

*Kathleen Ernst*  
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST



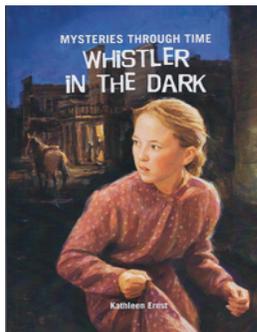
## Preview of *Whistler In The Dark*

An American Girl History Mystery

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It's 1867. Twelve-year-old Emma Henderson is mortified when Mother takes to wearing a Reform Dress—hideous bloomers! Worse, Mother has accepted a newspaper job in wild, far-off Colorado Territory. But even Emma can't imagine just how badly things will go in Twin Pines. From the moment she and Mother step off the stagecoach, it's clear someone doesn't want them there.

This book includes a detailed "Peak Into The Past" essay.

"Mother!" Emma called. Holding her painting carefully, she used one hip to shut the front door behind her. Madame Duchene's praise rang in her ears: "For a girl not yet thirteen, Miss Henderson, you show remarkable promise!" Emma could hardly wait to show Mother her latest work.

"You're home!" Mother's voice drifted down the stairs. "I have two surprises for you! Wait in the parlor!"

Emma put her package aside. Crackers! What had Mother so excited? The tiny parlor, cluttered with a tea table and horsehair-upholstered chairs and piles of books and magazines, gave no hint. She had sounded...happy, that was it. Emma couldn't remember the last time she'd heard that tone in Mother's voice. Surely not since Father had been killed two years ago, during the final weeks of the Civil War.

Footsteps creaked on the stairs. "Ready?" Then Mother stepped into the little parlor.



Emma sucked in her breath. Mother wore a new dress she'd made from brown plaid cotton. She was a good seamstress, and the dress fit well through the bodice and shoulders. But the skirt stopped at her knees. Emerging beneath the skirt, made of the same fabric, were trousers.

Trousers. Loose-fitting, ankle-length trousers.

Mother turned in a slow circle. "What do you think?"

"Mother!" Emma darted to the front window and pulled the lacy curtains closed. "Someone might see you!"

Mother's smile faded. "I'm aware of that." She folded her arms. "Gracious, Emma! I've been a member of the Dress Reform Association for several years. It's about time I had a Reform Dress of my own."

Emma remembered seeing her mother reading a newspaper called *The Sybil*, published by a woman who believed that women's fashions symbolized unfair restrictions placed upon them. And she remembered her mother talking about the need for women to be admired for their talents instead of their fashionable, confining clothes. But she also remembered the only time she'd ever seen a woman in public wearing a Reform Dress—or bloomer costume, as some people called it.

She and her best friend Judith Littleton had been walking home from art class and seen several boys trailing behind a woman in a Reform Dress as she walked briskly down Harkins Street. "Bloomers, bloomers," they chanted. One snatched an egg from an old woman's market basket and threw it—spot, against the woman's shoulder. No one scolded the boys.

The woman ignored them, and with her head high, quickly disappeared around the corner. But Emma was embarrassed for her. "I'm afraid she brought that upon herself," Mrs. Littleton had sighed, when Emma and Judith told her



about the incident. "It's scandalous. I'll never understand women who wear that ridiculous Reform Costume. Masculine, every one of them. No decent woman would be seen in such a get-up."

Emma's cheeks had burned as she hoped that Mrs. Littleton, who had been so kind and loving when Emma's own mother was busy with charity work, would never know that copies of *The Sybil* were tucked into the magazine rack at the Hendersons' house. Just as her cheeks burned now. Almost every man and woman in American thought the Reform Dress shocking. She had hoped that her mother would never go beyond reading about dress reform.

"Well?" Mother's chin was up, her shoulders back.

"Mother, please don't wear that outside." The words slid from Emma's mouth as she plopped into a chair. Her skin felt skittery. She'd never complained when Mother spent more time away doing war relief work than home with her only child. But this! This was too much.

Two spots of color appeared on Mother's cheeks. A flash of anger glinted in her eyes. Then she sighed, and the starch left her posture. She perched on the edge of the low velvet chair in the corner and crossed her ankles, studying the effect. A May breeze ruffled the curtains. Somewhere down the street a dog barked, making Emma painfully aware of the awkward silence in the parlor. But she simply couldn't twist her tongue around an apology.

Finally Mother looked at Emma. "I should have known that this would be difficult for you," she said quietly. "But Emma, I'm doing this for you as well as for me. I want you to grow up in a nation that respects women's abilities. As long as women are hampered by tight corsets and enormous skirts, we won't be anything more than—than ornaments."



Emma didn't want to be an ornament...did she? She wasn't quite sure what that meant. But she did know that she'd die of pure and absolute mortification if her friends ever saw her mother wearing a Reform Dress.

"Women are capable people, Emma," Mother said stoutly. "We proved that during the war. Farm women drove reapers and butchered hogs. Women here in Chicago helped keep the factories running while the men were off fighting. We raised thousands of dollars to provide supplies for the army. Why should we be forced backwards now that the war's over?"

Emma shrugged, feeling sadness anchor in her heart. The horrible war caused this! As if her father getting killed wasn't enough! Father had left the newspaper he published to serve as captain of a company in one of the Illinois regiments that clattered off to war in the train cars. That was in 1863, when Emma was only eight. For two long years she and Mother had waited, reading newspaper stories of terrible battles, almost collapsing with relief each time the Chicago Tribune published a list of killed soldiers without Father's name on it. But Father had been wounded in some of the very last fighting, and he died.

Emma looked at the daguerreotype of her father that sat on the parlor table. Her father's gaze, captured on the small piece of glass, seemed to take in the room. Whatever would Father think of Mother's Reform Dress?

Mother stood and walked back and forth across the room. "It's marvelously freeing," she murmured. "Emma, I think you'd like it. It just takes some getting used to. I think I shall make you a Reform Dress too - "

"I don't want one! What will people think?" Panic began to bubble in Emma's chest. Even if she didn't wear the Reform Dress, Mother was obviously determined to. Great glory, what would Judith say? Would Mrs. Littleton tell Judith not to spend time with Emma anymore? Would Pastor preach against



the Hendersons from the pulpit? Would boys throw eggs at her, just for being Mother's daughter? The skin between her shoulderblades tingled, as if the egg had already hit. Splot.

"I'm not interested in what other people think," Mother snapped. "I want you to develop your own thoughts and opinions. What do you want from life?"

Emma squirmed. What she most emphatically did not want was a Mother wearing a Reform Dress, with its short skirt and horrid trousers. Not when all of her friends pinned fashion plates of floor-swishing silk dinner dresses from Godey's Ladies' Magazine to their bedroom walls. Not when all of her friends' mothers—even those who had done war work—were settled back into their former lives, content to be wives and mothers, and wear hoop skirts that brushed the tops of their shoes.

"You're old enough to consider these things," Mother said finally. "At your age, I was already earning my keep in the newspaper office. And I was already finding doors closed, just because I was female. I had hoped you'd support my efforts to change that now. But I won't force you."

Good, Emma thought. She struggled to find something to say to break the uncomfortable silence. Suddenly she remembered. "Didn't you say you had two surprises?"

Mother's eyes began to sparkle again as she picked up an envelope from the table. "This arrived today. Emma, it's finally happened! I've been offered a position as newspaper editor!"

Emma's stomach flip-flopped as her mother slid the letter from the envelope. Oh no. Oh no...

When the first tide of grief had passed after Father's death, Mother had driven Emma to distraction with talk of making a new start. Mother had

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answered dozens of advertisements from small towns all over the west where, she hoped, people might be more "open-minded." Most of her letters had gone unanswered, although a few town representatives wrote to advise her that their job was not open to a woman. As the months passed, Emma had put the whole notion out of her mind. "Where?" she whispered.

"A town called Twin Pines. It's in Colorado Territory."

Twin Pines, Colorado Territory. A strange wild place far from Chicago... Emma clenched her hands into fists. "But I don't want to move to Colorado Territory! It's—it's a wilderness!"

"Agatha Award Nominee for Best Children's/Young Adult Mystery"  
— **Malice Domestic**

"WILLA Award Finalist for Best Children's/Young Adult Mystery"  
— **Women Writing The West**

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