides was there. He does not take anything valuable. Perhaps he was sent on a mission by the Eddisian queen? Perhaps he thought it would be a grand adventure to sneak into Attolia's palace and tease its queen with hints of his presence?

As it turns out, both explanations are true. But neither of them are the whole truth. Not until far into the novel does it become clear that Eugenides is obsessed with the Queen of Attolia. Even after she cuts off his hand and sends him home in a blur of pain and depression, he plans to go back. He works out an elaborate scheme by which he can sneak into a lightly guarded coastal castle where she is staying and kidnap her. By this time the two countries are at war. Eugenides' plan will be a preemptive strike—if he can make it work.

Strangely enough, in his plans Eugenides intends to marry the Queen. Ridiculous as it sounds, his idea has a chance of working.

It is in both countries' strategic interests to ally against the larger threat of the Mede Empire, rather than to fight each other. A marriage between the two houses would cement a treaty. Moreover, in Eugenides' mind, at least, it would not be only a dynastic marriage, but a romantic one, for he is in love with Attolia's queen.

This chain of reasoning reflects the novel's most important theme. Things are seldom only what they seem to be. The theme seems suitable for a book whose hero is a thief. It turns out to be equally valid in the life of a queen. Attolia, who wears a mask of silence and rationality in public, has secured her power by actions which would normally be thought immoral: poisoning her first husband and his father, who planned to use her as a mere puppet; hanging rebellious barons to teach a lesson to others; never letting her gentler emotions show, if indeed she has them. Yet after she orders Eugenides' hand

cut off, sleeplessness afflicts her. She looks out over the night-darkened ocean and broods. Even if she never admits or even fully realizes it, she is obsessed with the thief. Why else would she have her spies keep watch on him at Eddis's court, where he has supposedly sequestered himself in the library, unable to accept the enormity of his pain and loss?

On one level, Attolia's plight is that of someone who has always had to suppress her better impulses in order to keep power or perhaps in order to do her duty—in her mind, the two are probably interchangeable. Eugenides evokes these impulses and emotions from her almost in spite of himself. He is younger, handicapped by her own order, and seemingly untrustworthy— by most standards a very unsuitable mate for a queen. Yet she recognizes in him a sort of kindred spirit. Here is a man as devious and clever as she, and he jars her conscience in ways she has seldom felt before. By taking up his offer, she may be grasping her one chance to become a reasonably moral and balanced person. All these factors show the complexity of the characters' interaction.

Somewhat clearer, if not simpler, is the role of the Queen of Eddis. Friends since childhood, she and Eugenides trust each other perhaps more than either can trust anyone else. Eddis, who is short and stout, has never thought of Eugenides in a romantic way, although she is not above giving that impression to mislead political enemies. The two also share a talent for strategy and intrigue. This queen brings some additional thematic notes to the fore. Wellthought-out plans can trump superior force.

In fact, the most desirable trait in a ruler may be strategic thinking, cleverly applied.

When she (or he) can do so, she is less likely to use cruelty to maintain her power.

Other characters play lesser parts in the story. The magus, a major character in the book's prequel The Thief, is back again.

Eugenides kidnaps him from the court of Sounis, largely to make a point with its king. He spends most of the war detained in Eddis's capital, where he and Eugenides jockey for work space in the library but enjoy each other's company more than either would admit. The magus has lived long enough to appreciate his captivity in a relatively benign place. It is far from the worst thing that might have befallen him in time of war.

Gods and goddesses do not readily enter the affairs of humans, but near the end one appears, in response to Eugenides' sacrifice. She remains nameless, even as he is sure he has worshiped her before. As she talks, she brings into relief things he still has to accept. The actions of deities are beyond human understanding, but they too have limits on their power. She cannot grant his wish to have his hand back. But if he thinks about what has happened since, he may have some of the answers to his perpetual "Why?"

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Eugenides say the Queen of Attolia is "like a prisoner within stone walls?" Does she herself feel this way?

2. What does Eugenides hope to accomplish when he sets fire to Sounis's fleet?

Does he succeed?

3. Eugenides is a master thief, but the reader never sees exactly how he accomplishes his thefts. Why not?

4. When he first comes home to Eddis without his hand, Eugenides locks himself in his room and library, not wanting to face his relatives and other members of the court. Do you think this is a natural reaction? Does Eugenides have reasons for doing so besides his pain and awkwardness?

5. How does Eugenides know that the Queen of Attolia is staying in the fortress at Ephrata rather than her capital city? Is his plan to capture and kidnap her there realistic?

6. Eugenides cannot understand the King of Sounis's desire to marry the Queen of Eddis. Although he is close to her, he describes her as "ugly, short, broadshouldered, and hawk-faced." The magus responds that she is brilliant and has a lovely smile, in addition to the match's political advantages. Which one gives the better reasons?

7. Why do you think Eugenides really does not want his Queen to marry the King of Sounis?

8. Although the book's setting is based on ancient Greece, the world's inhabitants have some technology unknown to the Greeks, including rifles, cannons, matches, and watches. Do any of these items make a difference in events?

9. Would it be hard to be a ruling queen in a world like this? Why or why not?

10. Several times after his hand has been cut off, Eugenides says he wishes Attolia's queen had just executed him instead.

Do you think he means it?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Eugenides survives the loss of his hand, but he almost dies afterwards from infected bites. What are some of the measures that ancient-world physicians could take to treat amputations, infections, and other serious ailments? After doing some research, write a report about your findings.

2. Draw a map of the lands of Attolia, Eddis, and Sounis and the adjacent sea.

Show mountain ranges, important rivers, the dystopia, and the cove and castle at Ephrata. Draw in the route the Eddisian soldiers took down the course of the Aracthus to Attolia.

3. The Queen of Eddis tells a story about Horreon, a goddess's son who lives at his forge deep within the Sacred Mountain. He needs a wife, but no one will marry him until Hespira is tricked into going to his cave. While she spends the winter there, her mother wanders the earth looking for her. This story has some elements in common with two Greek myths: Hades' abduction of Persephone and Aphrodite's marriage to Hephaestus. Read one or both of these myths and compare them to the story the Queen tells.

4. How does the story about Horreon and Hespira foreshadow events at the end of the novel?

5. Do you think a marriage between Eugenides and the Queen of Attolia will last? Will they be happy? Explain your reasons, and write or draw a scene showing them at some time in the future.

6. If you have read Turner's The Thief, describe how its story's focus or structure differs from that of The Queen of Attolia. Which type of book do you prefer? Has Eugenides changed much from the boy in The Thief? Write a report comparing and contrasting the two books.

7. Explore other strategies the Queen of Eddis might have taken to get the Medes out of Attolia and work out a treaty with that country's Queen. Would they work?

8. There are quite a few fantasy novels based on Greek myths. After reading one, explain how the myths and magic are treated differently from Turner's approach.

9. The author received the inspiration for The Queen of Attolia and its prequel while on a trip to Greece. Have you ever been to a place which made you want to write or create another type of art based on it? Try and use that inspiration for a work of your own.

For Further Reference

Estes, Sally. Review of The Queen of Attolia.

Booklist (April 15, 2000): 1534. Favorable review with a short plot summary and some keen observations about the major characters. Recommends the book, especially for readers who liked The Thief.

Shook, Bruce Anne. Review of The Queen of Attolia. School Library Journal (May, 2000): 176-177. Short review which praises the situation and opening sequence, but feels Eugenides' infatuation with the Queen is not quite believable and that the book slows down too much as it goes on.

"Turner, Megan Whalen." In Contemporary Authors, vol. 156. Detroit: Gale, 1997. Biographical article including the author's explanation of how, after feeling like a failure in her childhood and college attempts to write stories, she tried again as an adult and succeeded. Contains commentary on her first published volume, the story collection Instead of Three Wishes.

Related Titles

The novel is a direct sequel to Turner's 1997 Newbery honor book The Thief. In that book, Eugenides is rescued from the King of Sounis's prison by his magus, who needs his talents as a thief on a quest for the Hamiathes Gift, a magically-charged stone.

After many adventures, including detainment by the Queen of Attolia, Eugenides surprises his own queen by bringing her the stone.

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