

A DANGEROUS EDUCATION

A Novel

MEGAN CHANCE

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INTRODUCTION

A reformist teacher. A dangerous student clique. A powerful novel about secrets and redemption set in the shadows of McCarthy-era America.

Rosemary Chivers is haunted by the choices she made as a teenager—and by those made for her by a controlling mother. Now, in the Cold War era of conformity and suspicion, Rosemary is a modern new teacher at a school for troubled girls, where she challenges the narrow curriculum meant to tame restless young minds. She also keeps a devastating secret. She knows one of the students is the child she gave up. But which one?

Ignoring warnings, Rosemary forms an impenetrable bond with the three girls who are the right age: shrewd runaway Maisie, alcohol-indulging Sandra, and overly flirtatious Jean. But these are no ordinary girls, and what begins as an effort to bring closure to her own rebellious youth soon spirals dangerously out of control.

Rosemary is prepared to do anything to find her daughter. What she isn't prepared for are the deadly consequences that come with discovery—or just how wicked wayward girls can be.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) How do Rosemary's thoughts and frustrations about teaching Sexual Education to students resonate with today? How do the consequences of such actions and the fears of teaching such knowledge parallel today's fears and consequences?
- 2) Do you have an opinion of why Rosemary's mother tracked her granddaughter all these years, or why she has kept that a secret?
- 3) "But Mercer Rocks was a reform school, and now that she knew her daughter was there, how could she just walk away without knowing who she really was? 'I just . . . I just want to know her, Dad. I just want to know that her family cares about her, that she's really okay.'" What do you think about this decision of Rosemary's? Is this something you would do? Do you think it's possible to do as she intends?
- 4) Rosemary believes she will instinctively know who her daughter is when she sees her. Do you believe that possible? Why do you think she believes that?
- 5) How bad are these bad girls? What do you think made them bad, if they are?
- 6) Do you understand why her parents made the decision to give the adoption agency a false birthday when Rosemary gave up her daughter? Do you think it was the right one?
- 7) Throughout the book, at different times, Rosemary imagines each of the girls as hers. Which one did you think was her daughter? Which one did you want to be her daughter?
- 8) What is the significance of the fact that the three girls have flaws/troubles/tendencies (the runaway, the drunkard and the sex fiend) in common with Rosemary? How does it complicate things? How does her experience with these girls change Rosemary's perspective on her past? How was her experience like theirs? How was it different?
- 9) How do you think the experience of Baby Mary and the Child in the Home class shaped Rosemary? Such classes were not uncommon in that time; what do you imagine was their effect on the young women and children who participated?
- 10) "When she was finished, the girls stared at her as if she were some sort of magician showing them the secrets to her illusions, a kind of dawning awe, along with an awareness of difficulty and required cunning they had never imagined might be necessary. The kind of lies and manipulations needed to get what they might want. She told them everything she wished someone had told her, everything she'd learned after David and the baby, everything she'd done herself as a single woman who wanted a life of her own, unfettered by the conventions that so changed the path she might have taken. ... There, too, she saw incipient anger, the realization of the unfair responsibility they bore." What does this paragraph tell you about the female experience in the 1950s, and do you believe it has any bearing on the female experience today? Do you believe there are similarities or parallels?
- 11) How do you think the trajectory of Rosemary's life would have changed had David lived and how important was his impact on her life?
- 12) Once Rosemary begins seeing Bobby, it escalates the tensions between herself and the girls. Do you think Rosemary makes the best decisions when it comes to how she deals with this? What do you think she should or could have done differently? At what point do Rosemary's decisions begin to be questionable, and why?
- 13) What would you do if a teenage girl who was not your daughter came to you for advice about sex or pregnancy matters, looking for information? Would you provide it?
- 14) Do you think Rosemary is right not to tell the girls that one of them might be her daughter? If not, when should she have told them?
- 15) How does Rosemary's understanding of her mother change as the novel progresses?
- 16) In the author's note, the author talks about maternal-fetal microchimerism, and entanglement, or Einstein's Spooky Action at a Distance. In what ways do those play into this novel?

ABOUT WRITING THE NOVEL

There are several people to thank for turning me to the 1950s—my agent certainly was one of those who suggested it early on, but so did my friend Jayne Ann Krentz, who told me that she thought the era fit my sensibilities, and that she believed it matched the 19th century when it came to women's lives. I believe she is right. History in general has a cyclical nature, and women's history in particular is both cyclical and has a "two steps forward, one step back" quality that is not just cliché but distressing. Every single time in history that women have gained even a bit of personal autonomy, it is re-seized. Controlling women has been, it seems to me, culture's singular goal throughout time.

When it comes to Seattle, the city in the 1950s was a weirdly big city with a provincial feel. Seattle was not the tech bastion it is today, but it was a very industrial town, with its shipyards and airplanes. It was also close to many military installations—and thus felt itself to be in the crosshairs during the Cold War. It was also a major stop on the McCarthy Senate Hearing and House Un-American Activities tours, given it had been considered a hotbed of Communist and radical political activity since the early 20th century. As you will see in my author's note in the novel, the University of Washington was a focal point even before Senator McCarthy gained sway, when in 1947 Washington State signed legislation creating its own committee to investigate Un-American activities—a committee that led to the destruction of three University of Washington professors, as well as the Seattle Repertory Playhouse and its leaders, Florence and Burton James, among others.

My own Mercer Rocks School for Wayward Girls is based on the Martha Washington School for Girls, which was a juvenile detention boarding school in Seattle on south Lake Washington. It was indeed set on a parcel of land with a rare copse of Garry Oak trees (the only ones in Seattle), and the site was indeed known by the early natives as "Taboo Container." In 1972 the site was turned over to the parks department, and the buildings finally demolished in 1989, when it was officially turned into Martha Washington Park. The fruit trees and the willow still survive, as do the Garry Oaks with their galls, and there's a lovely path down to the water. The fruit trees are maintained by volunteers. The park is listed as a "liminal" area in Seattle's haunted places, and there are plenty of stories told about the ghosts of sad and disaffected girls, but I've never seen them. I've also never been there at night or twilight, when ghosts tend to walk. One spring, when I visited the park, the cottonwood trees there were so full of bloom it was like being in a snowstorm. It is beautiful, but I've no doubt the place has seen its share of sadness and frustration.

When it came to choosing Rosemary's profession, given the options available to her at that time, and given her past and her relationship with her mother, I liked the irony of Home Economics, and studying the classes taught for home ec in that period was pretty fascinating. I managed to find actual textbooks from the period, as well as the class catalog from Central Washington college, which were extremely helpful. *Selling Mrs. Consumer* by Janice Rutherford, *Sex Education Books for Young Adults*, by Patricia Campbell, and *The Secret History of Home Economics* by Danielle Dreilinger were particularly helpful.

But the real inspiration for this book was my discovery of Fetal-Maternal Microchimerism, which I read about in *Science News*, and which I found not only stunning but which also seemed to explain a great many things about women and what I've often observed to be mothers' clairvoyance about their children. I could not help making the association between microchimerism and the idea of Entanglement, or what Einstein called "Spooky Action at a Distance": this idea that once two particles are entangled, they are always entangled, no matter how far apart they are. When I read *The Girls Who Went Away*, by Ann Fessler, about the many women who were forced to give up their children for adoption in the 50s through the 70s, during the era of unwed mother's homes—which were ubiquitous in my youth—it reinforced my own belief that for some women, adoption is trauma, and Fetal-Maternal Microchimerism explained why many of these women endured PTSD long after their children were gone. The idea haunted me, and became the inception of *A Dangerous Education*, though as the story progressed, it became about a great deal more.

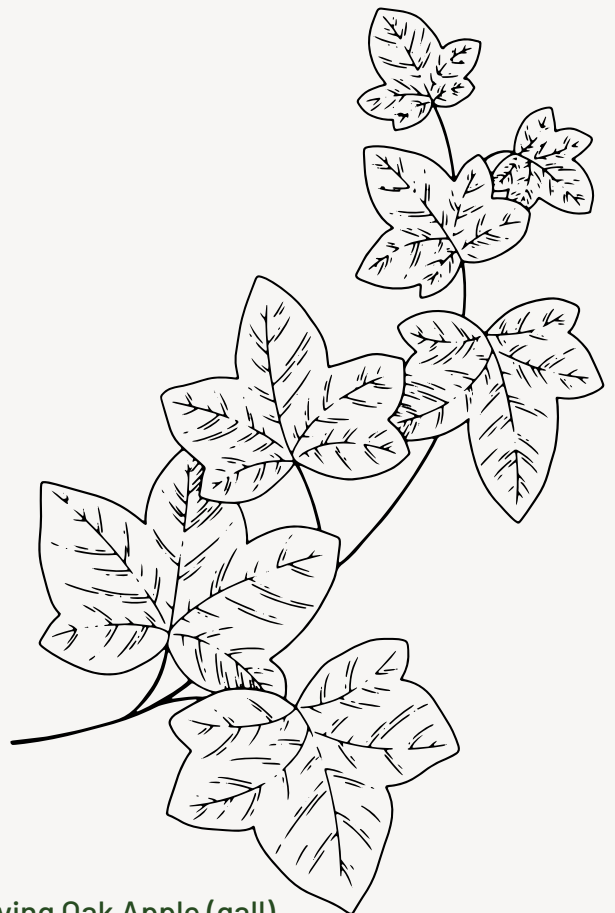
As always, I think the underlying theme of most of my work is about how much control society should have in people's lives, and the effect of limiting information in the guise of "for their own good." We may never know the true cost of restricting information. Knowledge is power, and whoever has it is in control—that's the truth it behooves us never to forget.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Martha Washington School
(photos courtesy University of Washington)



Martha Washington Park



A living Oak Apple (gall)

RECIPES

I can't stop you from making some of these recipes, but do so at your own risk. :)

Cocktails

(Courtesy *Vintage Spirits and Forgotten Cocktails*, by Ted Haigh)

Manhattan

2 1/2 oz. bourbon
1 oz sweet vermouth
2 dashes Angostura bitters

1950s Martini

3 Ozs. gin or vodka
1/2 oz dry vermouth
1 dash orange bitters

The Communist

1 oz. gin
1 oz. orange juice
1/2 oz. cherry brandy
3/4 oz fresh lemon juice
Shake and strain

Appetizers

(Courtesy *Betty Crocker Picture Cookbook*, 1950)

Gooseliver Bonbons

Mash gooseliver to a paste, add bits of crumbled crisp bacon, roll into a tiny ball. Roll in chopped ripe olives. Serve in little paper bonbon cases

Hot Cheese Puffs

Beat two egg whites until stiff. Beat in 1/2 tsp. Baking powder, 1/4 tsp. salt, 1/4 tsp paprika. Fold in 1 cup grated sharp American cheese. Heap on 1 1/2" rounds of prepared toast beds. Broil about 5 min., until delicately browned.

Flaming Cabbage

Clean a large cabbage. Curl outer leaves back from top. Cut out center; hollow it out about 6" deep. Place a sterno lamp in the cavity (lamp hidden, but flame should come almost to the top of the cabbage). Place cabbage on serving plate. Surround with a frill of parsley. Thrust wood picks through cocktail sausages and stick into the cabbage. Stick an olive onto end of each (to protect fingers from flame). Guests broil their own sausages.

Special Dishes

Bologna Salad

(You can do this with chopped ham too)

- 1 pound Bologna
- 1/3 cup Sweet Pickle Relish (may use dill relish if preferred)
- 1/2 cup Real Mayonnaise (may use Miracle Whip if desired)
- 1 tsp yellow mustard
- 1/2 - 1 tsp cream horseradish
- Salt and Ground Black Pepper, to taste

Grind the bologna in a food processor or mill to coarse ground, add the relish, mayo, mustard, horseradish, salt and pepper and mix. Adjust mustard, horseradish and seasonings to taste