

# *Theo Thwaite Had a Secret* Manuscript Evaluation

Dear Chris,

It was so fun to read a full story from you this time! I'm not surprised (based on your Christmas short stories) to find your imagination fully at work and running wild. I can tell you had a lot of fun creating the world of Vue and letting Theo explore it. You did a great job showing Theo, Fynn, and Tigue developing a strong enough friendship where they started to trust each other with secrets and help each other, no questions asked. You clearly showed that they're good but sometimes mischievous boys, and that was another theme and strong point that I noticed in your Christmas short stories as well.

You have a lot of great ideas in this book. However, they haven't quite come together into a cohesive story. There's almost no plot or meaningful story structure; the magic system, technology, and setting are overwhelmingly complex and under-explained; Theo's character arc is treated in a very surface-level way; the themes are buried; and the story may be targeting the wrong audience.

I know that may be hard to read, but I also know you're dedicated to improving your craft, so I want you to understand how much work may be required in order to revise this story. I know this may or may not have been one of your books you previously had up for sale on Amazon, but I assume that either way, you're hoping to self-publish (or re-self-publish) this story and find as much success as possible with it. And to have the most success, I suggest that after you read this manuscript evaluation, take some time to re-outline your plot and character arcs. Then, write your story again from scratch. As you rewrite, try not to refer back to the old manuscript or think about how much original material you're replicating or not. It's okay if your story turns out wildly different from the current version! The backbone of it will still come through in your next draft, I'm sure.

So, let's go ahead and talk about the plot, worldbuilding, character arcs, themes, and audience.

## Plot and Structure

The story starts off pretty promising. Theo's secret ability is interesting, one that can easily hook readers into the rest of the story. His relationship with Chloe is sweet, and the moment when some other force stops time really raises the stakes (and if you're sticking with a similar beginning in your revisions, I'd suggest making that moment of time stopping happen at the end of chapter one so that that chapter has an extra solid hook at the end).

When Theo first discovers the portal into Vue, the alien world is intriguing. However, within a few chapters, it becomes clear that Theo is getting little to no answers about anything in Vue, and that quickly becomes frustrating for readers. Theo is all but wandering around Sumr Sum, doing almost nothing meaningful to drive the plot forward. He doesn't actively work toward getting back to Chloe despite thinking about it fairly often, and even his research in the library doesn't feel like it gets him anywhere. Almost the whole book is about Theo exploring Vue and its magic excruciatingly slowly. The first event that gives Theo a meaningful, proactive purpose is when he frees that woman from a sandman and eventually realizes what he's done. (However, most of the impact of that moment is lost on the readers because it wasn't properly foreshadowed.) And his decision to help others escape sandmen happens in the last 25% of the story! Ideally, that turning point when Theo takes control of his story should happen by the midpoint. (Watch [these videos](#) by Dan Wells on the seven-point plot structure to understand more about what I mean by this and get a better understanding of how the plot in general needs more restructuring.)

Although Theo's enthusiasm for discovering the world around him is somewhat infectious, the stakes of the story are almost never high enough to keep readers invested in what Theo is doing. Theo rarely experiences negative consequences for anything he does in Vue—not that he's *trying* to do anything bad to earn those consequences, but sometimes bad things just happen, especially in a world where you don't know the rules. Without much adversity, Theo has little reason to change and the pacing grinds to a halt. Additionally, Theo never really seems to make a big mistake in the story aside from the occasional social faux pas (and this is partly because he doesn't take enough meaningful action in the story to cause either good or harm in the first place).

The end of the story leaves the reader with far too many unacknowledged issues. Theo has taken remarkably few steps toward his supposed goal of reuniting with Chloe, nothing has been resolved with the giant tree in the city center, it's not clear if Theo intends to keep freeing people from the sandmen and make a place for himself in Vue, and Mordeau's leverage against Theo doesn't feel believable enough for Theo to commit to doing a task before he even knows what it is. I'm sure you've planned or written more books to make this into a series, answering some questions and resolving some issues in later books. But so little actually happens in this first book that it seems odd for so much to still be unresolved at this point.

With all this in mind, I'd encourage you to take out as much of the "wandering" through Vue as possible and let Theo learn about the world and magic as he takes meaningful action to accomplish his goals. So if his main goal throughout most of the book is going to be making it home to Chloe, then we need to see him make satisfying progress toward that goal. And if you don't want him to end up making it back to her by the end of the book, then perhaps a more interesting way to get him to stay in Vue is to give him a situation that forces him to choose between that and another cause—for instance, he could be torn between helping someone in Vue before it's too late or abandoning them in order to get back to Chloe. Whatever Theo's goals are throughout the book (and they can change), keep in mind that you need not only that *promise* (the objective) but also the *progress* and the *payoff*. Check out [this video](#) from Brandon Sanderson explaining this concept too! It's very helpful.

Here's a quick example of how you could potentially shift away from the "wandering" to the progress and payoff. Let's say you decide to keep the scene where Theo has dinner with Fynn and the Judge. At this point, Theo's main goal is still to get back to Chloe as soon as possible. He's got a lot to figure out before he can get there, so maybe he decides to focus on getting one piece of the puzzle: information about how the people of Vue view travel between worlds. Is it commonly done, easy for him to slip through as if he were any other traveler? Or is he going to have to stealth his way to get to and through this portal?

Currently, the dinner scene is very focused on the unique aspects of Vue—the smells through the tubes, the type of food they eat, how the bowls come out of and back into the wall. All of those are fun details, but focusing on them doesn't help Theo accomplish his goal. Instead, he can ask careful questions throughout dinner, trying to maintain his "nutter" façade (also, he should figure out the truth of what a nutter is much faster than he currently does), to help him figure out his next step to getting back to Chloe.

The end result would probably be one of two scenarios: First, Theo might actually ask really clever questions that prove to the readers how smart and capable he is, and he'll get the information he needs and now have a new objective in mind in order to get back to Chloe, such as learning more about the portals or whether time is still stopped for Chloe or not. Second, instead of asking clever questions, Theo might get talked around in circles by the Judge and let slip that he's not a nutter—and not even from that world. He'll have to admit his secret (or at least one of his secrets), either earning himself a terrible consequence (showing the readers that he has realistic weaknesses) or learning that the Judge and Fynn are people he can truly trust in Vue because they won't betray his secret. They'll likely be willing to guide him through that world and help him get back to Chloe (unless the Judge would have another objective in his own mind). Again, with this second outcome, Theo's objective will likely change to either get himself out of that consequence or use Fynn and the Judge's help to make a plan to get himself home.

Do you see how what was once a simple dinner that didn't change anything could suddenly change *everything* for Theo? He just needs to be willing to take a little action, and you need to be willing to sometimes let hard things happen to him to raise the stakes of the story. What I'm talking about here will also tie in quite a bit to the worldbuilding, characters, and theme sections, so as you re-outline your plot, keep in mind how the plot can help you interweave those elements into the story as well.

## Plot Holes

However you decide to revise your plot, let me give you an idea of some of the plot holes that also came up throughout the story. Hopefully we can avoid repeating these plot holes or prevent similar ones from popping up in your next draft.

My first concern is about the short grass man that pushed Theo through the over and done. It's possible that you know a logical explanation for why the grass man would push Theo through an interdimensional portal without a second thought, but to the readers, there's never an explanation given. And at first glance, this action doesn't really make sense. Theo obviously isn't supposed to be at this portal—he's supposed to be frozen in time like everyone else. Why wouldn't the grass man see him, realize that something out of the ordinary is going on, and then approach him in some manner? He might try to scare him off, for instance, or persuade him to walk away and pretend this never happened, or he might run and grab his friends and capture Theo for snooping around.

Even if the grass man doesn't care about Theo at all and was just pushing him out of the way (which seems unnecessary given how large the portal seemed to be and how small the grass man is), why wouldn't Theo try talking to him? He's a pretty curious boy, so why not try to communicate and find out what's going on? At that point in the story especially, Theo desperately wants to figure out if he can get time to start again so he doesn't have to live in no-time forever or leave Chloe on her own.

The next plot hole came up when Theo froze time to escape the rock monster and went back to the campsite to check out the people there. I couldn't understand why he wouldn't unfreeze time in a more favorable position so he could talk to those people and ask for help. Addressing these plot holes could majorly change the direction of your story, but it could be an exciting turn, especially if those new twists and turns allow Theo to overcome more obstacles in satisfying ways.

Later when Theo is being "judged," Fynn stays in the room, and maybe I just didn't understand the situation, but that felt a bit like a violation of privacy to me. I'm sure Fynn was curious, and yes the Judge is his uncle, but unless he has a true reason to be there aside from his curiosity, wouldn't it be more polite for the Judge to ask him to leave for a moment?

Fast forwarding again, let's talk about when Fynn first tells Theo about the allipeaches and convinces him to pick some. Again, perhaps I misunderstood, but I was under the impression that the allipeaches could *only* be eaten by the person who picked it. Thus, even if Theo is safe to pick them because he's staying on Mother Tafuga's property, Fynn and Tigue shouldn't be able to eat them because *Theo* picked them. Right? (Additionally, let me add that it was hard to feel the stakes of how cool it is to eat the allipeaches because it's hard for *Theo* to convince us that he thinks they're cool. He doesn't come from this world for one thing, but even as Fynn explains, Theo doesn't have any reason to truly want to become popular or believe he can. As far as he's concerned, he's labeled as a nutter and just wants to get home anyway.)

Eventually, Theo learns that time stops when someone from Vue crosses over to Old Home. In that moment, I felt like he might sort of confirm that time has probably started again now that the over and done is likely closed—although perhaps he needs to research that too. And if he does connect the dots, that would imply that Chloe for sure knows he's gone by now, and that would be something important for him to react to.

I believe around that same point (in chapter thirteen?), Theo considers that a more secret over and done, the one he came through, might be easier to get through than a public one, but I'm not so sure. After all, wouldn't it be guarded carefully in order to remain a secret? The real reason to go for the secret one, in my opinion, is either because the public ones might require paperwork/identification he wouldn't have, or because the original one is more likely to take him back to the same place. Also, Theo learns that the known over and done are near cities. Would he have recognized if any were in Sumr Sum or in cities near him? If so, that knowledge should inform more of his actions and goals.

## Worldbuilding

As I've mentioned, the world of Vue is very imaginative and fun to explore. But like I hinted at earlier, some descriptions and most explanations of various aspects of the setting were confusing or unsatisfactory. I understand that you want Theo to be overwhelmed by all the culture shock, but that isn't the feeling that actually comes through. Instead, for a vast majority of the story, the readers' experience is one of frustration and impatience, wondering when some clear understanding will actually come. Sometimes, even more "ordinary" details aren't easily understandable (like about how class and teachers work in this world—I can't tell if people are tutored one on one or taught in groups or why sometimes teenagers like Cecile are in charge).

When you rework your outline for this story, one option I'd like you to consider is changing Theo's background. Instead of having Vue be a secret world with access to Earth that Theo stumbles into, perhaps Theo could just be a boy from a fantasy world called Vue. Whether Vue still has access to another world that is or is like Earth would depend on where you want to take the story. The reason I suggest this is because currently, the readers are very unlikely to enjoy following Theo through Vue because no one is actually guiding him—not even Fynn and Tigue, although they try to. But if Theo, our main character, is already a native of Vue, then *he* can become the guide to the readers as he introduces them to his world through his everyday life and then adventures. If you're worried about how to do this without infodumping on the readers, I'd suggest reading a book like *The Final Empire* of the Mistborn trilogy by Brandon Sanderson for a good example of how to interweave exposition with the present moments of the viewpoint character. Even the prologue of *The Final Empire* has some really good examples of how to explain worldbuilding to the readers without taking them out of the story.

Assuming you'd rather keep Vue as a hidden world with various points connected to Earth, another aspect I'd like you to consider is how you've incorporated Earth cultures into the Vue culture. In the very beginning of the book, we saw a few languages spoken by the people at the campsite. (That was cool to see such different languages, too.) It was hinted at that people came to Vue from different cultures and brought their languages with them. However, this is the only example of culture from Earth influencing the culture of Vue. If you want Vue to be more of a melting pot that really blends various cultures together, we'll need to interweave those cultural elements in more and also consider what it is about Vue that ties all these cultures together. Is

Vue a refuge from something on Earth? Is Vue a place of opportunity, like a new frontier? We'll touch more on this in a bit, too.

I also had a few questions about the world that I think other readers may have as well. For instance, why does time function in the same exact way in Vue as it does on Earth? Other worlds don't necessarily have to measure hours, minutes, and seconds the same way we do, especially if their planet has a different length of time to rotate around their sun. If nothing else, once Theo realizes he's in another world, it might make sense for him to at least ponder about this coincidence for a bit so it doesn't come across too much like a plot convenience. Later, perhaps he could discover that the time stays consistent across both worlds because of Vue's connection to Earth, however that may have happened. Again, an explanation of Vue's history and connection to Earth will help keep the time continuity from seeming like a plot convenience.

Along those lines, although I liked seeing how the people of Vue sort of scavenge through the over and dones (which seems like a clunky name for a portal), I couldn't help but wonder why the people of Vue don't try to openly trade or interact with "Old Home." What makes them keep to themselves? I can't quite tell if they're desperate for resources, or are selfishly hiding their magic, or if Vue is just a secret for the sake of letting Theo come from the normal world so he can explore the magic from a similar perspective as the readers. If the latter, we need a solid reason that the people of Vue as a whole have decided to keep their ventures into "Old Home" a secret so that, again, it doesn't seem like a plot convenience.

## Magic and Technology

Let's shift now to talk more specifically about the magical and technological aspects of the setting.

### No-Time

Overall, I think Theo's ability is a fun idea to explore in a story. Almost any reader will enjoy thinking of what they might do if they could stop time and be interested to see what Theo decides to do. I just want to point out here that the rules of stopping time and how objects interact in no-time weren't always consistent. The biggest inconsistency I saw was concerning gravity, how some things would fall and some things wouldn't. For instance, why does a bird not fall from the sky in no-time, but a camera Theo was holding does? Pay close attention to chapters one and thirteen especially to compare the rules no-time follows differently. Finally, the moon-walking feel of no-time didn't carry over after it was mentioned in chapter two, so remember to keep those details fresh and vivid for the readers when Theo slips into no-time.

### Vue

Like I mentioned earlier, many aspects of Vue are difficult to understand and visualize. Some that I found particularly difficult to understand, even by the end of the story, were the snippets (those were the sticks on people's faces, right?) and the strange finger actions the people would do as they went about their day. It was really difficult to tell what snippets were actually used for

or how those finger actions were accomplishing the desired effects when the people weren't actually touching anything. Was it their will or visualization that truly made the magic work? Did they need to cough first, since most of the magic seems to involve coughing?

Even when Fynn and Tigue began to explain dyleau magic in chapter thirteen, I still had no idea what the magic was supposed to accomplish for these people in everyday life. What was the point of creating a floral scent or a small pile of snow? Even in a world that's meant to inspire wonder and awe in the readers, the magic should serve more of a purpose, especially for the sake of the story. Currently, most of the interactions with magic in *Vue* are moments when Theo is just observing and wondering about it or when people are giving really simple examples that are otherwise meaningless to the plot. To make all the magic and technology in *Vue* truly exciting for the readers to learn about and understand, we need them to see how Theo and the other characters can use them as tools to accomplish clever and amazing things (like when Theo uses his power to free people from the sandmen).

You seem to want the magic in *Vue* to work as a hard magic system, meaning the rules of magic are clear and understood almost like a science (think of a magic system like in the *Mistborn* trilogy or the *Bartimeus* trilogy.) However, there's *so much* going on with snippets, coughing, dyleau, volos, zeps, familiars . . . and that's only the tip of the iceberg. The readers can't keep these rules and magic forms straight, and when they try to, they don't have enough concentration left to process how these things work or affect the setting. It's all too complicated, and these elements aren't outlined or linked clearly enough to help readers follow along at a good pace.

I thought of a couple books that might be instructive for you to read (or review if you've already read them) to help you see how this kind of complicated worldbuilding *can* be introduced and used effectively. First, look into *Beyonders: A World Without Heroes* by Brandon Mull. This is an excellent middle grade fantasy novel about a boy just a little younger than Theo falling through the mouth of a hippo into a foreign, magical world. He suddenly has to navigate his way through an unfamiliar, complicated setting and becomes an unlikely hero. Although the worldbuilding is intricate, it's very well done, and the pacing and adventure are exciting and engaging. Second, check out *The Ten Thousand Doors of January* by Alix E. Harrow. This fantasy story follows a girl named January who learns about the reality of thousands of doors between worlds. She and the reader have a bit of a learning curve to learning about how this world travel works, but the readers never feel lost and are instead intrigued as the information about the magic unfolds.

Another possibility you may want to consider is attempting to simplify some aspects of the world. Sometimes, focusing more on just a few aspects of the worldbuilding is more immersive than trying to spread yourself too thin by trying to innovate every aspect of a fantasy world. Whatever direction you choose to go, I'd like to bring up a couple things that just don't seem practical or fully developed.

As an example, when Fynn smashes his bowl at the wall to get it to blend in again, he teases Theo about doing it before he's finished his soup. But wouldn't Fynn's bowl still have traces of

soup even if he finished it? So he would get drops of soup on the wall as well unless he took the time to wash the bowl first—but it seems like throwing the bowl at the wall was supposed to be a way to circumvent having to wash the bowl out. Additionally, this way of washing dishes never came up later as Theo was helping out in Mother Tafuga's house. To me, this is a sign that this may not be a necessary worldbuilding aspect.

When Fynn's mother casted the Esperelle spell on Theo, I was a little shocked. And I think that's what you were trying to accomplish in a sense; I think you were trying to show how powerful and cruel she is. And that spell was definitely super intense and highly dangerous. It could not only kill you if you're not careful, but it also seriously violates a person's freedom of speech and expression. So, yes, I was shocked that she would be so callous . . . but I was more shocked that there didn't seem to be any rules in this society about using harmful spells like this. It just seems like the kind of power ordinary people shouldn't have access to unless the governing system is corrupt. (Another issue with this particular scenario is that Fynn's mother never comes around to be a threat again, so what was really the point in this confrontation? How did it move the plot forward or influence a character arc?)

## Characters

Let's talk in depth about Theo's character and arc, as he's our main perspective throughout the book. We'll also touch a bit on Fynn and Tigue, Chloe, and Mordeau.

### Theo

Theo is overall a really likable character. His joy and wonder about all the magic, his kindness to keep cleaning up the trash on Mother Tafuga's doorstep, and his occasional cleverness with his secret talent all make him likable. However, I see some inconsistencies in his character and found his motivations often underdeveloped. And as I've mentioned in the plot section, he's usually not very proactive in this story, which can make readers perceive him as boring.

The biggest inconsistency I see in Theo's character is that you describe him as *extremely* extroverted in chapter one, so much so that he practically pins people down to talk to them. However, Theo hardly ever *acts* like an extrovert throughout the story. He seems to enjoy spending time alone and doesn't often seek out company for the sake of company. Typically, extroverts are energized by spending time with other people. So, it's a little unrealistic for Theo to be such an avid reader and love libraries so much if he's supposed to be really extroverted. Reading is usually a really solitary activity and doesn't fulfill that need to spend time and talk with other people. Not that extroverts can't enjoy reading, but it's just less likely to be a major passtime. If anything, Theo should be a little discouraged at the thought of having to spend who knows how long in a library researching until he finds out the books can talk. Then he should be thrilled that he can now focus more and enjoy reading more because talking books truly cater to his personality and energy levels. To go along with that, maybe we should consider more how



lonely his talent of stopping time can be for him. (I'll talk more about that when we get to themes.)

Additionally, as an extrovert, his actions should often be motivated by how he likes to interact with other people. This might be a desire to see others be happy (offering compliments, asking about someone's day, etc.), or it could be a desire to always have someone to confide in because he's a little insecure. Maybe, to go along with his love of learning, he could just be curious about what makes other people tick and what life experiences and perspectives everyone else has. Whatever the case, we need a core value inside Theo that motivates him to interact with people the way he does. (If you really want to dive into some examples of great character work that shows characters acting from a place of motivation and living their core values, check out the Aurelian Cycle by Rosaria Munda.)

Another aspect of Theo's character that feels a little lacking is the way he reacts to being stuck in Vue and his desire to bring Chloe there and live there forever. If Theo is really so attached to his sister and Vue is so different from Earth, he should be experiencing bouts of homesickness at least once in a while. I remember when my family hosted a German exchange student one year. She was so excited to visit America, improve her English, and make new friends. She was one of the most capable teenagers in her class of living abroad for a year and developing her language skills, yet she really struggled for the first month or two because of the culture shock. She was still so happy to be there, but she had trouble sleeping and eating and could get pretty emotional. Even if you *want* to be somewhere new, sometimes the foreignness of a place can get to you, especially as a teenager who is still figuring out so much about life. (My German friend was fifteen at the time, by the way.)

By the end of chapter six, Theo should be more worried about whether time is still frozen in his world or not. I think it's great that he still wants to take his sister to see the cool new world, but I think he should be a little more worried. What if time stayed frozen on Earth and he took ten years to get back and figure out how to start time again? What would that mean for him and Chloe? Also, I don't quite connect with Theo's emotion of wanting to live in this world with Chloe forever (which is mentioned at the end of chapter seven). Why is it so wonderful to have so much unknown and whimsy there? Why does he long to live in a place like this? Why does he think it will be better than Earth, or that Chloe would actually choose Vue over Earth? (Again, look into *The Ten Thousand Doors of January* and consider the motivation so apparent in January and her family members to live in new worlds by comparison.)

## Theo's Character Arc

Finally, let's talk in depth about Theo's character arc. You've obviously put thought into what you wanted his arc to look like with him thinking that he can't make a difference in the beginning and then realizing by the end that he indeed can make a difference. But the way the arc has been incorporated into the story is all on the surface: it honestly feels like you wrote the story, then went back and planted a few lines for Theo to think here and there about how badly he wants to make a difference. Beyond that, it's really unclear why this drive is so closely linked with the memory of his mom dying. Why would he really expect to have been able to have made a

difference when she was dying? Even as a teenage boy likely going through puberty, it seems strange for him to assume that he could truly have power over her disease. It's common for people struggling with grief to blame themselves for one reason or another, but Theo doesn't even have a bad reason he's convinced himself of.

Assuming we add enough that Theo's desire to make a difference in the world makes enough sense to be his main inner conflict, we still need to do a couple things to really make this desire a part of him and his motivation.

First, we need to get down to the core character value Theo has that makes this his big desire. In this case, it's probably going to be something like him being driven by compassion or loyalty or selflessness, and one of those attributes is what's going to make him want to help others. Or, maybe it's a trait like pride or low self-esteem or guilt, and *those* make him want to be noticed and "make a difference" in a way that's not necessarily best for him and others. We could even choose both a positive core value and a negative core value that battle with each other as Theo works through his challenges.

Second, we need to incorporate his character arc into the plot. You've made the right move in trying to show that Theo believes the lie that he can't make a difference in the beginning, but we need to do more than that. We need to show him *living* his lie, making decisions based on the belief that he can't help others in a meaningful way. This becomes the first step on his character arc. Next, we need a moment when Theo encounters the opposite of his belief—the truth that he is fully capable of making a difference—through some sort of advice, instruction, or whatnot. He won't accept it at that time, but it will plant the seed for him to change.

Around the midpoint, he should go through enough experiences that he decides to give living the truth a try. Maybe he *can* make a difference! But by roughly the 75% mark, something so devastating will happen that he now doesn't know if there's any hope for him to live by this truth, and he'll return to the lie. Finally, all the pieces will come together, and he'll realize he has (or can get) everything he needs to not only win the plot but also live his truth, and that's what he'll end up doing! (You can study more about this structure for a character arc to be woven into the plot by reading K. M. Weiland's *Creating Character Arcs*. I highly recommend her instruction!)

## Fynn and Tigue

The first thing I want to note here is that the first time Fynn was introduced, I couldn't tell how old he was. Eventually it became clear that he was about the same age as Theo, but for a while I wasn't sure whether to imagine a five-year-old or not.

Otherwise, I liked that Fynn and Tigue had distinct personalities. The three boys developed a bond that was rather believable and endearing. One thing you may want to consider is giving Fynn and Tigue some small character arcs of their own. They don't need to be quite as up and down or complex as Theo's, but it's often satisfying if the side characters have a reason to grow

and change too. (Tigue has the roots of a good arc by potentially leaving the popular crowd to become true friends with Fynn and Theo.)

Finally, you might want to consider just a little more what Fynn and Tigue's friendship might mean to Theo if he's truly an extrovert. If he's used to having tons of friends around him all the time, it would be *really* lonely at first to be stranded in a world without knowing anyone. But to finally get really close friends when he hasn't really had that before might make him emotional once or twice, even if he doesn't say the words out loud. (Because let's be real, what teenage boy is going to talk about his feelings?)

## Chloe

One thing that's really hard about the structure of the book is that we don't see Chloe for most of it but still have to believe that Theo loves her and honestly wants to find his way back to her. I think where this is lacking most is in Theo's wish to show the world to Chloe later. I want to get more of a sense of inside jokes from them, like seeing Theo realize that Chloe would think something was extra cool or pretty or that something else was creepy or weird. Show how well he knows his sister by the way he knows how she would likely react to things in the alien world. To be clear, most of the time, Theo just thinks, "I have to show Chloe this!" What I'm asking for is more specific reactions. Like, "Wow, Chloe would die to have a makeover like this. She never has time to do her makeup the way she wants to."

Also, remember how I suggested we need some homesickness or trauma going on with Theo if he thinks he's not getting back to Chloe? Another option, if he's not struggling with these emotions, is that he could have a very complicated relationship with her. We could let Theo be interested in Vue because he thinks it has everything he wants and that he'd be happy to leave Earth behind. The direction you go here depends on where you want to take his character arc, the plot, and your themes.

## Mordeau

Aside from the mysterious sandmen who seem to be more of a force of nature than anything else, Mordeau is really the only antagonist we see in this story. However, besides being unabashedly rude to everyone, he doesn't really act like a villain. However, he has quite a bit of potential to become a truly dangerous and memorable antagonist.

Think for a bit about Mordeau's job to sweep the streets. If those magical sticks are sweeping up every little thing left on the ground, it seems like more people would be really worried about accidentally dropping something and leaving it behind. We see, for example, that if you drop something like a coin, it belongs to Mordeau. So how would people protect the items that matter to them? (On a worldbuilding sidenote, this could have huge implications for the culture of this city, such as not being able to leave furniture or potted plants out on your porch, creating magical bags or leashes to keep your items safe on your person while you're traveling . . .)

That's a lot of power to have over a city when you think about it. Imagine that someone loses something valuable or meaningful. Mordeau can barter basically anything he wants for that person to get it back. Yet Mordeau never actively takes advantage of this power in the story. We do see him ignoring people who are waiting to talk to him, but that just feels like a petty move that isn't ever explained. It's much more intimidating and threatening to see Mordeau actively manipulating different characters and realizing that he could do this same thing to Theo if he were to drop anything important.

On a bit of a worldbuilding tangent again, there's an unanswered question of who even gave Mordeau this power over property and why other powerful figures in the city allow him to keep that. The governing structure of Sumr Sum (or anywhere in Vue) isn't mentioned much, if at all, but it seems like the politics of this world could become fairly relevant if Mordeau's character is primarily motivated by power, politics, and manipulating others.

## Theme

One buried theme I saw that has potential to come out more was that of friendship. Theo, Fynn, and Tigue's friendship is one of the strongest elements of this story currently because their fondness for each other is so believable. Then, when Fynn and Tigue agree to guard his secret, that moment becomes pretty meaningful.

What I'd like to see more of is what message (or messages) you'd like to give your readers about friendship. Do you feel that friendship can be so strong that it can outlast any form of adversity? Do you feel strongly that friendships can be made between unlikely people? Do you feel that friendships can be remade after being broken? Just throwing out various questions here to get you thinking, but I hope you can see how you can develop this friendship in a way that not only propels the plot and helps along the character arcs but can also become an impactful message that your readers could really resonate with.

Next, obviously Theo's internal conflict about making a difference can become a powerful theme as well. However, I sense a potential issue that could arise here. Theo, after all, has an incredible special ability that almost anyone, with a little thought, could think of a way to make a positive difference with. It's going to be tricky to make the readers believe that Theo could truly feel unremarkable or worthless with a unique power like his.

If you still really want to use this theme, though, I do see a way we could make it work. The key will be showing within the first chapter or two that Theo truly *can't* find ways to make a difference with his power even when he tries. As an example off the top of my head, maybe he tries to keep someone in a store from tripping over an obstacle by moving the obstacle out of the way, but someone else ends up tripping, or the original person runs into something else, or any other number of unfortunate outcomes. This means we likely wouldn't keep the opening scene with Theo trying to prank that family on their vacation, but we could still find some interesting ways to show how Theo has experimented with his ability over the years trying to answer the question of how he can matter in his society.

Near the end of the story (or series if you want to really dive into this theme), we may want to explore an idea such as how the abilities we're given don't measure our impact; the way we choose to interact with others (both on a large and small scale) is how we can truly measure our success. Sometimes, that means that you simply mean the world to one individual, but that difference that you make is still priceless to that one person. Anyway, there's lots of directions you can go with this theme, but I think it's just going to be critical to remember that we have to add on the question of how privilege and power fit into the idea of what kind of difference you can make. If the only times when Theo feels like he can make a difference are when he uses his time-stopping power, then know that this theme probably isn't developed enough.

## Audience

When you first told me about this project, you mentioned that you'd categorized it for young adults. I understand why you might have decided on that label. First of all, Theo is a teenager, a common age you see in other YA novels and a great age for the target audience to relate to. Second, the depth of your worldbuilding and magic system and the way Theo is thrust into the world with little instruction at first creates a fairly steep learning curve for the readers, which is easier to pull off with an older target audience (as compared to a middle grade audience).

However, practically everything else about your story gives a sense of a middle grade novel rather than YA. Part of that is because the setting is constantly working to give the readers a sense of wonder, a very popular aspect of MG novels. Another reason is because although Theo is a teenager (an age range we see all the time in MG, by the way), he and his friends often act very boyish and playful, making them all seem a little younger than they are. In contrast, most YA novels have some sort of focus on or theme involving coming of age, growth, discovering who you are, etc.—and those kinds of themes didn't come through in this particular story.

So, you have two obvious choices in how to course correct this genre labeling: make some minor changes and market the book to MG, or make some major changes to the theme and feel of the book so it appeals to the YA audience. You'll want to think carefully about your vision for your book and possibly do a little research into the current market differences between MG and YA. My instincts say you really value the wonder and whimsy in your world of Vue and already have the seeds of more MG-esque themes planted in this manuscript, so it feels natural for you to develop the story more in that direction. But, if transforming the story into a true YA novel is the direction you want to go, it's certainly doable even though it could take a lot more rewriting.

## Title

The title of your story goes hand in hand with the audience you choose to market to. Like I mentioned before, your current title is certainly intriguing, but the more I've thought about it, the more I think we could tweak it a little to better "sell" your story.

The biggest pros of the current title are the pleasant alliteration of “Theo Thwaite” and the connotation that the word “secret” brings. Both of these aspects of the title can draw readers in by giving them a sense of mystery and wonder, which, like I’ve mentioned, seems to be a pretty big component of your story at this point.

However, one big hang up that I have is the past tense of the word “had.” Granted, your story is written in past tense, and that’s the literal phrasing you use a few times in the manuscript, so it makes sense why you would have used that in the title. But at the same time, some readers may approach the title wondering if Theo no longer has a secret at the beginning of the story because the “had” can imply he *once* had a secret but no longer does. It also implies that his secret will no longer be a secret by the end of the story, which it technically still is because only a handful of people know about Theo’s special ability.

This may or may not be a big deal to you, but I’ve done a little bit of brainstorming of some different directions you could go with the title. Keep in mind that I’m not an expert when it comes to these marketing things, but I do think the ideas I’m giving you reflect many successful titles in recent years. And if you hate any of these ideas, I’m not offended and you certainly don’t have to use them!

- The Secrets of Theo Thwaite
- The [adjective] Secrets of Theo Thwaite
  - Potential adjectives: remarkable, mysterious, curious, fantastic(al)
  - Potential alliterative adjectives: select, sensational, shrouded, simple, significant, special, specific, splendid, stupendous
- Theo Thwaite and the Secrets of Vue

## Conclusion

I know this is a lot to consider, and I’m asking a lot of you to rework your outline and rewrite your entire story. But I hope you can recognize that currently, although delightfully imaginative, the story meanders more than anything else. The book will be most engaging and exciting if you can interweave your plot, worldbuilding, character arcs, and theme as much as possible. As you discover all the different pieces you want to put together, try considering each scene as a chance to incorporate as many of these elements as you can.

I hope my feedback and the resources I’ve listed are helpful as you move forward, and I look forward to seeing where Theo and his secrets end up next.

Best of luck,

Brittany