



The Thirteenth Tale

By Diane Setterfield

First published in 2006

Genre & subject

Family Saga

Synopsis

Biographer Margaret Lea returns one night to her apartment above her father's antiquarian bookshop. On her steps she finds a letter. It is a hand-written request from one of Britain's most prolific and well-loved novelists. Vida Winter, gravely ill, wants to recount her life story before it is too late, and she wants Margaret to be the one to capture her history. The request takes Margaret by surprise—she doesn't know the author, nor has she read any of Miss Winter's dozens of novels.

Late one night, while pondering whether to accept the task of recording Miss Winter's personal story, Margaret begins to read her father's rare copy of Miss Winter's *Thirteen Tales of Change and Desperation*. She is spellbound by the stories and confused when she realizes the book only contains twelve stories. Where is the thirteenth tale? Intrigued, Margaret agrees to meet Miss Winter and act as her biographer.

As Vida Winter unfolds her story, she shares with Margaret the dark family secrets that she has long kept hidden as she remembers her days at Angelfield, the now burnt-out estate that was her childhood home. Margaret carefully records Miss Winter's account and finds herself more and more deeply immersed in the strange and troubling story. In the end, both women have to confront their pasts and the weight of family secrets. As well as the ghosts that haunt them still.

Author biography

Diane Setterfield (born 22 August 1964) is a British author whose 2006 debut novel, *The Thirteenth Tale*, became a *New York Times* No. 1 best-seller. It is written in the Gothic tradition, with echoes of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Her debut novel was turned into a television film.

Before writing, Setterfield studied French Literature at The University of Bristol. Setterfield's PhD is on autobiographical structures in André Gide's early fiction. Setterfield taught at numerous schools as well as privately before leaving academia in the late 1990s.

Discussion starters

- Much of the novel takes place in two grand estates—Angelfield and then Miss Winter's. How are the houses reflections of their inhabitants?
- As the story unfolds, we learn that Margaret and Miss Winter are both twins. What else do they have in common?
- Margaret and her mother are bound by a singular loss—the death of Margaret's twin sister. How has each woman dealt with this loss, and how has it affected her life? If her parents had told her the truth about her twin, would Margaret still be haunted?
- Books play a major role in this novel. Margaret, for example, sells books for a living. Miss Winter writes them. Most of the important action of the story takes place in libraries. There are stories within stories, all inextricably intertwined. Discuss the various roles of books, stories, and writing in this novel.
- Miss Winter asks Margaret if she'd like to hear a ghost story—in fact, there seem to be several ghost stories weaving their way through. In what ways is *The Thirteenth Tale* a classic, gothic novel?
- Compare and contrast Margaret, Miss Winter, and Aurelius—the three "ghosts" of the novel who are also each haunted by their pasts.
- It is a classic writer's axiom that a symbol must appear at least three times in a story so that the reader knows that you meant it as a symbol. In *The Thirteenth Tale*, the novel *Jane Eyre* appears several times. Discuss the appearances and allusions to *Jane Eyre* and how this novel echoes that one.
- When did you first suspect Miss Winter's true identity? Whether you knew or not, looking back, what clues did she give to Margaret (and what clues did the author give to you)?
- The title of this novel is taken from the title of Miss Winter's first book, *Thirteen Tales of Change and Desperation*, a collection of twelve stories with a mysterious thirteenth left out at the last minute before publication. How is this symbolic of the novel? What is the thirteenth tale?
- When do you think *The Thirteenth Tale* takes place? The narrator gives some hints, but never tells the exact date. Which aspects of the book gave you a sense of time, and which seemed timeless? Did the question of time affect your experience with the novel?

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