



## The Queen's Return

**Mary-Ellen Lang Collura**

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*With a feisty female lead, this dystopian novel is a solid addition to a suspense-filled series for more-mature teens.*

Sometimes the princess isn't saved, sometimes she saves the world. In *The Queen's Return*, Mary-Ellen Lang Collura continues her series of YA dystopian fiction with a compelling fantasy filled with suspense, supernatural elements, questions about finding and accepting one's purpose in life, and a feisty female lead.

Fifteen-year-old Princess Zabeth flees for her life. Her sister, currently the queen, is controlled by Zabeth's stepmother, whose evil intentions are starting to show. Thought to be dead, and hiding her true identity, Zabeth must find a way to survive, even as the "queen's" laws draw a dangerous net around her.

After falling in with some Outcasts, Zabeth is drugged and raped. She finds her way to the Bunker, where she hopes to hide in safety. There, her security is not completely certain, and an unexplained illness is not quite what she first thought. On the run with evil forces at her heels, the princess finds that her people are restless for a new leader, especially when a dangerous rumor arises. Zabeth must determine what is right, and what role she will play in saving her people.

Collura crafts a compelling story while maintaining many standard YA fantasy elements—the young saving the world, minimal adult help, and a girl warrior rising up with the help of friends. And like many such novels, the book tackles difficult issues head-on—in this case, rape, teen parenthood, family infighting, and betrayal. However, the plot remains suspenseful and intriguing, and the strong main character is well developed: "She was simply present and not present at the same time, in a world that felt unreal to her."

The author's descriptive writing can be particularly effective, such as when a butterfly floats by: "Against the dark backdrop of trees its bright yellow wings romped and played. At last it landed on Zabeth's knee and rested there, trembling in its beauty and delicacy." However, the clever writing weakens when comma errors come into play, making otherwise promising writing feel stilted and awkward: "Startled, Normed shifted in his seat, spilled tea into the saucer. He sat up straight, stared at her carefully for a minute." The occasional use of supernatural elements might jar some who feel the setting could otherwise be a future Earth.

Overall, the novel is a worthwhile prospect for young adults who enjoy dystopian stories with strong female protagonists. Though they are handled well, issues such as the rape of a teen by an adult, use of drugs in rape, hints at abortion, and teen pregnancy mean that this book may not be for every teen or every family. The narrative generally assumes that the first installment in the series has been read. Whether or not it has, *The Queen's Return* is a solid addition to a suspense-filled library for more-mature teens.

DIANE GARDNER (May 5, 2014)

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