

Little Rebels Exploring Social Justice

Cottonopolis

by S F Layzell

Northodox Press

Set in the slums of 1840s Little Ireland, Manchester, and starring Nellie Doyle whose family is struggling to survive from hand to mouth. A welcome distraction comes in the form of workhouse resident, Chloe Valentine, offering a belief in magic, friendship and perhaps a little more. A historical portrayal of working class struggle and endurance amidst extreme poverty and inhumane labour conditions. References enslavement and Black emancipation. A rare pre-20th-century foregrounding of queer and PoC identities.

Shortlisted for the 2025 Little Rebels Book Award



Social Justice Themes: Inequality; Access; Freedom; Racism; Well-being

Things to talk about

- The first chapter introduces you to the main protagonist, Nellie. What do you understand about her working and living conditions? Do you think this is a realistic depiction?
- From the late 18th century, manufacturing in new, machine-filled cotton mills transformed Manchester into a booming industrial centre. 'Most of the bosses here don't like to talk about all the people that get hurt to make them rich...' (P7). Who are the people who get hurt? Is there more than one group of people in this context?
- When Nellie is wrongly accused of stealing, she says, 'This wouldn't be the moment to speak out with an Irish voice...' (P14). What does she mean by this?
- Magic is an important theme in the novel. Paying particular attention to the wishes, what do you think the author is exploring through this device?
- When Nellie lashes out at Chloe, 'You get fed..' (P95), she is stating that life for Chloe in the workhouse is easier than her life. Is she right to make this comparison? Does this statement have modern resonances?

Activities

- In their Author's Note S F Layzell mentions the book, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* by Friedrich Engels. Watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIXmJyUOIxg>, The Left Library. Do you agree that Engels work resonates today?

Extended

- The character of Francis is based on a real person, Francis Frederick. Born into slavery, he escaped on the underground railroad and later became an abolitionist. Are you already aware of him and his life and work? Do some research to see how much you can discover about Francis Frederick.

For more information about The Little Rebels Book Award visit littlerebels.org