



Speculative Fiction Book Review

Book Title	The Thief Who Pulled on Trouble's Braids
Author	Michael McClung
Date	September 2020
Stars	

I can always tell when I'm reading a truly great book; it's when I can't stop thinking about it. There is a moment of excitement as you pick it up, the joy of immersing yourself in the author's story once again.

The Thief Who Pulled on Trouble's Braids by Michael McClung is such a book.

I admit I am very late to the party with this story. Winner of the very first Self-Publishing Fantasy Blog Off competition in 2015, this story has earned plaudits from every blogger in the world by now. I'm sure I won't be saying anything very new about it for this reason.

Instead I want to focus on the ingredients which, in my opinion, make this story work so incredibly well. I'd go so far as to say it is a masterclass in fantasy writing. Here's why.

Magic: I am a sucker for stories where magic plays a significant role. Magic should be treated like another character, it can be good or bad, it can be a demanding task master and a soul-sucking parasite. The major characters need a clear and vivid relationship with it too. It must impact on them in different ways like all the other people in the story. Mike McClung achieves this goal with ease. Amra Thetys is the titular thief but her troubles stem from her relationship with the magic that envelopes her, there are allies, there are enemies but all of them bring a new perspective to the story.

World Building: This is another character in the story. The more vivid it is, the easier it is for the reader to understand and picture the protagonist's interactions with it. The classic dark fantasy trope is for the setting to be a poverty-stricken, decadent and desperate urban location where life is cheap and survival a daily slog. Lucernis is no different in this regard. Charles Dickens would recognise the place immediately. But what makes it stand out is the interplay between this character and the one just mentioned, Magic. They complement each other, performing a kind of dance of death together.

The Thief and the Mage: character tropes in fantasy frequently offer up these two stock characters. Once again, McClung turns them on their head, breathes new life into these character types. The Thief has their own ethical compass, this is someone driven by tradition. I loved how Amra is given the option of a conventional life and actively decides it is not for her. She isn't a thief driven by greed or entitlement. She's provoked trouble but only because of her ethical code, it's a great twist. The same is true for the Mage, Holgren is enigmatic but much of Amra is reflected in him, they make a great partnership.

All in all, this is a truly wonderful, exciting, thrill-a-minute story filled with vivid detail and a simplicity of storytelling (never easy to achieve) which is also stylish and beautifully written.