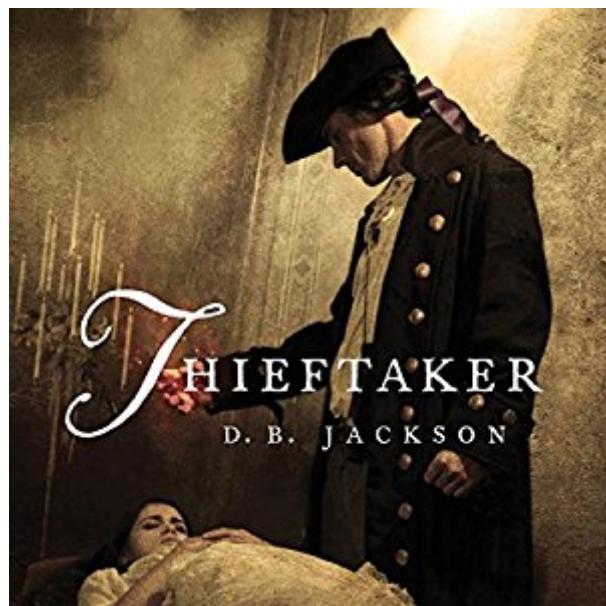


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Thieftaker: Thieftaker Chronicles, Book 1



Synopsis

Boston, 1765: In D.B. Jackson's *Thieftaker*, revolution is brewing as the British Crown imposes increasingly onerous taxes on the colonies, and intrigue swirls around firebrands like Samuel Adams and the Sons of Liberty. But for Ethan Kaille, a thieftaker who makes his living by conjuring spells that help him solve crimes, politics is for others...until he is asked to recover a necklace worn by the murdered daughter of a prominent family. Suddenly, he faces another conjurer of enormous power, someone unknown, who is part of a conspiracy that reaches to the highest levels of power in the turbulent colony. His adversary has already killed - and not for his own gain, but in the service of his powerful masters, people for whom others are mere pawns in a game of politics and power. Ethan is in way over his head, and he knows it. Already a man with a dark past, he can ill afford to fail, lest his livelihood be forfeit. But he can't stop now, for his magic has marked him, so he must fight the odds, even though he seems hopelessly overmatched, his doom seeming certain at the spectral hands of one he cannot even see.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I heard the author of this book interviewed on a podcast (I forget which one), and it sounded interesting: an urban fantasy set in pre-revolutionary Boston. It's certainly different from the usual, and I enjoyed it, but it does suffer from an excess of research in some areas and an apparent shortage in another. Let's play the trope-spotting game first. We have the "protagonist has magic in a society where magic is forbidden" trope. That's usually an eye-roller for me (it's Standard Fantasy

Plot #3), but because it's only one element here, rather than a large slice of the premise, I give it a pass. Actually, saying that magic is "forbidden" is a bit strong. It appears that magic is about as forbidden as, say, prostitution: it's disapproved of, respectable people don't like to talk about it, the church opposes it, and under some circumstances you will be arrested for it, since it's technically illegal (though you're unlikely to ever be burned for prostitution, and that is a possibility for "conjurers"), but most of the time people uncomfortably look the other way. This sets up a situation in which the possibility of being revealed as a "witch" was a threat that kept being used against the protagonist, but it never seemed as if it was going to be a real problem. (Also, why use "conjurer" as a name for a user of real magic? It seems odd.) Trope number two comes from the noir detective story: the protagonist gets beaten up, a lot, in the course of his inquiries. The official police are both corrupt and incompetent, and are more of a threat than a help to his investigation; his professional rival, though, is responsible for most of the beatings (and, incidentally, most of the crimes she claims to solve). The protagonist is also overmatched by a more powerful opponent, and only determination and cleverness enable him to stand up against the antagonist at all, but that's a trope I thoroughly enjoy, so I approve of it. Other than that, the story wasn't too troperific. Magic has a cost, which is something I like to see. The mystery pace is good: not too drawn out, with progress always being made, but also not too quick and easy. The main character has a Tragic Past (which isn't fully gone into, and at the end of the book we still don't know the full circumstances of his fall), and it makes him empathetic and sets him up with a lost love and a full bundle of regrets. This helps him to be a fully rounded character, with contradictions and weaknesses as well as strengths. I liked him by the end, although there were moments when I didn't in the course of the story. The minor characters are less fleshed out, but play their roles effectively and aren't simply cardboard cutouts. I got a sense of individuality from them, because they have characteristics which aren't just there because of the roles they play in the story or in the hero's life. The problem is their names. I'm picky about names, and pay a lot of attention to them. Among the secondary characters that we meet early on are Kannice Lester, Devren Jervis (known as Diver), and Kelf Fingarin, which sound like made-up fantasy names to me, not names you'd encounter in eighteenth-century Boston. The author's note at the end reveals that he initially set the story in a secondary world, and I wonder if these names are left over from an early draft that wasn't in eighteenth-century Boston at all. The first murder victim (at least, the first we encounter) is called Jennifer, a common name now, but very uncommon before it appeared in George Bernard Shaw's 1906 play *The Doctor's Dilemma*. I'm not saying a eighteenth-century Bostonian couldn't have been named Jennifer, but it's pretty unlikely unless her family were Cornish, and their surname, Berson, is German. I suppose the mother could

have been Cornish, though. So the research behind the names may not be up to the level of the historical and geographical research, which is, to be frank, at flood level sometimes. I appreciate a book set in a historical period which has a genuine sense of the time, but very few authors, having spent a lot of effort hauling water from the research well, are able to hold back from making the reader drink from the bucket. This author is not always one of those self-restrained authors. That's a minor annoyance, though, in what is, overall, a well-written, well-edited, original and different book with a protagonist who I would follow through a series. It isn't my new favourite, but it's a worthy entry into the urban fantasy (and historical fantasy) field.

I truly enjoyed this book. Ethan Kaille, loyal subject of the Crown, is a near-middle-aged thief-taker—someone who, for a price, retrieves stolen goods and makes the thieves disappear (being the moral type, Kaille encourages them to leave town, though other thief-takers aren't so kind). But there's a twist: Kaille is also a conjurer, who can use magic, usually by drawing his own blood and summoning the power of his spectral guardian, an old medieval ghost he calls Uncle Reg. In this sense, the world of *Thieftaker* is a bit like an adult version of Harry Potter set in the eighteenth century. There are muggles and spellers, and Kaille is just one of many spellers living secretly in Boston. The story begins when Kaille is hired to retrieve a brooch stolen from a merchant's daughter who died mysteriously during the Stamp Act riots that proceeded the American Revolution. It turns out the murderer and thief is a conjurer, which makes Kaille the perfect man for the job. But the conjurer is more powerful than any Kaille has ever encountered, and I spent much of the novel wondering how he would possibly survive his battles with this dangerous foe. At its heart, *Thieftaker* is a well-crafted murder mystery that combines an intriguing magic system with a wonderful historical setting. I've been to Boston many times, but I more than enjoyed visiting this city in its pre-revolutionary days and being introduced to a few real historical characters, including Samuel Adams, along the way. And speaking of characters, the author has developed a host of memorable ones, from the rival thief-taker Sephira Pryce to Kannice Lester, the pretty barkeep who serves as Kaille's love interest in the tale. All in all, I put the world that D.B. Jackson has created among my recent favorites in historical fantasy fiction. I also loved the fact that Kaille is not a young man, which I found refreshing, especially with so many YA books flooding the fantasy sections these days. Needless to say, I'm pleased there are at least two more books in the series—*Thieves Quarry* and *A Plunder of Souls*—as I am eager to explore more of colonial Boston with Ethan Kaille!

It is difficult for an author to pull off a consistent alternative history. Add in new rules for magic and the author has a lot of balls in the air he has to keep juggling. This was an intriguing story with plot twists, a hero with an amazing tolerance for pain and even a female crime lord who borders on psychotic. Thieftakers function as private investigators, when the police fail to get back your goods you call a thieftaker. Ethan Kaille is the hero, a second tier thieftaker with a dark past who uses his limited magic to aid his work. When the daughter of one of the wealthy Boston elites is murdered Ethan is hired because magic is suspected. His competition Sephira Price would usually handle any prominent and lucrative cases. However she doesn't want to deal with magic. But she also doesn't want Ethan to get too uppity and start stealing her rich clients. So after recommending him for the case, she has him beaten and his fee stolen for becoming involved in her upper class business. As more is disclosed it becomes apparent the death is just one of several used to fuel dark magic and identifying who is behind it and their motives leads Ethan on a dangerous quest where his magic is hopelessly outclassed. Ethan is too stubborn (or stupid) to quit and he takes several beatings and risks his life to get to the bottom of this mystery. Luckily he can heal magically. The author avoids the trap of many simplistic writers by not making his hero too powerful, as he struggles against more powerful enemies. He also does a good job of depicting some of the politics of pre-revolutionary Boston on the verge of erupting in revolt. An entertaining book although not a great or deep book.

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