



## The Sunbird

*Elizabeth E. Wein*

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Eleven-year-old Telemekos is the grandson of two royal men: one African, from the kingdom of Aksum; the other Artos, the fallen High King of Britain. He is also a remarkable listener and tracker. Now his country needs his skill. Even though there is a quarantine, plague is spreading through Aksum, leaving disease and death in its wake. Telemekos is recruited as the emperor's spy. He must travel through the brutal desert to the salt mines of Afar; there, he needs to discover who has been traitor to the crown. This challenge will take all of Telemekos's skill and strength and his ability to stay silent—for if he is discovered, there will be no mercy.

## **The Sunbird Details**

Date : Published January 19th 2006 by Firebird (first published April 12th 2004)

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Author : Elizabeth E. Wein

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Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Young Adult, Fantasy, Fiction, Mythology, Arthurian

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## From Reader Review *The Sunbird* for online ebook

### Rachel Neumeier says

Not the first in the series, but it stands alone and it's my favorite (though I like them all). Ordinarily I think doing any kind of spin on the Arthurian legend is a bad idea, but Elizabeth Wein can handle it -- and anyway, *The Sunbird* is pretty far removed from the legend.

The writing is superb, Telemakos is one of my all-time favorite YA protagonists, the setting -- the African kingdom of Aksum -- is fabulous. But there is some grim, grim, grim violence in this book, some of the worst I've ever seen in YA stories, so be warned.

Even so, note the five stars. The violence isn't gratuitous, it IS integral to the story, it DOES work, and I love and admire this book more than words can say. Anything else this author writes, let me tell you, I'm right there.

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### Sherwood Smith says

Intense, spare and vivid, this story builds, with subtle characterizations, and some sharply dramatic and painful moments.

I've recommended it to readers who like Megan Whalen Turner's work, and heard back that this was a successful pairing.

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### Em says

For me, *The Sunbird* is Elizabeth Wein's *Prisoner of Azkaban*: the third book in an already excellent series that goes out and takes it to another level. The first two books in her Lion Hunter series are beautifully written character studies and political intrigues, just like this one is, but they set up the backstory that allows *The Sunbird* to soar.

Like most Arthurian adaptations, *The Sunbird* is about a royal bastard who saves the kingdom. Unlike most Arthurian adaptations, this royal bastard is no king—in fact, his greatest asset is that no one notices him—and the kingdom he's trying to save isn't Britain. A plague is spreading across Aksum (modern-day Ethiopia) thanks to black-market salt traders who defy the emperor's quarantine. Eleven-year-old Telemakos has the skill and the courage to root out the traitors—but does he have the time?

At its core, though, this story isn't about political espionage or thrilling heroics. It's about family. The loneliness of a biracial boy whose father has taken a vow of silence. The love and hate of two siblings still haunted by their brother's premature death and their own misdeeds. The fear that the past will repeat itself. These characters are beautifully flawed. They make mistakes because they live in a dangerous (and largely historically accurate) world that forces them to make difficult choices, not because they're careless or callous.

Is Telemakos too much of a prodigy, being able to smell blood from over a mile away and memorize sentences in a language he doesn't know? Perhaps. But he's also a fully fleshed out character with contradictions that run deeper than his dual heritage. He's simultaneously overconfident and terrified. He's allowed to weep out of both sorrow and joy. He runs, mud-spattered and bloody, into a highbrow party because he doesn't know how to deal with his father's affection—the same affection that he craves more than anything else. In short, he's one of the most likable protagonists I've come across in some time, even more so because he is so in tune with his emotions. You don't often see male protagonists who feel things deeply and are open about it.

Wein is also incredibly economical with her storytelling. Other authors would prolong Telemakos's adventure, but what Wein describes is much more real: three months of brutality and loneliness for a few minutes of useful information—and with it, agonizing pain. She lets readers find meaning in the allusions and doesn't waste words. In fact, silence is perhaps the biggest theme of the novel.

The only reason not to read this book would be if violence, especially toward children, disturbs you. It's not gratuitous, but it is graphic.

It is an insult that this book only has 353 ratings and 73 reviews. I picked up my first Elizabeth Wein book in December and just finished my fourth. Safe to say, you can judge her books by their cover; if her name's on it, you're in good hands. I am both excited and terrified to move on to the fourth book in this series, *The Lion Hunter*. Partially because I don't want this series to end, and partially because I'm afraid that it's going to be Elizabeth Wein's *Goblet of Fire* (in terms of how happy the ending is).

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### **Kim (magicsandwiches) Lawyer says**

Megan Whalen Turner was once asked if there was one book she evangelized and she replied, "The Sunbird by Elizabeth Wein." After reading it, I know why.

My favorite of the Lion Hunter's series, *The Sunbird* is an amazing adventure story told through the eyes of Telemakos, an intelligent and nimble eleven year old boy. As a member of the royal household and one who often roams the palace freely, Telemakos fades into the background as a natural part of the landscape. Because no one takes notice of him, he realizes this makes him invisible and therefore capable of spying on anyone anywhere in the palace. When he passes a challenge from the emperor to do just that, he is sent on an important but dangerous mission to discover who is defying the quarantine that should keep Ethiopia safe from the plague that decimated Britain. Of course things don't go as planned and Telemakos must use all of his wits, tenacity, and courage to triumph.

A subplot about family relations ends in a way so satisfying that I just sat there and cried happy tears when I finished the book.

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### **Nikki says**

I think I liked *The Sunbird* best of the series so far. It goes even further from Arthurian myth -- the only character from the Arthurian canon is Medraut -- but in the process makes an enchanting narrative. Young Telemakos is growing up and showing all signs of inheriting his father's ability to stalk prey, but he uses his

skills politically.

The story of his search for the figure called the Lazarus, and what happens to him there, are compelling. The darkness from the other stories remains here. Telemakos is a very strong character, almost unbelievably so, and yet still believably a child, too. The reactions of the other characters to what happens to him feels real and shocking, and is well-handled.

Medraut as a character develops further here, into someone one can like, or at least sympathise with a little -- largely divorced from the Arthurian canon, by this point.

Again, it's easy to read, well-written, but there are parts at which the soft-hearted will struggle.

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## **Chachic says**

Read this again for EWein Special Ops. It was just as good as I remembered. I was still afraid for Telemakos even though I already knew what was going to happen.

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2010 review: Originally posted here.

Ms. Wein blends Arthurian legend and sixth century Ethiopian history in her books. Telemakos, the main protagonist of this book, is the son of Medraut (Mordred, Arthur's son). If you're a fan of Arthurian novels, I definitely recommend Ms. Wein's novels. But even if you aren't, I still recommend them! I haven't read a lot of Arthurian books and I thoroughly enjoyed this one. Telemakos is such a talented child and so mature for his age. There were times when I was reading the book that I couldn't believe he's just a young boy. He's a very curious person so he trained himself to be stealthy and this skill has earned him a dangerous task. This book only has around two hundred pages but all of those pages are packed with a gripping story and you won't be able to let go until you finish the entire thing. I'm still amazed at how vibrant this story is for its length.

As with most of my favorite books, the characters in this one stand out. I remember that a member of Sounis calls Miles Vorkosigan as Gen-in-Space and I remember that Telemakos was labeled as Gen-in-Africa. Here are some of their similarities: they come from noble families, they're both trained in stealth, they're both highly intelligent individuals with a certain skill set and both MWT and Ms. Wein are not afraid to make their characters go through very difficult situations. I'm going to stop there because I don't want to reveal any spoilers but rest assured that the secondary characters in this book are just as interesting as Telemakos is.

*The Sunbird* can be read on its own but I think it's better to have the Mark of Solomon duology on hand because those are the next books that feature Telemakos: *The Lion Hunter* and *The Empty Kingdom*. After reading *The Sunbird*, you're going to want more of Telemakos and the rest of the characters in this book.

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## **TheBookSmugglers says**

Original review posted on The Book Smugglers

The Sunbird is the third book in Elizabeth Wein's Arthurian/Aksumite cycle of stories which follows the descendants of King Artos of Britain and their lives in sixth century Aksum, Africa (present-day Ethiopia). Although part of an ongoing series, The Sunbird can definitely be read as a standalone (although I did have a few questions about previous happenings in the series, the most urgent one being: how and why exactly did the descendants of King Arthur end up in Africa? I shall have to go back and read the first two books in the series The Winter Prince and A Coalition of Lions both already purchased and added to my TBR pile)

The Plague is spreading in Europe and even though quarantine has been set in the Aksumite Empire, the plague breaks through and begins to spread. This story follows young prince Telemakos, the son of Medraut (son of King Artos) and Turunesh (daughter of Kidane, member of the imperial parliament of Aksum), as he is tasked by his aunt Goewin, the British ambassador to Aksum, with the dangerous mission of investigating who is responsible for it. Telemakos is a clever, resourceful boy who is constantly overlooked and underestimated because of his youth and his mixed-race status. Using these to his advantage, he is able to learn key information to help the Kingdom and is eventually sent on a journey across the Empire to learn more – a journey which will have terrible consequences.

Overall, I really enjoyed The Sunbird – it is a short yet extremely well developed story. It has moments of great gravitas – especially those that deal with courage and loyalty and the moments where the story dealt with the relationship between Telemakos and his father Medraut. There is a great comparison between their relationship and that of the mythology Telemakos and his father Ulysses. The latter deals with an absent father and the hope for his return whereas our Telemakos has to deal with a father who is present but who won't use words to communicate with Telemakos: his muteness is a self-imposed punishment for past deeds and frustratingly difficult for Telemakos to understand. I also really appreciated the strong female characters with agency and the high stakes of the story – Telemakos' is a really dangerous mission and the author doesn't shy away from it and there are horrendous scenes of torture that were really hard to read.

I loved its protagonist above all. Telemakos is a great, intrepid hero whose reluctant acceptance of his mission is coupled with his own cheeky certainty that he is the only one who can pull it off. He is at times old beyond his years and at others, a youngster who wants nothing to be cuddled by his family. I loved the Ethiopian setting as well, although I can't really attest to any historical accuracy when it comes to the Kingdom of Aksum ( I am not really sure historical accuracy comes into play here considering this is a Fantasy novel about King Arthur).

Beyond that, I had extremely high expectations for The Sunbird considering that 1) the author wrote Code Name Verity which is so far my favourite 2012 read and 2) the main character of this book has been compared to Megan Whalen Turner's Eugenides, one of my favourite characters of all time. In hindsight, this was probably not a good thing and I will admit that those expectations were impossible to be met. Although Telemakos did remind me of a young Eugenides (from The Thief) for his cleverness and cocky demeanour, I think the fact that narrative here doesn't have the unreliability factor akin to Megan Whalen Turner's books, makes this comparison a bit too extreme. This is perhaps, an unfair assessment but expectations are expectations and I believe I have to be clear in this regard. Funnily enough, I think The Sunbird has more things in common with Code Name Verity and its themes of courage and patriotism despite their wildly different setting.

One thing is certain though: Code Name Verity was not a fluke and Elizabeth Wein has just become a new favourite author.

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### **Nastya M says**

CONFOUND YOUR AMAZINGNESS MEDRAUT TELEMAKOS YOU CANNOT HIJACK MY LIFE  
LIKE THIS  
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHGGGGGGGGGGGGGG\$&@\*\$&&&&&&\$8@@:\$2834828:&;!!!!!!!  
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### **Maureen E says**

I think the most important thing to say about these books is that they're not The Winter Prince. They certainly build off of that story, and I would most definitely read it first. But The Winter Prince is one of those books that I don't think you could write a real sequel to. Nonetheless, A Coalition of Lions and The Sunbird are both fascinating and well-written. Telemakos is a wonderful character who's reminding me more and more of Megan Whalen Turner's Gen. I've got the next one ordered and I can't wait till it gets here!

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The main focus switches from Goewin to Telemakos in this book. And I love Telemakos. I love this book too, in a way I think I didn't the first time I read it. The political tensions, the relationship between the plague and salt, the characters. There are so many echoes back to the first book, which made me think about the characters in such a new way. Probably my favorite of these is when Telemakos tells Medraut that the salt looks like snow—the brief description there had such a vivid ties to the description of the snow in The Winter Prince, and it provides a glimpse into Medraut's mind that we're lacking at that point in the story. [Jan. 2011]

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### **Megan says**

YA adventure set in the past in Ethiopia with references to the Odyssey. A quick, fun read.

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### **Katie Montgomery says**

SERIOUSLY WEIN WHY ARE YOU SUCH A BADASS.

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### **Liviana says**

The first three books of the Lion Hunters series switch focus between three members of a family: Medraut, then his legitimate half-sister Goewin, and then his son Telemekos. This means that although the books build on each other, they also stand fairly well on their own. (The last two books focus on Telemekos and should be read as a duology.)

THE SUNBIRD first came out in 2004, and in some ways feels dated despite only being ten years old. It is very short compared to most current YA novels, although it cannot be confused with an MG novel despite Telemekos's youth. (He's eleven.) The Lion Hunters novels address some very dark themes, including torture and dehumanization in this entry.

The start of the series plays with Arthurian mythology, but the series does not stick to a traditional path. THE SUNBIRD takes place in Aksum, now known as Ethiopia. Telemekos is half-British and half-Aksumite, but he is still accomplished at hiding in plain sight despite his distinctive pale hair. It is that skill that causes the Emperor to recruit him. Plague is spreading through Europe, and quarantine has been instituted to protect Aksum. But there are those who would take this as a chance to make money on the black market, no matter the risk of spreading disease.

In THE SUNBIRD, Elizabeth Wein skillfully weaves together an espionage adventure with a coming of age and the story of a broken but loving family. Medraut does not speak, and Goewin is a princess of Britain first, grooming her nephew (who is unknowingly the heir apparent). Fans of her breakout novels CODE NAME VERITY and ROSE UNDER FIRE will not be surprised at the depth of emotion in THE SUNBIRD nor the exploration of darker themes.

This historical fantasy will appeal to fans of Megan Whalen Turner and Jennifer A. Nielsen, which also feature clever and secretive young boys having adventures with consequences for entire nations. I do recommend reading THE WINTER PRINCE and A COALITION OF LIONS first. It is not necessary to understand THE SUNBIRD, but it makes the experience richer. Plus, they're also terrific novels. This series is criminally underrated.

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## Jess says

This is the third in a loose series - following The Winter Prince and A Coalition of Lions. I say loose because while many characters repeat from book to book, and each one resolves but leaves you hanging a bit, like a good series, each one is unique in plot and mood. These are no cookie-cutter series titles, but filled with well-developed characters, intrigue, and fascinating settings. By this book, the story has moved fairly far from the Arthurian legend roots of The Winter Prince, but a few of those elements are still there even in the African setting.

As with the previous two, I felt a similar love and addiction as I feel when reading Megan Whalen Turner. Telemakos is Eugenides' long-lost brother, particularly when he hides around the palace or goes on insane spy missions, but also deeper in his personality, where is pain and delight in things live side by side.

I think these books could be appreciated by a really sharp middle-schooler - they're not for the struggling or reluctant reader - or by anyone older who doesn't think it's babyish to read an excellent book with an 11-year old protagonist (the earlier books have young adult protagonists, so you could hook a high schooler and then they wouldn't care).

Read the series in order - you'll have a better feel for the characters that way, even if the plot makes sense on its own.

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## **Terry (Ter05 TwiMoms/ MundieMoms) says**

Third book in the series and could not put it down. Would not have thought the tale of an eleven year old boy would draw me in like this one did. But of course it is the continuation of a fascinating story, and I am already drawn into the lives around him. These books are very roughly based on the Arthur legend, particularly Mordred although he has a different name in these and is called Medraut. He also has a far different role in the story that began in *The Winter Prince* where the tense and anguished relationship of love/hate between him and his half brother has stayed with me since reading it. (of course in the Arthur legend he did not have a brother) Elizabeth Wein has a different style of writing and it certainly has worked for me. The first book in the series was written in the first person as Medraut writes to his mother, the witch Morgana. The other books are written in the third person and both worked well.

Telemakos is the son of Medraut conceived when he served in Ethiopia prior to the events in the first book. He is the grandson of two nobles of different lands and has a certain freedom in the African Kingdom of Aksum. He is wise beyond his years and has the ability to become invisible (not really invisible) and hear and see things he reports back to his aunt, Goewin, who is Britain's ambassador to Aksum. She is his father Medraut's half sister. Goewin loves him but the Kingdom has been quarantined because of plague and they must find out who is breaking the quarantine and put a stop to it or all could die. Thus she and others must place a spy in a very distant land across the desert.

In this book Telemakos volunteers to go on that very dangerous journey and every step of it was brilliantly written as this young boy faces terrible hardships. Good books are all about good writing and this one passed the test. I won't go into the details and do spoilers, but this series is rapidly becoming one I will re-read in the future and not forget. These books are kind of hard to find. I have the fifth one and must find the fourth one.

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## **kari says**

It's been weeks since I read it and I am still FURIOUS at Medraut.

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