

The Thirteenth Princess

Diane Zahler

Reviewed by: Sophia Cheng, Age 16

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Despite being a servant in the palace kitchens, Zita has always known that by birth, she is the thirteenth princess of the land, royalty in the very palace she works in. In fact, the entire castle is aware of Zita's status by birth, as well as the tragic story behind it. Gradually, young Zita pieces together a story of her birth herself - how her father, had in his inconsolable anguish and despair at having lost both his wife and an opportunity for a son with Zita's birth, had blamed her for his misfortunes and cast her off to live with the servants. As the caring, yet sensible cook's understudy, Zita leads a comfortable childhood, and does not resent the menial tasks she is expected to do every day, as preparing dessert offers her the opportunity to delight her father with her baking skills. Her sisters secretly dote on her, and once a week, she has the complete attention of all twelve princesses and their affections, which includes a full princess treatment. She even befriends the charming young stableboy, whose adventurous nature leads them to the dwelling of a grandmotherly witch.

Then, one night, a dinner between the princesses and a young prince goes horribly wrong when the princesses are unable to carry out a conversation, much less speak a word. Their baffling behavior becomes even more worrisome when the princesses' health decline, and they appear frailer and more exhausted every day. Soon, the princesses start to fall from exhaustion, starting with Adena, and the only clues are the tattered slippers that the servants find every morning. There seems to be no cure for the princesses' mysterious illness, and the benign witch, Babette, suspects a powerful, evil enchantment to be involved. Unsure who is responsible for the darkness that has enshrouded the castle and unable to attain additional help without revealing that Zita is well acquainted with her sisters, Zita must find the source of the evil before the princesses' deathly rests become eternal slumbers.

The Thirteenth Princess by Diane Zahler is a retelling of the *Twelve Dancing Princesses* that aside from the different characters and storyline generally follows the original plot. The story itself is simple and easy to follow, especially if the reader is familiar with *the Twelve Dancing Princesses* and the key components of the typical happily-ever-after princess story. Although *The Thirteenth Princess* is not a lackluster imitation of the original, the individual ideas represented in the book seemed trite and overused. The predictability extends to the characters, which is disappointing considering that the story is derived from a classic fairytale, and exhibits the undertones of one as well. The majority of the characters have a set personality in the beginning of the book, and for the most part, the characterization is minimal and any shifts are only necessary to complete the story. Overall, the innocent romance, family-centered theme, and the standard good-over-evil theme give the book its appeal, but it lacks in other areas that constitute a riveting read.

Recommended Readings:

Although it is not my favorite version of *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, *The Thirteenth Princess* is still a charming twist that does hold a surprise or two while staying faithful to its original plot. I would recommend this book to middle school students, but as a whole, it would probably be more interesting for someone who has not read *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* yet.

If you are looking for books similar to this one, be sure to check out *Rise* by Anna Carey, *The Seventh Princess* by Nick Sullivan, *The Tail of Emily Windsnap* by Liz Kessler, and *Cruel Beauty* by Rosamund Hodge.