

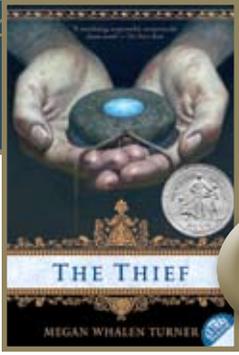
MEGAN WHALEN TURNER'S

The Thief, The Queen of Attolia, The King of Attolia, and A Conspiracy of Kings

DISCUSSION GUIDE



MEGAN WHALEN TURNER'S four entrancing novels bring to life the world of the epics. The wonderfully unique hero, Eugenides the thief, is the heart of this series, in which battles are lost and won; political machinations and intrigue decide the fate of nations; and if one calls on the gods, they just might answer. Eugenides's destiny is entwined with the destinies of three nations, and his personal journey anchors and echoes epic themes that resonate throughout the books. The series is ideal for encouraging critical thinking about deceptive appearances, familial relationships, responsibility, passion, and shifting power dynamics—in both politics and personal relationships.



THE THIEF

Newbery
Honor
Book

★ “To miss this thief’s story would be a crime.”

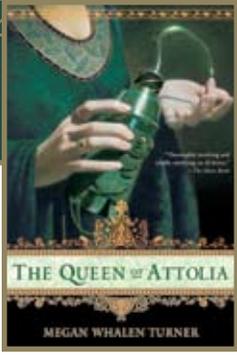
—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books* (starred review)

ABOUT THE BOOK

Gen is a thief who can steal anything—at least, that is the boast he’s made in wineshops across Sounis. Now his boasting has landed him in prison, so when the king’s magus invites Gen on a quest to steal a legendary religious object, he is hardly in a position to refuse. With little fanfare, Gen, the magus, the magus’s two apprentices, and a soldier embark on a journey that takes them out of Sounis, across the mountainous kingdom of Eddis, and into the potentially dangerous territory of Attolia. The three nations are currently in a tenuous peace, but if the quest succeeds, the balance of power will shift. Of course, there’s no guarantee that the legendary object even exists. And if it *does* exist, there’s no guarantee that Gen will be able to wrest it from the watchful gods who guard it. Gen, the incorrigible young thief, narrates an unforgettable adventure full of danger, obstacles, and the difficult truth that things are not always what they seem.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sophos’s father believes that the people of Sounis should forget the old gods. Sophos explains, “[My father] says that a country with two sets of gods is like a country with two kings. No one knows which to be loyal to” (p. 78). Do you agree? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having two (or more) systems of belief? What conflicts might arise as a result? Do you think Sophos’s father’s comparison of religions and monarchs is apt?
2. The magus informs Gen that “it is inevitable that in the hands of the common people [stories] get debased” (p. 85). Do you agree or disagree? How can you decide which is the “most accurate” version of a tale (p. 85)? Is there such a thing? Thinking about the fairy tales, folktales, and legends you know, which stories have several familiar variations? How have these stories changed over time?
3. The magus reveals that he was the sole member of his family to survive the plague years. Gen, who dislikes many of his relatives, ponders, “I have an overabundance of relations, and I wonder if I am better off than you” (p. 135). Do you think it’s better to have many relatives you dislike, or to be alone?
4. Several times, Sophos is startled by Gen’s comments about his family and background. What surprises him? Why? How does Gen reshape or defy other characters’ perceptions of class and hierarchy?
5. Why doesn’t Gen tell the magus about the gods in the temple? The magus asks Gen if he “won’t tell [him] or can’t,” and Gen replies, “Can’t” (p. 231). Why *can’t* Gen tell him?
6. The magus says with regret, “[Ambiades] would have made a fine magus if he could have stopped being the grandson of a duke” (p. 269). What does he mean? How does Ambiades’s awareness of his position impact his actions and decisions? To what extent are Sophos’s actions similarly dictated?
7. How does the magus’s attitude toward Gen change? What evidence do you see of this? How does Gen’s attitude toward his companions change? How does this influence his plans?
8. Were you surprised by the ending? Why or why not? How does Gen, as a first-person narrator, skirt around the truth? What hints does he drop about himself, and what information does he withhold? What other techniques does the author use to hide or to hint at Gen’s true purpose? In retrospect, do any lines strike you as being ironic, foreshadowing the ending, or having a second meaning?
9. Do you agree with Eddis’s decision to destroy Hamiathes’s Gift? What does she lose by destroying it? What does she gain?
10. Eugenides says he would rather die than be burdened by immortality: “There is something horrible and frightening and, I’d discovered, very, very painful about being trapped in this life when it is time to move on” (p. 273). What are the advantages and drawbacks to being impervious to death? Is this a suitable gift for a god to give a king? If you were offered a chance at immortality, would you take it?



THE QUEEN OF ATTOLIA

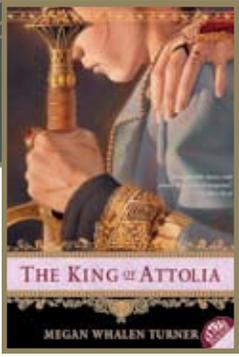
★ “The intense read is thoroughly involving and wholly satisfying.” —*The Horn Book* (starred review)

ABOUT THE BOOK

The talented thief Eugenides has visited the palace of Attolia one time too many. Normally, he leaves a small token for the queen, indicating his presence, and then safely vanishes, unseen by Attolian guards. One excursion, however, does not go as smoothly as planned. The queen is ready for him, and Eugenides finds himself imprisoned in her dungeon. Attolia punishes the thieving interloper as thieves have been punished for generations, guaranteeing that he won't steal from her again. Once returned to his native land, Eugenides must overcome the physical trauma of torture and then, after the most immediate threat passes, confront the greater problems of despair, bitterness, and terror. Irrevocably altered by his experience in Attolia's prison, Eugenides emerges from his self-imposed isolation to discover Eddis at war with Attolia and Sounis. He endeavors to end the war and stave off the threat posed by the Mede empire, and if he plays his cards right, he might be able to give Eddis what she desires—peace—and find his heart's desire, as well.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Looking into Eugenides's eyes after she cuts off his hand, Attolia sees “only fever and pain and an emotion she couldn't put a name to” (p. 33). What are some possible emotions that this nameless feeling could be? Why can she not name it?
2. When Attolia visits Eugenides in the prison, she is reminded of a broken amphora from her childhood (pp. 34–35). Why does the one-handed thief make her recall this memory? At what point do you think she regrets her decision to maim him? Does she recognize this regret?
3. Is Attolia within her rights to cut off Eugenides's hand? Politically, is this a wise decision? Why or why not? What other options does she have? What would you have done in her place?
4. What does Eugenides suggest about human nature when he comments that “everybody is always willing to throw someone else's country to the dogs” (p. 112)?
5. After Eugenides heals, a doctor from the War Hospital takes him to visit amputees (pp. 169–170). What do you suppose the doctor's intentions and goals are? Why does the visit make Eugenides feel sick and irate? To what extent is Eugenides—a public figure, part of the royal family, and an amputee—obligated to share his experiences with others?
6. When Eugenides's nightmares return, he asks Eddis's permission to “run away and hide,” explaining that he feels something worse than despair—terror (p. 184). Do you agree that terror is worse than despair? Why or why not?
7. Eugenides suggests that to “eliminate the instability of the Attolian queen” he could get into Ephrata and “remove” her (pp. 191–192). Eddis protests that “it would be worse than losing you to have you do this and become like her” (p. 195). Do you agree that it would be better for Gen to die than to compromise his beliefs? Why does Gen insist on leading the excursion?
8. Why do the gods go from being “a nerve-racking reality” to “a vague possibility” in the minds of many Eddisians after the destruction of Hamiathes's Gift (p. 78)? Eddis says, “We can't ask the gods to explain themselves” (p. 171). Why not? How does Eugenides's faith guide his actions in the novel? Is his faith well placed? Why does Attolia scorn Eugenides's gods and insist that they are not her own (p. 23)?
9. Eddis and Attolia have radically different ruling styles. How would you characterize each? Is one more effective than the other in the long run? In the short run? What factors have led the two rulers to adopt such distinct policies? Which country would you prefer to rule and which method of ruling would you use?
10. Eddis tells Eugenides that Attolia is afraid of him, while Eugenides admits that “part of him would always be afraid of [Attolia]” (pp. 173, 332). How can Eugenides and Attolia love each other despite their mutual fear? Could the fear be part of the attraction? How do you know that Attolia is marrying Eugenides for love, not for power—or at least, not only for power? How is Eugenides's love for Attolia able to survive her maiming of his body?



THE KING OF ATTOLIA

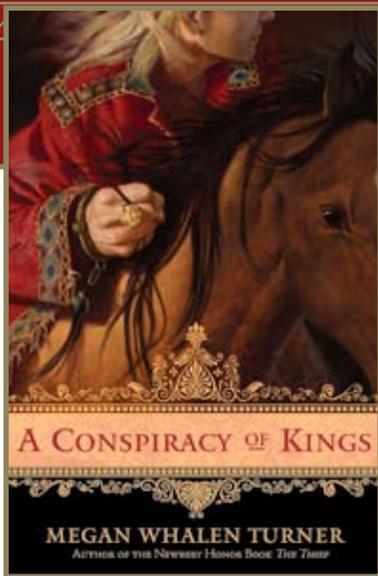
★ “One of the most fascinating and original children’s fantasies to appear in years.” —*The Horn Book* (starred review)

ABOUT THE BOOK

As the new king of Attolia, Eugenides has all the accoutrements of a monarch: the throne, the title, the crown, the raiment. What he lacks is the respect normally due a monarch. The people of his new country either resent him for kidnapping their queen and forcing her into marriage, or else they see him as her puppet, completely useless in his own right. Eugenides does little to discourage this perception. He seems apathetic, weak, and crippled, prey to the practical jokes of his soldiers and blind to the poorly concealed insults of his attendants. But for those who will see it, there is a strong, tender bond between Eugenides and his wife, and the few who look beyond Eugenides’s appearance might note a will stronger than tempered steel and a mind twice as sharp.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Costis tells Eugenides, “You have no idea even how to look like a king, much less be one” (p. 13). What sorts of behavior might qualify as kinglike? Does a monarch have an obligation to appear regal? What are the advantages of presenting a regal appearance? Are there advantages to seeming less kinglike? How do Eddis and Attolia behave as monarchs?
2. The Eddisian ambassador, Ornon, “expected a great deal of pleasure in watching Eugenides” at the Attolian court. Instead, Ornon feels he’s “floating downstream with no one at the tiller in a boat headed for a waterfall” (p. 92). Why does he feel this sense of impending disaster? At this point, do you think Eugenides’s actions are as controlled and calculated as usual, or is he really on the edge of a precipice, as Ornon believes?
3. When one of Dite’s companions offends Eugenides at dinner, Eugenides responds with a threat veiled in a pleasant expression (p. 94). Why does the queen choose this moment to offer Eugenides a wine glass? Do you think she should have intervened sooner to prevent the abuse of her husband? What is her ultimate goal? Is her passivity an effective method for achieving this goal?
4. How does Eugenides’s style of manipulation differ from Sejanus’s? In your opinion, which is more dangerous?
5. Why does Costis feel compelled to confess to the king that he told the queen and Susa about Eugenides’s staring out the window? Why does he delay in his confession? When he finally tells the king, why does the king apologize? What is the “impossible situation” Eugenides has put Costis into (p. 143)?
6. Why does Costis begin to feel sympathy for Eugenides, even when he claims to still hate him (p. 169)? Have you ever sympathized with or felt a loyalty to someone whom you didn’t like? How is it possible to both like and dislike a person at the same time? As Costis’s attitude toward Eugenides changes, do you think he should be obligated to defend Eugenides when soldiers or courtiers mock him? Why or why not?
7. In order to encourage the queen to pardon Teleus, Eugenides instructs Teleus to invoke Hephestia (p. 193). Why is the queen angered by this invocation? Is Eugenides’s veiled reminder more acceptable than directly countermanding the queen’s justice? Relius later asks for mercy in Eugenides’s own words: “Please don’t hurt me anymore” (p. 246). Why does he remind Eugenides of the past? How are Eugenides’s relationships with Relius and Teleus colored by their shared history?
8. Speaking to the traitor Relius, Eugenides says, “You must hate [Attolia] now.” Relius replies, “If I were [imprisoned] for fifty years . . . and she released me, I would crawl, if that was all I could do, to her feet to serve her” (p. 247). What has Attolia done to command and retain this kind of loyalty?
9. Relius tells the queen, “No man can choose to serve only himself when he has something to offer to his state. No one can put his own wishes above the needs of so many” (p. 327). Do you agree with this assessment? If someone has something to offer the state, should he proffer his services? Should the needs of a country take precedence over the needs of an individual?
10. *The King of Attolia* arguably shifts the focus even farther from Eugenides, often emphasizing the perspectives of Costis, Ornon, or other characters. How does this shift alter the way the author can reveal or hide information?



A CONSPIRACY OF KINGS

ABOUT THE BOOK

While Eugenides is winning the heart of the queen of Attolia and becoming her king, Sophos, the unwilling prince of Sounis, has disappeared. Everyone presumes that Sophos is dead, but that isn't the case. Kidnapped and sold into slavery, the scholarly heir to the Sounis throne finds himself working among field hands by day and reciting poetry by night, all the while concealing his true identity. When Sophos orchestrates an escape, he reunites with the magus and journeys to Attolia, this time to negotiate an alliance to protect Sounis from the threats of Melenze and the Mede. A different type of hero than Eugenides, but no less heroic, Sophos surrenders his country in order to save it, and in doing so gains the esteem of his people, realizes his love for a queen, and proves himself a worthy king.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The magus tells Sophos that the next time he meets Eugenides, "it must be as king and king, and not as friends" (p. xvi). How does the power and responsibility of being a ruler affect one's personal relationships? What impedes leaders of nations from being friends? Is it possible for two national leaders to maintain a friendship while still protecting the interests of their sovereignties?
2. Why do you think Hyacinth betrays Sophos? Why does Sophos feel betrayed by Eugenides? Why doesn't Sophos suspect either friend of being capable of such duplicity? How is betrayal an act of cowardice? Can it be an act of bravery? Which other characters perform acts of betrayal in the novel?
3. What is "the power of poetry" (p. 46)? What value do poems and stories have to the field hands? How does being an esteemed storyteller help Sophos during his enslavement? What is "the magic of dreams" (p. 53)? What does Sophos learn from his dreams, particularly from his talks with his imaginary tutor? How are poetry and dreams related in the novel?
4. How is the hierarchy of the field hands similar to and different from the larger social hierarchy portrayed in the book? Does the same set of rules determine the hierarchical standing of Sophos the prince and Zec the slave? How does being a known murderer raise Sophos's status on two separate occasions?
5. When determining what to do in difficult or compromising situations, Sophos often tries to imitate the way he imagines Eugenides would act. Why? Even after Sophos feels let down by Eugenides, his admiration for the king of Attolia does not lessen: "He would have given Eugenides his heart on a toothpick, if asked" (p. 188). Why? Do you think that Eugenides would give his heart for Sophos?
6. Why is the written word a "mortal danger" for Sounis (p. 219)? What dangers should his enemies have been more concerned with?
7. Even though Sophos does not want to rule by intimidation, he ends up relying on just such a tactic to gain the throne. Why do you think he chooses to surrender his principles? What is the benefit of doing so, and what is the cost? How is breaking the sacred truces representative of a new age? Is it true that "to be underestimated by an enemy is the greatest advantage a man can have" (p. 230)? How is Sophos underestimated not only by his enemies but also by his family, friends, and countrymen?
8. Lies and tricks are almost a form of currency in the novel. How are they traded and used among the characters, and how does their pervasiveness make trust all the more important? How does Sophos choose whom to trust? Eugenides may be the original liar and trickster, but what makes Sophos a credible successor?
9. What does it mean to be king? Does it mean something different to be queen? Consider the similarities and differences among Attolis, Attolia, Eddis, and Sounis. How does each govern in a distinguishing way? What qualities, choices, and actions validate the right or ability these four individuals have as rulers? At the same time, how do they reveal themselves to be susceptible to human nature?
10. The hero of *A Conspiracy of Kings* goes by many names: Sophos, Lion, Zec/Rabbit, Zecush/Bunny, and Sounis. How do these various names embody the hero's growth over the course of the story? Can he be all of these names at once? Why or why not?

SYNTHESIS: MEGAN WHALEN TURNER'S NOVELS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The first book of the series is told from Gen's perspective, the next two are written in the third person, and the fourth comes both from Sophos's viewpoint and that of an omniscient third-person narrator. What are the advantages and limitations of each perspective? Which perspective do you think works better in relating these stories?
2. At the beginning of the series, Eugenides, imprisoned in Sounis, swears to himself and his gods that if he ever gets out, he "would never never never take any risks that were so abysmally stupid again" (*The Thief*, p. 1). Does he abide by this promise throughout the series? What sorts of risks does Gen take, and do they pay off? Does he risk just himself, or others as well? In your opinion, are some risks more worthwhile than others? At what point does a risk become "stupid"?
3. Divine intervention is a motif throughout these novels. Do you think Eugenides could have become king without the support of his gods? How much do the gods interfere in his life, and how much can his accomplishments be attributed to him alone? In *The Queen of Attolia*, Eddis tells Eugenides, "If I am the pawn of the gods, it is because they know me so well, not because they make up my mind for me" (p. 171). What does she mean? Consider other stories or myths you've read in which gods interact with mortals. How do Eugenides's gods' actions compare?
4. Eugenides has a reputation as a liar. Does he deserve it? How does he use the truth to mislead? Eddis says she "sometimes believe[s] his lies are the truth, but [she has] never mistaken his truth for a lie" (*The Queen of Attolia*, p. 342). How can she tell the difference? How does Attolia initially respond to the things Eugenides says? Do her responses change after they are married?
5. One of the ways Eugenides deceives people is by cultivating particular appearances. In *The Thief*, for example, the other characters see him as a lowborn, uneducated braggart. In *The King of Attolia*, he seems to be an inept, weak ruler. Why does he craft and maintain these façades, and why do people believe him? How does he use people's beliefs and expectations against them?
6. Which other characters share Gen's aptitude for misleading appearances? How does this deception serve their respective purposes? How much of your true self do you reveal to others? To what extent do you adapt your personality to the occasion?
7. Familial relationships are complex in Megan Whalen Turner's novels. Consider Sophos and his father, Eugenides and his father, Eugenides and his cousins, and Dite and Sejanus. What are some sources of friction between these relatives? How do their respective relationships change with time?
8. How would you describe a typical hero? How would you describe Eugenides? How is Eugenides similar to and different from a typical hero? Would you use the same adjectives to describe him in *The Thief* as you would in the next three novels? How would you describe Sophos? How is he a hero, and how is he a different type of hero than Eugenides? Which qualities do Gen and Sophos share?
9. In *The King of Attolia*, Hilarion says, "Remember, the love of kings and queens is beyond the compass of us lesser mortals" (p. 199). How is this statement affirmed by the romantic relationships of Eugenides and Attolia and Sophos and Eddis? Why do you think the author allows these two royal couples to keep their love lives mostly private from the watchful eyes of other characters—and readers?
10. What roles do stories play in a culture? What roles do storytelling and stories play in Megan Whalen Turner's narratives? Do you notice any parallels between the myths in these books and other myths you have read? The magus says, "I didn't realize that so much of the teller could be invested in the stories" (*The Queen of Attolia*, p. 146). What does he mean? How does a teller make a story his or her own? How can a story be adapted to fit an audience or advance a certain perspective?

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