2017

Mark of the Thief

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All Nic wants is freedom. But he’s a slave working in the mines of the Roman Empire. His father died when he was a child, his mother was sold years ago, and his sister is the only reason he’s remained in the mines. One day he’s approached by Radulf, the general of the Roman forces, and asked to go into a sealed cavern that contains Julius Caesar’s lost treasure. He’s told to touch nothing but a bulla, a childhood accessory that signifies status. But the bulla contains magic and when Nic takes it a gryphon guarding the treasure marks him with another magical sign. After escaping the cave, he is pursued by Radulf who wants to use the bulla to overthrow the emperor. Friends are hard to come by and even harder to trust as Nic scrambles to learn all he can about how to use the magic and what to do to save his sister. But with lots of luck and even more magic Nic ends up defeating many foes in the colossal arena. Despite his triumph, Nic discovers that Radulf has his sister and when he attempts to rescue her Radulf takes the magic from Nic. Radulf uses his sister and the shocking discovery that he is Nic’s grandfather to keep Nic from fleeing Rome.

Jennifer Nielsen’s new trilogy begins with a bang. With lots of plot twists and turns, Mark of the Thief is an exciting read. Nielsen does an excellent job of developing her characters, particularly Nic and Aurelia. She develops a small romance between the two, but she never lets this overpower the plot or character development. Nielsen’s writing is clear and witty; she does an excellent job of defining Latin terms used during the time period. There are lots of characters that are against Nic and the plot can be a little confusing as readers try to navigate who is after Nic and for what reason. But the overarching plot is clear and the key players are well defined and developed. A good read for any fan of Nielsen’s Ascendance Trilogy and for any middle grade teachers looking for a great read aloud for their classrooms.

*Contains mild violence.