

Princess Lizzie and the Missing Magic Ball: Book 1

Dr. Van

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Dr. Van illuminates grown-up concepts for young readers with vibrant illustrations and a tech-savvy princess heroine.

The Princess Lizzie series, created by author Victoria Van Zhong, who writes under the pen name Dr. Van, attempts to fill a void in literature for young girls with a princess heroine who solves mysteries and fixes problems using math, science, and technology. The illustrations are exciting, and the use of computer-generated art is appropriate and well done. With much of the story taking place at night, the saturated colors make the stars and magic items appear to glow. Significant attention has been paid to making each page as visually engaging as the next, with vibrant backgrounds and patterns of reflected light.

In *Princess Lizzie and the Missing Magic Ball*, Princess Lizzie, in her cute purple outfit and crown, loses her magic ball and finds it with the help of her friends. Along the way she checks the MITA (Magic Item Tracker App) and sends a couple of texts, which introduces the concept of a smart phone to young readers, but falls short of the promises made of “a female role model who is just as good at math, science, and technology as she is about being a princess.”

Lizzie’s friends are an odd mix of personalities: Elephant is introduced in the book when returning from “lobbying for animal rights,” and Cat is a “pest control consultant.” These inclusions indicate that the author wants to step out of the box, but without context or follow-through, the attempt is clumsy and confusing. The book introduces these grown-up occupations, but when Elephant is hurt, there is a missed opportunity to integrate real science; instead, Lizzie uses a glowing pink “magic medicine bottle” to help him. It is difficult to reconcile these disparate choices.

The band of friends eventually finds the magic ball and attends a “Magic Item Convention for Young Royals and Friends.” It is then revealed that Princess Lizzie’s magic ball grants wishes, and she offers to make a wish come true for each of the friends who has helped her. Sharing with others and offering a kindness for a kindness are good lessons to learn.

Princess Lizzie is reminiscent of the more well-known Dora the Explorer, with the same problem-solving independence and a monkey sidekick. The action is clear, and the overall design choices are well thought out. It is an enjoyable story despite being interrupted with concepts that may not resonate with beginning readers. Being the first book in a series, the door is open for improvement with subsequent installments, but Dr. Van should be applauded for her creativity and attempt to enlighten young minds.

SARA BUDZIK (May 5, 2014)

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