



# A Proper Education for Girls: A Novel

*Elaine diRollo*

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Not since the Brontës have we seen the likes of the Talbot sisters, plucky peach growers with a peculiar upbringing and a flair for subversion. Set in England and India in the mutinous year of 1857, *A Proper Education for Girls* tells the story of Alice and Lilian Talbot, twins separated for the first time in their lives by their martinet father. After an affair comes to a tragic end, Lilian is banished from the Talbot mansion and married off to a sickly missionary in India. Unwilling to play the part of the demure missionary wife, beautiful, tomboyish Lilian quickly takes advantage of her husband's hypochondria and her newfound freedom as a British expatriate, tramping off into the jungle to paint pictures of the indigenous flora and secretly learning the language and customs of her adopted homeland.

Meanwhile, the plain but sharp-witted Alice remains on her father's isolated estate, serving as curator to his strange and vast Collection under the watchful eye of the malevolent Dr. Cattermole. The Collection, which has taken over every inch of the rambling estate, is the essence of Victorian England—antiquated and ingenious, austere and excessive. Twelve perfectly synchronized grandfather clocks stand at attention at the bottom of a staircase. Botanical specimens have overrun the conservatory, turning the room into a tropical greenhouse. Forgotten houseguests roam amid fossilized sea creatures, display cases of Greek pottery, and mechanical contraptions. A peach tree, inherited from their mother and planted in a wheelbarrow for portability, is a constant reminder of Lilian's absence.

Though Mr. Talbot has cut off all communication between the sisters, a cryptic letter from Lilian manages to slip through, and hidden in the envelope is a puzzling photograph of a tiger hunt. Alice sets about cracking the code in the letter, finding an unlikely ally in Mr. Blake, the photographer hired to document the Collection. While Mr. Talbot is absorbed in the eccentric but seemingly benign Society for the Propagation of Useful and Interesting Knowledge, Alice plots her escape from both her oppressive father and Dr. Cattermole's unspeakable plans for her future.

Intrigue is rife in India as well, where Lilian continues to defy convention. Playing her many admirers off one another, she quietly works toward the goal of reuniting with her sister. But the violent onset of the Indian rebellion against British rule threatens to derail her plans. And back at the Talbot estate, the Society's experiments are taking a menacing turn. Will the sisters' resourcefulness and profound devotion to each other be enough to save them? Capturing the Victorian era in all of its whimsy and horror, *A Proper Education for Girls* is a superb debut novel about the power of sisterhood.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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