

Literature Circle Guide to FEVER 1793 by Laurie Halse Anderson

Plot Summary

During the summer of 1793, Mattie Cook lives above the family coffee shop with her widowed mother and grandfather. Mattie spends her days avoiding chores and making plans to turn the family business into the finest Philadelphia has ever seen. But then the fever breaks out. Disease sweeps the streets, destroying everything in its path and turning Mattie's world upside down. At her feverish mother's insistence, Mattie flees the city with her grandfather. But she soon discovers that the sickness is everywhere, and Mattie must learn quickly how to survive in a city turned frantic with disease.

Author Information

As a little girl, Laurie Halse Anderson spent hours writing poems, letters, newspaper columns, and stories. Her many pets were a constant source of inspiration. She spent her senior year of high school abroad, living on a pig farm in Denmark. "I helped with all the farm chores, from working in the fields to capturing runaway ducks," she reports. Upon her return, Anderson attended Onondaga Community College in Syracuse, New York, and then earned a bachelor's degree in Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. She now lives in Ambler, Pennsylvania, with her husband and two children.

Anderson has written numerous books for children and young adults. A picture book, *Ndito Runs*, was a 1996 Pick of the Lists from the American Booksellers Association. Her most recent title, *Speak*, was named a 2000 Printz Honor Book by the American Library Association and was a finalist for the 1999 National Book Award.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Much of the first part of the story takes place in the Cook Coffeehouse. Describe the activities that go on there before, during, and after the guests arrive.
Before the guests arrived, Eliza had to prepare the food they will eat, like her special gingerbread (p. 11). Mattie tended to the garden (p. 12), and Mrs. Cook made sure that the kitchen had all the necessary provisions for the day (p. 10). While the guests were at the Coffeehouse, Matilda served the guests (p. 18), carried dishes to and from the kitchen (p. 21), while Eliza tried to keep the Coffeehouse tidy (p. 21). After the guests left, Mattie figured the bills (p. 22), washed up, swept the floors, dusted the tables, and put items back in their place for the next day of business (p. 22).
2. At the time, no one really knew the true cause of the yellow fever epidemic. What are some of the possible causes suggested by various townspeople and doctors?

Mr. Carris, who owned an export business, believed that the fever was caused by the heap of rotting coffee beans on Ball's Wharf. (p. 19). A government clerk believes that it was brought to Philadelphia by Santo Domingan refugees (p. 20).

Grandfather believes that the summer refugees brought the illness to Philadelphia, just as the ships from Barbados brought it in 1763 (p. 38).

3. Toward the beginning of the story, Matilda wants to go to the market place in town. Why does she want to go there?

Matilda wants to go to the market place to see Nathaniel Besson who works as a painter's assistant at the Peale house (p. 30).

4. Why does Mrs. Cook want Matilda to join her for tea at the Ogilvies'? Why does Matilda agree to join her that afternoon?

Mrs. Cook wants Matilda to join her for tea at the Ogilvies' because Mrs. Cook believes that Edward Ogilvie is a good marriage match for Matilda (p. 41). Matilda agrees to go because if she does not attend, she will have to do chores all day long such as scrubbing the kettles clean (pp. 41-42).

5. Throughout the book, Matilda and her mother never say they love each other, yet we know they do. What evidence is there in the story that the two feel deeply for each other?

Mrs. Cook expects Matilda to work hard, but also wants her to have a better life than she does. She expresses this by saying, "You might turn out to be a beauty after all...You've grown so quickly. I want the best for you (p. 46)." Matilda cares for her mother at the beginning of her sickness. She reflects on her mother's strength and resolve and realizes that her mother has tried to teach her many things, but Matilda has been unwilling to listen (p. 68).

6. In good times, how are the farmers outside the city dependent on the city dwellers of Philadelphia? How are the city-dwellers dependent on the farmers?

The farmers are dependent on the city dwellers to sell their products and to make money (p. 27-28). The city dwellers are dependent on the farmers to supply them with food (p. 27-28). Without the farmers, the city dwellers do not have a source of food. People who stayed in the city during the fever began to starve when the farmers stopped coming to the market place (pp. 116, 155-156, 211).

7. Authors sometimes subject their characters to difficult tasks. What are two tasks Matilda accomplishes?

Matilda is faced with many difficult tasks during the novel. One of the most difficult is taking care of her Grandfather's dead body and getting him buried with dignity and respect (pp. 148-154). Matilda also decides to keep the Cook Coffeehouse open without the help and guidance of her mother by taking Eliza on as a partner (pp. 224-231).

8. What evidence is there in the story that grandfather enjoyed his earlier years as a soldier?

Grandfather dresses up in his soldier's uniform to escort Mattie to the countryside (p. 77). Grandfather also gives Mattie soldiering lessons, and teaches her the tricks of the American, British, and French armies (p. 79). Grandfather's work at the Bush Hill Hospital gave him a clear purpose that he enjoyed, similar to his work as a soldier (p. 108).

9. Matilda changes a great deal from the beginning of the novel to the end. Give three specific examples of those changes.

Matilda changes physically from a soft, young girl (p. 43) to a thin, but strong young woman who now resembles her mother (p. 215) and even wears her mother's clothes (p. 132). Matilda's idea of herself as a child who needs to be fed (p. 9) and pushed to work (p. 11) changes. At the end of the book, she is running the Coffeehouse (p. 228), getting up early (p. 240), and taking care of her family (p. 241).

10. During the story, the people of Philadelphia face many dangers, including the risks of disease, starvation, robbery, and assault. Describe a dramatic incident in which Matilda faces one of these dangers and point out the personal qualities that help her survive.

Although the Coffeehouse had already been robbed once (pp. 122-123), more thieves come to take anything else left (pp. 138-146). While the thieves are there, one of them attacks Grandfather, and Matilda drives off the assailant by striking him with Grandfather's sword (pp. 145-146). Although Matilda was surely terrified at that moment, she was able to stand her ground and protect the person she loved.

11. Based on what you know about Matilda's character and experiences throughout the story, what, to Matilda, would make a perfect day?

Matilda enjoys food, especially sweets (p. 9), fishing (pp. 31-32), and being out and about in the city (p. 9), so a perfect day for her might be filled with good meals and walks around Philadelphia.

12. How would Matilda's life have changed if Mrs. Cook had stayed healthy and remained with her daughter at all times during her story?

Matilda would have remained protected by her mother, rather than having to protect herself and other people who came to see her as their caretaker. The experience Matilda had of being on her own helped her to see that she could manage her own life, make her own decisions, and make her own way in the world (pp. 215-216).

13. Do you think it is fair of the town council of Pembroke to prevent fever victims from escaping the city of Philadelphia and entering their town?

It is understandable that people were very scared of the fever victims, especially since no one understood how the disease was spread, but the town council of Pembroke as well as many other families in Philadelphia allowed their fear to control their actions. Instead of extending a helpful hand to people in dire need of

aid, many people pushed the needy away. Students could be divided into two groups: fever victims and the town council of Pembroke. Each side could argue for the actions they believe should be taken.

14. What is your opinion of Matilda's decision to make Eliza a partner in the Cook Coffeehouse?

Matilda trusts Eliza, views her as a best friend, and respects her work ethic and ability to run the Coffeehouse (pp. 224-226). Thus, it is a very prudent decision for Matilda to make Eliza a partner in the Coffeehouse, but the decision is not that simple because Eliza is a black woman. For example, her brother Joseph comments that people do not accept Eliza as a partner in the business because, "They don't like to see black people move up (p. 226)." Students can discuss how Eliza's life might change now that she is a partner, and could do more research about what life was like for free black people in Philadelphia in 1793.

Note: The following questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-4; Comprehension: 5-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-14.

Activities

1. *Fever 1793* contains many words or expressions that were commonly used in those days but are rarely used today. Create a dictionary for unusual words or phrases found in the book. For each word, include a definition. Suggested entries: stays (p. 3); the necessary (p. 24); ninny (p. 33); flagstones (p. 35); mucky (p. 69); headed for a lark (p. 76).

Provide students with dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other primary sources. Discuss how we use context clues to determine the definition of a word and how and why language changes. Students might also create a dictionary for unusual words and phrases used today to compare how the American language has changed and what might have influenced those changes.

2. Excerpts from diaries of people living in Philadelphia during the yellow fever epidemic appear on each chapter's opening page. Create a fictional diary entry, written by a Philadelphian in the summer of 1794.

Students can use the dictionaries of words and phrases from the period to add some authenticity to their journals. Again, provide the students with primary sources to help them get their bearings. Encourage them to think about how Philadelphia might have changed since the epidemic: was medicine, trade, or business different? They could also investigate how Philadelphia might have changed while it was the temporary capital of the United States. Before students begin their diary entry, they should have a clear idea of who their character is, i.e. his or her social class, gender, occupation, race, etc.