Fever 1793

Concept Analysis


Plot Summary

This novel tells the story of a 14-year-old girl named Matilda (Mattie) Cook, living in Philadelphia at the outbreak of the yellow fever epidemic in 1793. Mattie's family owns a coffeehouse in the city and she lives there with her mother and grandfather. One day, the coffeehouse serving girl, Polly, fails to arrive at work. They soon find out that she died from yellow fever. Mattie is distraught. At first, just a few individuals start getting sick. But when the fever begins to quickly spread and hundreds of people start to die, drastic measures are taken as Philadelphia residents flee into the country and desert the city by the thousands. Mattie was initially carefree and uninterested in hard work, but after Polly dies and her mother contracts the fever, she is sent away with her grandfather and forced to learn how to fend for herself in a society overrun with fear and the dangers of the contagious fever. The plot is conflict-ridden and Mattie is faced with many challenging situations, one after another, but which help her to learn the values of perseverance, determination, self-reliance, and compassion.

Organizational Patterns

The book is divided into twenty-nine relatively short chapters (about 5-10 pages each), an epilogue, and a detailed informational appendix. Each chapter begins with a date heading (ex: August 16th, 1793) and a quote from a primary source document from the time period. Both of these elements serve as appropriate directional tools to guide the student through the reading experience. The story is told in a strictly chronological manner as seen by the sequential dates at the beginning of each chapter, apart from one instance where Mattie has a flashback of watching the first hot air balloon ascend from Philadelphia in January earlier in the year 1793. But that is described as a memory she thinks back to at a later date. The events of the story, because they are clearly chronological, make it easy to follow.

The Central Question/Enduring Issue

There are many important issues dealt with in this novel, but they all seem to point back to the overarching question:

- What does it mean to be self-reliant and independent?
Mattie has to grow up in many ways throughout the course of the story and truly reaches a state of independence by the end. To what degree does experience have to do with it? Or is it something that comes with age? What qualities does a person need to possess to be considered self-reliant? All of these questions under the overarching umbrella of self-reliance and independence also address other themes like perseverance, coping with loss, and bravery.

**Background Knowledge**

Since this takes place soon after the time of the American Revolution, the students will need to know some of the norms of the era that differ from today. The story is told from the point of view of a 14-year-old girl who is constantly badgered about finding a husband and getting married. Obviously this can be pretty confusing to students who don’t understand the marriage norms of the time.

A basic knowledge of the contemporary class system and how the servant system worked will help the students understand the interaction between some of the characters in the story as well. Students will need to know that having servants was a common occurrence during this era.

The common contemporary views on medicine might be a good background area to focus on. Students could benefit from knowing about concepts like miasma, noxious fumes, separating infected individuals from the population, contemporary treatments, etc. Disease and sudden death was a much more common and mysterious force then.

Students could benefit from learning about how sanitation worked. They talk about the rivers carrying smells, filth, and disease in the novel. Students might be interested in how they took care of sewage and other waste.

Perhaps the most important background knowledge would be the yellow fever itself. This could help the students realize what it is like to have yellow fever. The students will be interested in learning about what it is like to get the disease, what causes the disease, when the cause was discovered, and what they thought caused it in 1793.

It might be fun for the students to learn about some of the little details from the time such as what foods they ate, what types of clothes they wore, and how they might have spent their free time.
Themes

The Levels of Self-Reliance: Survival and Initiative
This is perhaps the major theme of the novel. Mattie is forced to become self-reliant as she is separated from her mother and grandfather. She starts the novel as one who must be commanded to work—she tries to get out of work by any means she can—then she grows to work on her own as she must strive to survive the harshness of plague-stricken Philadelphia. Later, she realizes that, in order to improve her situation and her life, she must take initiative. This is the driving force of her character progression. By the end of the novel she has essentially become self-reliant and responsible through her own initiative.

Bravery in the Face of Fear and Uncertainty
The yellow fever is a very scary force: no one is safe from it, and it can take even the strongest of persons. Philadelphia, a very large city, becomes a graveyard because of the plague. Everyone is effected either by becoming infected, hiding from infection, or by losing friends and family in the disease’s wake. The fever brings the best and the worst in people: thieves and looters stalk the streets, while others sacrifice their own health and safety to care for the sick. Mattie is thrust into this situation. She must be brave in the face of death and sorrow. Fear is a constant force, and her bravery is what pulls her through. Other characters demonstrate bravery throughout the novel as they stay noble in the face of danger and death.

Coping with Loss (Good and Bad)
This is a constant throughout the novel. Virtually every character has to learn how to cope with loss in some way or another, whether it’s through losing friends and family to the plague, or losing property and wealth due to looters, or with losing their routine as Philadelphia becomes a shell of itself. Some characters cope in good ways (serving others, respecting the dead, etc.) while others choose less effective ways to cope with loss (looting, raising prices of wares instead of helping, etc.).

Setting
This story takes place in Philadelphia in 1793. Philadelphia, at this time, was America’s largest city, inhabited by over 40,000 people. Geographically, it is located where the Schuylkill River meets the Delaware River, so it’s location on the water also made it America's busiest port city. The book mentions that Mattie’s family does not live right next to the river, but that they can and do walk there often to go to the market.
America is a very young country. The Revolutionary War’s impact is still very much on the minds of the people ideologically and socially and this is shown through little details such as the parrot named King George, mention of Mattie's grandfather in Washington's army, friendly arguments about Thomas Jefferson as secretary of state and so on.

Point of View, Narrative Voice

This story is told in first-person narrative from the perspective of the main character, Matilda (Mattie) Cook, a 14-year-old girl born and raised in Philadelphia. Mattie's voice is very unique and offers a fresh perspective on the events of the yellow fever epidemic due to her limited experience with the difficulties of life, providing a window into her growth and development as the story itself progresses. That visible change in her voice is a key element to the successful impact of the story's themes.

Characterization

Laurie Halse Anderson constantly develops the characters in this book. Each character has their purpose and the main characters are shown reaching that purpose. All of the characters bring out elements of Mattie's own personality and help her to grow and develop.

- **Matilda (Mattie) Cook**: Mattie is the main character. She starts off a carefree dreamer, but develops into a self-reliant, dedicated young woman.
  
  Introduced: "I woke to the sound of a mosquito whining in my left ear and my mother screeching in the right." (Page 1)

- **Lucille Cook (Mother)**: Mattie's mother is the owner of the family coffeehouse. She is left widowed after her husband, Mattie's father, dies after falling off of a ladder and breaking his neck. Becoming somewhat closed off, she always demands the best of her daughter. When the epidemic hits, she remains driven but eventually contracts the illness herself. She shows her love toward Mattie by forcing her to leave town so she does not get sick too. Much of the mystery of the story revolves around whether Lucille is actually alive.
  
  Introduced: "Rouse yourself this instant!" (Page 1)

- **Captain William Farnsworth Cook (Grandfather)**: He is an ex-military man who fought under the direction of General Washington. He is a loving, protective, brave, independent man who Mattie greatly admires. He takes care of Mattie over the course of their journey, but eventually dies after a fight with looters that break into the coffeehouse. He provided Mattie with her positive attitude and teaches her the lessons she needs to continue on after his death.
  
  Introduced: "Over here, lass!" Grandfather shouted from his corner seat. (Page 18) He is discussed earlier though, but this is his first use of dialogue.

- **Eliza**: She is a free black who works as the cook at the family coffeehouse. She is strong-willed, compassionate, and confident, pulling out those same characteristics in Mattie. That is why it is so fitting that, at the end of the novel, Mattie offers Eliza a partnership in owning the coffeehouse with her as an equal.
"Good morning," Eliza said loudly, startling me. "I thought you were going to sleep the day away. Have you eaten?" (Page 8)

- **Nathaniel Benson**: A young man working as a painter's apprentice, he is Mattie's close friend and love interest. He is playful and kind, always finding ways to send Mattie flowers, even after the fever devastates the city of Philadelphia.
  
  Introduced: "Is that all you have to say? You disappoint me. I thought you would send me sailing into the horse trough at least. I guess you respect my new position as man of the world." (Page 31)

- **Nell**: The really young child that Mattie finds orphaned on the streets of Philadelphia, she latches onto her and Mattie decides to care for her.
  
  Introduced: "Broken," she said. (Page 161)

- **Other minor characters**: Individuals like Joseph, Mother Smith, and Polly also add dimension and virtue to the intensifying plot.

**Literary Terms to Teach**

- Dialogue
- Allusion
- Tone
- Analogy
- Setting
- Imagery

**Affective Issues Related to the Work**

**Self-Reliance**

Students will likely be interested in Mattie’s growth from the lazy teenage girl at the beginning of the novel to the responsible and reliable young adult by the end. Students may be interested in talking about this transformation, since it is what most teenagers go through in one way or another. Teenagers want to have responsibility, because they know they are not children anymore, but sometimes they are denied this opportunity. Students will likely have many opinions about this subject, because they can identify with it.

"Please, Eliza, don't make me go. I know you think I'm a child, bigger than Nell, but a baby still, and that I need someone to tell me to wash my face and finish my bread." I struggled to control my voice. "I'm not. I'm not a little girl. I can take care of myself." (Page 175)

**Perseverance**

Because of the constant bleakness of the story, students will latch on to any examples of hope and perseverance in the novel. They will find confidence and comfort in characters like Mattie and her grandfather and Ellie as they power through all the struggles and sorrow that surrounds them. These characters will inspire students to face the struggles they go through with the same courage.

“They are full of pestilence,” she said grimly. “Nell seems to be faring better, but there is no question she has it too.” She pressed her lips together to hold back her tears.
“It will be fine, Eliza. Think of all the people we’ve cared for. I survived this, Joseph survived, and so did thousands of others. We can do this.” (page 203)

**Loneliness**

The deserted streets of Philadelphia and the overall bleakness of Mattie’s situation during the novel will strike a chord with students. Everyone has felt loneliness at one time or another, but the loneliness Mattie is forced to deal with will be surprising and memorable to students. This will help them realized just how important other people are to them and how important they are to others. They will feel with Mattie’s suffering.

“There could be no running from this. Hiding from death was not like hiding from Mother when she wanted me to scrub kettles, or ignoring Silas when he begged for food. I was the only one left.” (page 151)

“I wandered up one street and down the next. The printer’s words haunted me.
Thousands dead.
I saw Grandfather’s empty eyes.
No food.
I saw Mother order me to leave her.
No hope.
I saw people weeping the doorways and did not stop. I heard the death carts rattling in the street and did not look up.” (page 160)

**Coping with Loss/Mourning**

Students will likely have a reaction to the morbid and sorrowful scenes of death and loss throughout the novel. This will remind students of how they felt when they had to deal with loss, and it will also cause them to wonder how they would cope if they were in a similar situation as Mattie. Students will wonder what it would be like if they didn’t have their parents around and how they would deal with it. Some students have had to experience this sorrow, so they will be able to relate to it first-hand, while other students will have to imagine what it would be like. It should inspire reflection and remind them just how important their loved ones and friends are to them.

Dead.” (page 147)
Implications for Students of Diversity

Students themselves are all so varied and different, so it is fitting that the cast of characters and dynamic between them in this book also reflect that diversity. The first important thing to note is that there are characters and situations that diverse students will be better able to understand because of their own backgrounds. For example, when Mattie and her mother visit the Ogilvie’s for tea, there is a clear class distinction. This hierarchy of wealth is common in most all societies and can be used as a discussion point with students.

Characters like Eliza also offer diverse perspectives in the book. Eliza's involvement in the Free African Society and her general background can be used to show the diversity that exists among all groups of people during any time of history. Pointing to her character can also be a great way to get students involved with change and embracing their diversity.

Gender Issues

This book gives a great outlook on the role of women in post-revolutionary society. It does so in the narrative itself, while also hinting at it in some of the primary sources at the beginnings of the chapters. This is a big theme in the story, so there are many things you can do with this with your students. Students will almost certainly have questions about this issue, since it is explicitly addressed in the narrative, so this can be a very interesting topic to discuss. It is a topic that the teacher will need to address, and it is one that will be interesting to the students. It can lead to discussions on the history of women’s role in society and how it has changed since then.

Mattie is often faced with the women's domestic role in her society. She is expected to cook and clean, and she is encouraged to find a husband at 14. Mattie often reflects some of our modern mindset as she argues against these norms slightly. This could be an interesting point of discussion. It could be interesting to talk about how likely it was that she would think that way or if Anderson is imposing our modern mindset on the time.

Vocabulary Issues

This book is set in the late 18th century, so the language and dialect might be difficult for some students to understand. There are references to items, places, concepts, or people that might be unfamiliar to students and will require some frontloading and explanation. Fortunately, much of the vocabulary can be figured out in context, but that might not be true for all students at varied learning levels. Below is a list of vocabulary terms (with page numbers) that might need explanation in order for students to fully understand the book. Because most of the difficult vocabulary is due to the usage of period language, most of the vocabulary terms fall under the category of Tier 3. Students will not be tested over these terms, but knowing what they mean will aid in their comprehension of the novel.

- balderdash (page 21)
- bilious fever (page 20)
- bunkum (page 71)
- Continental (page 141)
• cooperage (page 171)
• crockery (page 242)
• demure (page 32)
• din (page 54)
• droll (page 37)
• fetid stench (page 210)
• flint and tinder (page 92)
• gaunt (page 219)
• grog shop (page 53)
• haberdasher (page 215)
• lancet (page 72)
• miasma (page 19)
• necessary (page 24)
• noxious (page 20)
• peckish (page 16)
• Petticoat (page 42)
• scullery maid (page 117)
• strongbox (page 24)
• wench (page 146)
• yellow fever (page 21)

Research Issues/Project Ideas

• Student could create a public health message informing Philadelphia citizens as to what they should do to protect themselves and their family members from the fever (poster, declaration, newspaper announcement, etc.). This should reflect the ideals of the time. What would doctors and physicians from the time period tell the people to do? Page 58.

• Alternatively, students could do the same assignment as above, but have the students try to “save” the people from 1793 with our 21st century knowledge about the fever. Students will research the causes of the disease and what can be done to prevent getting the disease. They will also need to research what measures the citizens should take if anyone is infected.

• Have students create a newspaper with articles detailing the events of the fever epidemic as well as the other historical events occurring at the time. Students can incorporate research with the genre of a newspaper article and the importance of images and graphics. Students can have general announcements about the fever, and they can also insert interviews with citizens or prominent historical figures like Doctor Benjamin Rush.

• Students can rewrite a chapter or section of a chapter from Eliza’s point of view. Students will be required to research about slavery and the culture of free blacks living in Philadelphia.

• Students could write a letter pretending to be someone their own age, but living in Philadelphia in 1793. They could address the letter to a relative living in New York detailing the events going on around them. Research would include finding answers to questions like, what do you see, smell, hear, feel?
Enrichment Resources

- A variety of Internet resources: 
  [http://www.bcps.org/offices/lis/models/Fever/internet%20resources.html](http://www.bcps.org/offices/lis/models/Fever/internet%20resources.html)
- Even more Internet resources: [http://www.shmoop.com/fever-1793/resources.html](http://www.shmoop.com/fever-1793/resources.html)
- Laurie Halse Anderson’s website has a page about the book, including teacher aids. 
- Further vocabulary issues: 
  [http://www.southerncet.edu/~ils69313/fever1793/Feervocabulary.html](http://www.southerncet.edu/~ils69313/fever1793/Feervocabulary.html)
- *An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793* by Jim Murphy. 
- [http://bobarnebeck.com/history.html](http://bobarnebeck.com/history.html)
- [http://bobarnebeck.com/fever1793.html](http://bobarnebeck.com/fever1793.html)

Video:
- Monty Python and the Holy Grail: Bring Out Your Dead! video clip: 
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grbSO6O6kbs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grbSO6O6kbs)
- Through the Air to Calais Trailer (Blanchard's Hot Air Balloon): 
  [http://www.youtube.com/embed/cGWpEAVXfeU](http://www.youtube.com/embed/cGWpEAVXfeU)

Music:
- "Mystic Natural" by Bob Marley: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqg90Qj2ApU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqg90Qj2ApU)
- "Dare You to Move" by Switchfoot: 
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTl1MYaCSH8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTl1MYaCSH8)

References

- [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/7/7e/Fever_1793.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/7/7e/Fever_1793.jpg)
- [http://www.dafont.com/-skinny-jeans.font](http://www.dafont.com/-skinny-jeans.font)