

# The Thief Short Guide

## The Thief by Megan Whalen Turner

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## Overview

The Thief follows the adventures of a myriad-talented young man named Gen who, after announcing that he can purloin anything, accepts a wager and steals the king's seal, which is in the possession of the magus, a powerful advisor to the king of Sounis. Gen brags about what he has achieved and is then caught, tried, and thrown into the king's prison. Although he boasts that the prison can not hold him, weeks later Gen is still in jail, dreaming of sunshine, and swearing to himself that he "would never never never take any risks that were so abysmally stupid again."

His reverie is interrupted by the appearance of the magus at his cell door. Gen is dragged to the advisor's study, then promised his freedom in return for stealing something for the magus and the king of Sounis. The next day Jen leaves the city with four companions: Hamm, the magus; Sophos and Ambiades, his students; and Pol, the soldier. The small group spends several days traveling through the kingdom of Sounis, sneaking through the neighboring kingdom of Eddis, and riding across the kingdom of Attolia. Gen begins to realize, as they cross these territories, that the magus is on a quest to find Hamiathes's Gift, a stone which will convey immortality as well as the throne of Eddis on its owner. The plan is to have Gen steal the stone and give it to the magus who will, in turn, give the magical object to the king of Sounis. This king will then have dominion over two lands, as well as having a direct way to attack and conquer the kingdom of Attolia.

However, some of the members of the party are not exactly who or what they purport to be, and things do not go according to this plan. Sophos is really the heir of the king of Sounis, Ambiades is a traitor, and Gen is much more than a common thief. Turner's plot has as many twists and turns on the way to its surprising conclusion as the goat path that the group takes through the mountains of Eddis.

## About the Author

Megan Whalen Turner was born in Fort Still, Oklahoma on November 21, 1965. Turner, always a reader, decided to become a writer at the age of ten when she could not find anything to read; unfortunately, she "couldn't think of anything to write."

After learning that Roald Dahl kept a notebook of ideas, she tried that approach, but each of her ideas "just sat there on the page. It did not magically turn into a story the way it was supposed to."

Turner gave up writing until she needed to select a field of study and a senior project during her third year at the University of Chicago. Although she chose children's literature with the idea of writing her own stories, she called the results "almost uniformly horrible." She was afraid of writing "anything that wasn't perfect and nothing comes out perfect the first time." She graduated in 1987 with honors and a B.A. in English Language and Literature, but she became a children's book buyer instead of an author, first at the Harper Court Bookstore in Chicago and then at Bick's Books in Washington, D.C. She married Mark Bernard Turner, a professor of English, on June 20, 1987. Turner later left book buying and moved to California when her husband needed to do research there.

Turner began to write short stories in California, eventually sending a few to Greenwillow Press. They were accepted for publication, to her complete surprise, and appeared in the collection *Instead of Three Wishes*. This book received excellent reviews, and *Booklist* called Turner "an entertaining, original storyteller with something to say." Patricia Wrede said the book was "a gem of a book—or, rather, a string of gems." *Instead of Three Wishes* became a *Booklist* Editors' Choice List (Best books of 1995) and reached the 1996-1997 Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award Master List.

Turner's next work *The Thief* also placed on the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award Master List for 1997-1998 and, more importantly, became a 1997 Newbery Honor Book.

The novel also appeared on numerous best books of the year lists: in 1996, it made the Horn Book Fanfare List for best books and the Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books Blue Ribbon List for best books; in 1997, it made the American Library Association's list of Notable Children's books and the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults.

## Setting

Turner claims that "nothing in this book is historically accurate," but she does admit incorporating information from Greek history into *The Thief*. It is therefore not surprising that readers find many similarities to ancient Greece as Gen travels through the countries of Sounis, Eddis, and Attolia. The country of Sounis, like the citystate of Sparta, focuses on military might while the country of Eddis, like Athens, has become powerful through trade. In the city of Sounis, where the tale begins, the prison and the home of the king of Sounis are located on a hill high above the commercial quarter of the city. Turner describes a city not unlike the fortified acropolis or "high city" found in ancient Greece.

The action of the novel takes place in settings reminiscent of ancient Greece, but the atmosphere surrounding the characters feels like medieval Europe. There are references throughout the story to historical happenings of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth century such as the bubonic plague, gunpowder, the printing press, and pocket watches. The author subtly interweaves these historical occurrences into her tale of fantasy to provide an underlying link to reality.

Turner does far more than just borrow elements from Greek and European history; she creates a setting rich in its own right. There are the formidable Hephestial mountains, the mighty Seperchia river, and the barren dystopia. She adds to this vividly etched geography a history abounding in legends of the ancient gods and goddesses and a social background vexed by the intriguing polities of the three neighboring countries through which the travelers pass.

When Gen and the others leave the city of Sounis on the circuitous Sacred Way which crosses the King's Route, they travel through the farms and fields of Sounis, then spend the first night at an inn in Matinaea. Over the next two days, the fields grow smaller and the road turns into a narrow track and finally into an overgrown path as the travelers head toward the Hephestial Mountains. The magus leads the group out of Sounis on foot and through Eddis by climbing nearly unscalable cliffs and descending through deep ravines until they finally reach Attolia. Here, they find that where Sounis "had been brown and baked gold," well-watered Attolia is "shades of green." After the magus purchases horses and supplies, the travelers hurry through the groves of trees in the Sea of Olives which seem similar to the olive groves of the Argolid region or Sterea Ellada of central Greece. At last they reach the dystopia, a barren land which is "as empty as any piece of land in the entire world." There are no trees and the earth is "broken into ridges of rock and rubble." The magus, Pol, Sophos and Gen—leaving Ambiades with the horses—cross the inhospitable land until they reach a large falls on the Aracthus river.

At this place, when the flow of the Aracthus is stopped a few nights each year, the entrance to an underwater temple is revealed. Turner vividly describes the maze that Gen must conquer as he explores the temple in his quest to locate Hamiathes's Gift.

She also allows readers to share Gen's fear as the waters of the Arcthus river return each night and to feel his panic as he tries to flee the labyrinth before he is trapped.

One hallmark of good fantasy is the author's ability to create a world that is believable and logical, to provide tangible connections to the world we live in or of our past, and to persuade the reader to accept the fantastic as real in its own right. Turner's *The Thief* lives up to this challenge.



## Social Sensitivity

This novel of adventure perfectly blends characters and action. Although there are sword fights, Gen does not like fighting and would rather rely on his wits to escape from an enemy. He has even taken a pledge "not to take a sword by the hilt unless my life was in danger." It is his cunning and cleverness, not his skill with a sword, which allow Gen, Sophos, and the magus to escape Attolia's prison and flee into Eddis.

Turner, in *The Thief*, has created a complete set of gods and goddesses as well as myths about the creation of the world. The magus tells the story of Earth's creation, how she made Sky, and how together they created humans. Gen later takes up the tale and relates the story of the birth of Eugenides, the god of thieves. He tells how Eugenides stole the thunderbolts from Sky and gave them to Hephestia, at the same time tricking Sky into making him immortal. Lyopidus, the human brother of Eugenides, who becomes jealous of his now-immortal sibling and tries to humiliate him, is burned in a fire caused when Eugenides hurls at him one of the stolen thunderbolts.

While some may object to these tales, they are consistent with the fantasy genre and add the intellectual depth of a history and religion to the make-believe world. They are part of the elements which make this imaginary world feel "real" to the reader.

Some may also object to the fact that the thief Gen is the hero of this tale, and that the book may be construed as one that glorifies stealing. Gen, through cunning, wit, and perseverance, retrieves Hamiathes's Gift from the temple and returns it to Eddis. He also brags more than a little about his abilities as a thief. Undoubtedly, some will think that he is too much the likeable rogue and does not show enough remorse for his life of thievery. But these are the elements which make Gen such a unique, unforgettable fantasy character. Rather than being a common thief, Gen is more like the "noble" thief who steals from the rich to give to the poor. The earrings that he steals from people who are ostentatious or who boast of their wealth are dedicated at the family shrine to the old god Eugenides. His ultimate "crime," the theft of Hamiathes's Gift, is done not for personal gain but rather to secure the throne of Eddis and to assure that the Queen of Eddis is not forced to marry the King of Sounis.



# Literary Qualities

The Thief possesses many of the elements necessary for a truly successful fantasy. Turner uses them to create a fresh, original story that allows readers to suspend their disbelief and accept the fantasy world as real. Gen and the magus undertake a quest in which, as in most moral tales, justice and good triumph over evil. Gen seems to be an unlikely hero at first, but he possesses a sense of honor and his own type of courage. There is even a friendship that develops between Gen and the magus after Hamiathes's Gift is found and then seemingly lost.

The world that Turner creates for the three kingdoms is consistently logical with just the right amount of reference to actual history to make the fantasy persuasive. The careful juxtaposition of and balance between the old and the new are also shown in her replacing the sorcerer often found in fantasies with the powerful scholarfigure of the magus. Rather than relying on magic, the magus uses knowledge and persuasion to further his cause. Fable and legend add to the story as the mythical tales of the old gods provide contextual links to the past, add a sense of drama, and prepare the readers for Gen's discovery in the temple.

The Thief is a book of adventure, stealth, and intrigue where things are not as they appear on the surface; like Gen's life, this story hinges upon deception and deceit. Turner has Gen narrate the story in a way that allows him to reveal just enough of the truth to let readers feel secure and confident. Then she has him add another detail that puts an entirely new twist on the story which leads to a surprising conclusion.

Turner also displays her mastery of foreshadowing in The Thief, where only careful reading of the narrative details is likely to uncover her artfully strewn clues to the eventual resolution of the twisting plot. Even if some hints are missed however, a strength of this novel is that it stands up well to the rereading that is likely necessary to find all the cleverly hidden clues.

There are many indications throughout the novel that Gen, ostensibly a thief from Sounis, is familiar with the mountainous country of Eddis. As the magus and his companions travel toward the mountains, Gen feels that "the world was closing back in a comforting way." His actions indicate that he seems at home in this mountainous country. He instinctively knows that when going down a steep shale slope it is best to be in the last position. When the magus, Sophos, and Gen later flee from the Queen of Attolia, Gen is not only able to locate a convenient tree that spans the raging Seperchia River, but he also knows where to pull on a hidden rope to dislodge the tree and keep any pursuers from following them.

Turner also provides clues about the usefulness of Gen's braided hair. At the beginning of the trip, Gen considers borrowing a knife to cut off his hair. He decides to braid it instead, remarking that he "sometimes caught small items in the hair at the top of the braid and hid them there." Later, after Gen has been wounded by the Attolian soldiers,





the magus tries to put his cloak around Gen despite Gen's protests. The thief is relieved when the magus does not notice "the bump under my hair at the base of my skull."

Very few readers will guess that the bump is actually Hamiathes's Gift.



# Themes and Characters

The Thief contains an attention-grabbing cast of dynamic characters, the foremost of which is Gen, the thief of the title, who leads a life of deception both in his actions and in what he as narrator permits readers to know. Gen provides glimpses of his past, though he manages to leave out just enough to make it difficult for readers to fit the parts together. Gen, as his narrative unfolds, seems to reveal more and more about himself, but he never discloses very important clues to his true identity. He often leaves his audience wondering how much of what he says is true and how much is an elaborate facade. Gen appears to be fooling them with his humor and wit in the same way that he hopes to fool the magus and his companions; for just when readers believe they know him, he surprises them again and again.

Gen is not the traditional hero found in many fantasy books. Most heroes found in epics and legends are bold, brave, and courageous, sometimes to the brink of disbelief, but Gen has human faults and needs, and he feels his share of pain and fear.

Though loyal to his queen and often forthright, he is an enigma who is quick-tempered, rude, snide, and even childish. He is frequently rebellious and tests the limits set by the magus, much as a child tests the limits established by his elders. He can be seen as a man of composite talents who combines the brain and the brawn of his traveling companions—resembling the magus in his scholarship and breadth of knowledge and Pol in his use of the sword.

The book gains force through the tension and mental jousting between Gen and the magus and by the illuminating changes in their relationship.

The magus begins the journey as a smug leader, but he becomes more open-minded and trusting as the story progresses. When the travelers leave Sounis, the group, led by the magus, insults Gen by calling him an idiot, a fool, a "useful sort of tool," and "O scum of the gutter." By the end of their travels however, the magus has gained respect for Gen, becomes concerned about his welfare, and finally comes to realize that Gen is really Eugenides, the Queen's Thief of Eddis.

Gen also changes along the way as he learns the politics that the magus patiently explains to his students and begins to understand the role of the Queen's Thief in the power struggles among the three kingdoms.

Gen's traveling companions also include a soldier and two students, whom he calls Useless the Younger and Useless the Elder. Sophos (Useless the Younger) is, unbeknown to Gen, the son of the brother of the king of Sounis and heir to the kingdom.

Though Gen does not realize the position Sophos holds, he does realize that Ambiades (Useless the Elder) is a fraud. Ambiades is resentful of Sophos and seeks power and respect by betraying the magus to the Attolians.

It is Pol, the soldier, who pushes Ambiades to his death when the group is captured as Gen valiantly fights the Attolian soldiers.

Turner also provides *The Thief* with a full complement of nonhuman characters in the form of the old gods who populate the myths told by Gen and the magus and those who reside in the underwater temple. Some bear a close resemblance to the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology, while others are unique to this novel. Some reviewers have noted that these myths draw the reader away from the main story, but these tales of the creation and the relationships between gods and goddesses provide Turner with an expository vehicle to explain the history and politics of the countries Gen journeys through. They prepare readers for the gods in the temple.



## Topics for Discussion

1. What clues does Turner provide to indicate that Gen is more than a common thief? How much do they reveal about Gen's real identity?
2. With the training he is receiving, Ambiades could rise to the position of magus to the king of Sounis. Why is he willing to throw that away by betraying Gen and his companions to the Attolians? Are his immediate gains better than the long-term prospects he sacrifices?
3. Gen is a thief and the magus is an advisor to the king. Compare and contrast these two characters. How alike or different are they?
4. As Gen and his companions leave the city of Sounis, he calls out to Philonikes. Why does he believe that it is important for someone to see that he is free?
5. How does Gen begin to assert his independence during the trip with the magus to the underwater temple and their attempt to escape Attolia? At what point does Gen become the leader of the group?
6. Gen claims that he does not believe in the old gods. Why then does he hesitate to take Hamiathes's Gift from Hephestia? After Gen leaves the temple with Hamiathes's Gift, why does he believe that the gods are taking an interest in him? How do they show their support?
7. When Gen and his companions attempt to flee Attolia, they are caught by soldiers. Why does Pol push Ambiades over the edge of the cliff and then jump himself?
8. How are Eugenides, the Queen's Thief, and Eugenides, the god of thieves, alike? How are they different?
9. Although the magus does not believe in the old gods, he tells a creation myth on the journey to the underwater temple. Why does he do that? Why does Gen continue telling the myths to the group?
10. Sophos says that "a country with two sets of gods is like a country with two kings." What does he mean?
11. Why is Gen willing to risk his life to steal the Gift for the queen of Eddis? Is it only because he has inherited the title of Queen's Thief?
12. How do Gen's views on the relationships between Sounis and Eddis change as a result of his conversations with the magus?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Examine creation myths of Native Americans, Greece, and at least one other culture. Compare them to the creation myths in *The Thief*.
2. Turner presents vivid descriptions of the countryside on Gen's journey. "Visit" Greece using the resources of a library or the Internet. Explore the parallels in physical and cultural countries Gen visits.
3. Prepare a map or three dimensional representation of the kingdoms of Sounis, Eddis, and Attolia. Trace the route taken by Gen and his companions.
4. Gen might be called a "noble thief" and compared to Robin Hood since he did not steal for personal gain. Identify, then compare other "noble thieves" in history.
5. Turner explains in an author's note that she made up the gods. However, some of them such as Oceanus, Polyfemus, and Moira (themoerae) have Greek counterparts. Explore Greek mythology and identify the similarities and differences between the Greek gods and the old gods of Eddis.
6. Research the city states of ancient Greece such as Athens and Sparta.

How do they compare to the kingdoms of Eddis, Attolia, and Sounis?

7. Although a fantasy, *The Thief* contains historically accurate references to the bubonic plague, gunpowder, the printing press, and pocket watches. Select one of these and explore its history.
8. Research European history in the fourteen, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. How were the rulers chosen?

What were the usual lines of succession? What place did war or military actions play in changing the established protocols?

## For Further Reference

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Volume 94. Detroit: Gale Research, 1998. Provides both biographical information and critical evaluations of Turner and her works.

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In *Amazon.com*. (1998). Available: <http://www.amazon.com/> This online bookseller includes copies of professional reviews as well as "customer comments" from children who have read and enjoyed Turner's book.

Turner, Mark. *Megan Whalen Turner*.

<http://home.att.net/~mwtturner> On an Internet home page, Turner's husband provides information about her writing, lists of her awards, and copies of reviews of her works.

## Related Titles

The Thief is only the second work of fiction published by Megan Whalen Turner. Her first work, a collection of short stories titled *Instead of Three Wishes*, showed her ability to write stories with surprise endings. In these tales that blend fairies, ghosts, and leprechauns with contemporary settings, there is, as Carolyn Phelan noted, "an often witty recognition of eternal truths spiced with temporal incongruities."



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