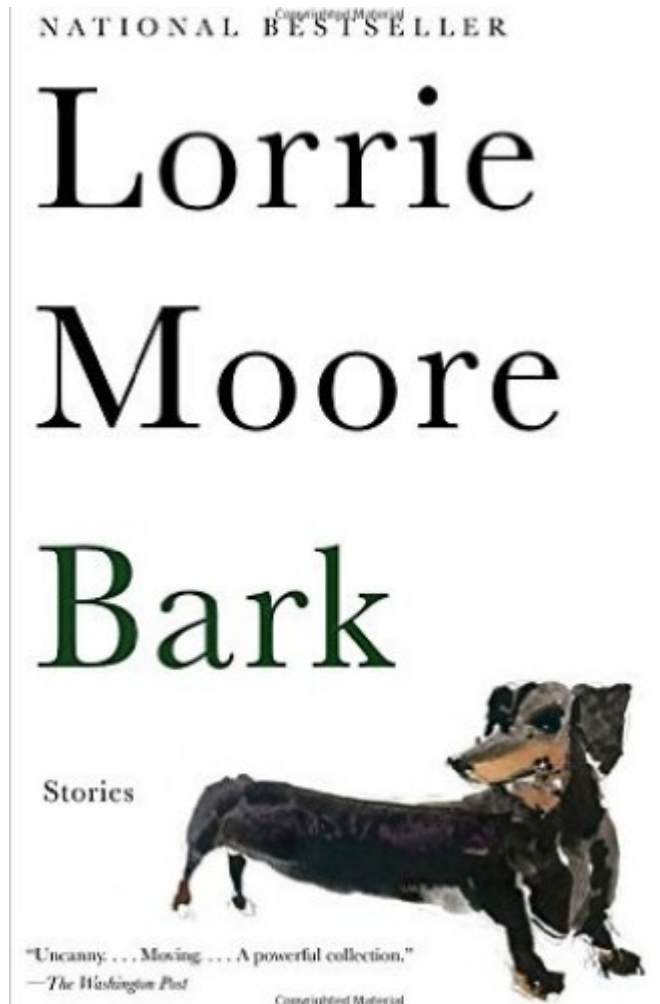


Francis Spufford's Christmas picks

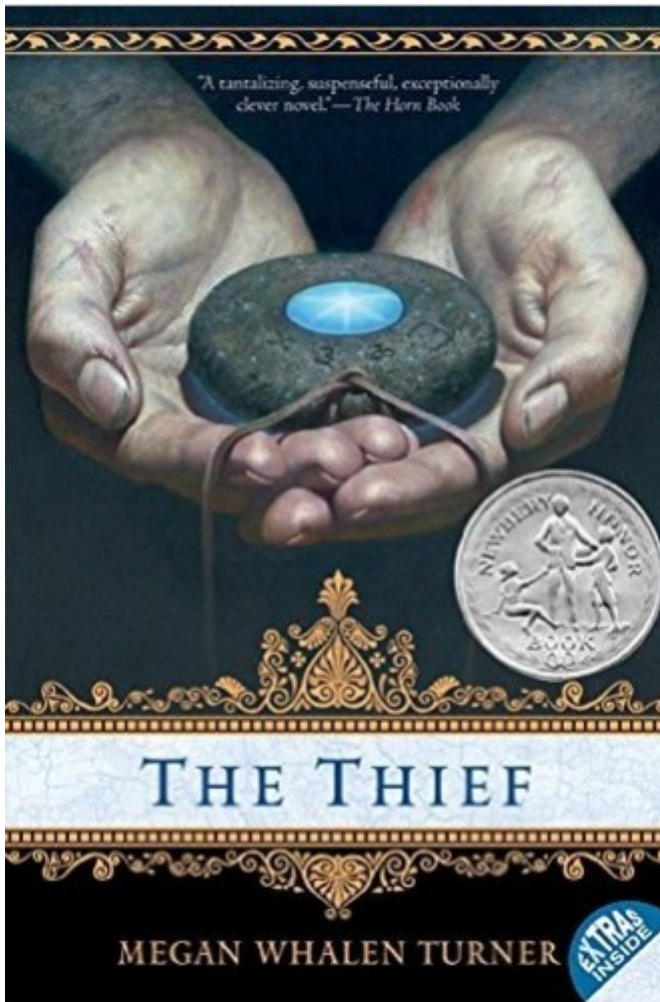
selected by [Francis Spufford](#) in the [December 9, 2015](#) issue

In Review



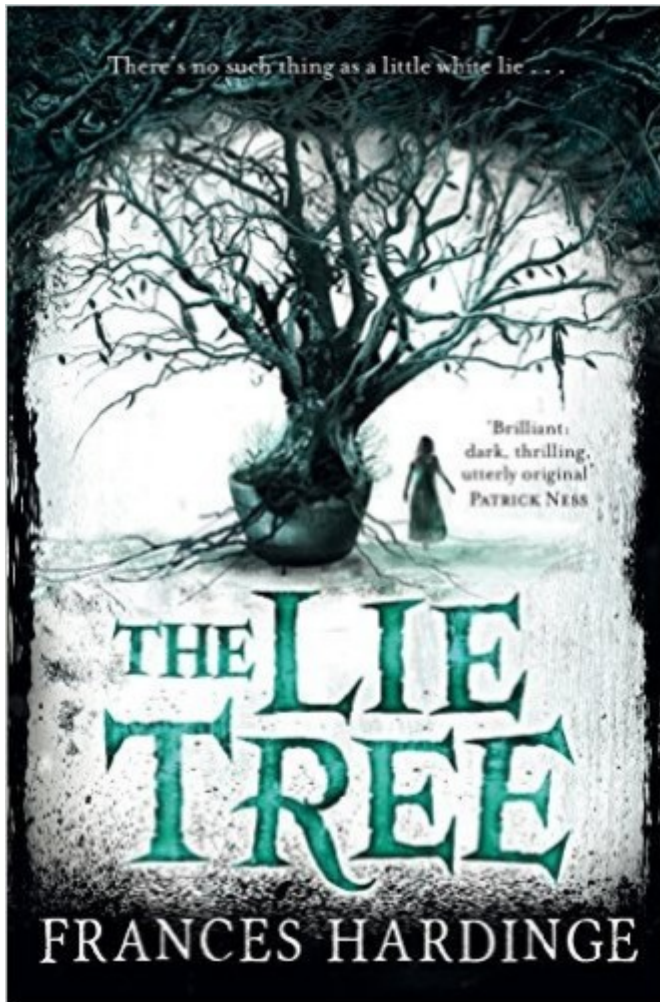
Bark

Lorrie Moore
Knopf



The Thief

Megan Whalen Turner
Greenwillow Books



The Lie Tree

by Frances Hardinge

Macmillan Children's Books



Mortal Fire

by Elizabeth Knox
Square Fish



The Thing Itself

by Adam Roberts

Hachette Book Group

Over the last year I polished off the last novels I hadn't read by Penelope Fitzgerald and worked my way one bomb of perceptive wit at a time through Lorrie Moore's stories (her latest collection is *Bark: Stories*, published by Knopf). I also discovered Megan Whalen Turner's young adult series *The Queen's Thief*—brilliant, tricky novels of romance and intrigue set in the Renaissance courts of an imagined Hellenic world. Some of the best new fiction I've come across this year has been YA. Frances Hardinge, heir to Joan Aiken's tradition of English fantasy, brought out *The Lie Tree* (Macmillan Children's Books), a deliciously tangled and atmospheric piece of Darwinian Gothic about a Victorian girl attempting to defend the reputation of her murdered fossil-hunting clergyman father and instead finding herself entwined in the mass of secrets he has left behind him. Sometimes billed as antireligious, it's actually doing something far richer and more imaginative than just facing off a

stereotyped “faith” against a stereotyped “reason” (coming May 2016 from Amulet; already available on Kindle). Meanwhile, Elizabeth Knox added *Mortal Fire* (Square Fish) to her Printz Award-winning YA series set in a fantasticated New Zealand. I haven’t read a book since the heyday of Margaret Mahy’s writing for teenagers that is so able to make fictive magic do justice to the vertiginous vividness of ordinary experience when you’re young. And then I found a surprising pendant to the pleasures of that novel in Knox’s 2014 Margaret Mahy Memorial Lecture, “What I do is build an unreal house and fill it with real storms,” a meditation on writing and on caring for the dying that segues without warning into an electric evocation of the presence of God. (It’s downloadable as an audio file from the Radio New Zealand website.) Finally, I recommend the strangest book I’ve read in many years: *The Thing Itself*, by British science fiction writer Adam Roberts (available for Kindle in December). It’s a mash-up of Kantian metaphysics with John Carpenter’s movie *The Thing*, full of pulp violence and virtuoso literary pastiche, through which an atheist author spins a plot out of the idea that the physical universe is a scanty frontage for infinite love. Can you imagine being talked into going to church by Philip K. Dick, who wrote the novel that became the movie *Blade Runner*? Well, it’s far weirder than that.