

# ***Fever, 1793***

**by Laurie Halse Anderson**

For 14-year-old Mattie Cook the epidemic of Yellow Fever sweeping through Philadelphia, the capital of the United States, begins with the sudden death of a friend. When the rich flee to the country, abandoning the city to looters, forsaken corpses, and frightened survivors, Mattie's struggle to build a better life must give way to something even more important—the fight to stay alive.

## ***THEMES***

history, medicine, disease, family, community, responsibility, courage, race relations

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## ***I. PRE-TEACHING***

### **A. Have the class define and discuss these terms:**

droned, abhorred robust, peckish, miasma, stench, noxious, bilious, pleurisy, drought, impudence, demure, pummeled, oppressively, tedious, taunted, din, fronds, pestilence, vehemently, fractious, myrrh, taut, purge, cajoling, cicadas, improvised, reeking, melodious, devastation, destitute, famished, jaundiced, placid, abates, brandish, shroud, mute, harried, scurrilous, melancholy, putrid, ominous, fetid, gaunt, feign, entourage, scraggly, embers, begrudge

### **B. Before beginning the story, discuss the following questions with the class:**

1. What are some of the notorious epidemics that have had high death tolls?
2. What is the difference between a plague and an epidemic?
3. Has science stamped out epidemics? What epidemics are affecting the world today? What can be done to stop an epidemic? What is the difference between an epidemic and a pandemic?
4. What was the plight of African Americans during the early days of our country? Were they all slaves? What role did freed slaves play? How were they treated?

## ***II. PRESENTATION***

### **A. Understanding the Story:**

1. Begin with Chapters 1 - 10: How is Eliza different from Mother in her treatment of Mattie? What has happened to Polly? Why won't Mattie's mother let her attend Polly's funeral? What are Grandfather and the other men talking about? What are they blaming the sickness on? What convinces Mother to let Mattie go to town? What do the common people think is causing the fever? What rumor has Mother heard about Nathaniel Bensen? What improvements does Mattie suggest for the Cook Coffeeshop? How does Mother convince Mattie to go to tea at the Ogilvie's? What happens to Mother? What does Mattie think about as she sits with her mother? What does Dr. Kerr suggest Mattie and Grandfather do?

2. Advance to Chapters 11 - 20: How does the farmer feel about taking Mattie and her grandfather into the country? What has Grandfather been teaching her from her "crawling days"? Who appears in the road in front of them? Why have the soldiers stopped them? What does the doctor order? What happens to their food and clothing? What does Mattie do so they can eat? Where does Mattie find herself when she wakes up from having the fever? How has Grandfather spent this time? Where do they want to send Mattie? What dream does she have? What are Grandfather's symptoms? What happens during the night? How does Mattie get rid of the thieves? How does she honor Grandfather at his burial?
3. Complete the story with Chapters 21 - Epilogue: How does Mattie try to help little Nell? Where does she find Eliza? What does Eliza tell Mattie about her mother? What does Mother Smith advise Mattie to do about Nell? What does Mattie decide when she gets to the orphanage with Nell? What does Eliza tell her about the Ogilvies? What are some of the rumors that have washed over the city? Why do Mattie and Eliza quarrel? How does the frost change things? What are Mattie's plans for the future? In what ways has Philadelphia returned to life? What convinces Mattie the fever is gone? In what ways has Mother changed toward Mattie?

### **B. For Discussion:**

1. In what ways is the balloon ascent a symbol for what is happening to Mattie? How does it make her feel when she sees it?
2. What are some of the superstitions and suppositions about the cause of the fever? Which of the instructions from the College of Physicians are wise precautions? Which are foolish?
3. Discuss the attitude of the soldier on the road who says, "We have to take care of our own." In what ways does the epidemic bring out the "best and worst in the people"? Is this true in our times? Give examples.
4. In what ways does Mattie mature because of the fever?

### III. EXTENDING THE LESSON

Give students the opportunity to work with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

#### INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:

##### A. Language Arts:

1. Have students start a diary that Mattie might keep during the epidemic.
2. Have students take time to watch a sunset and appreciate the new day, then write a poem about the experience.
3. Have students write a tribute to someone close to them who has died, such as a grandparent.
4. Have students write newspaper headlines or an article that might have appeared during the epidemic.

##### B. Art and Music:

1. Have students select background music that is appropriate to some of the scenes. For example, when the market vendors call out their wares as if they were singing, students might imitate these calls and record them for background music.
2. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. They could cover the board with yellow paper and draw eyes like the cover, find or draw pictures of what the city streets looked like, research the period and copy articles and pictures about medicine during this time.
3. Have students learn more about the portraits of famous people painted by Charles Willson Peale and his son Rembrandt Peale.

##### C. Social Studies:

1. Have students learn more about ballooning. When did the first hot air balloon flight take place? What made it an exciting event? How high could balloons fly then?
2. Have students learn more about freed slaves during this time. What was the Free African Society? What was the attitude toward African-Americans in Philadelphia and other Northern cities?
3. A quote from Dr. Benjamin Rush at the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia says, "American ladies

require a peculiar mode of education." Have students find out about the education of girls and women during these and later times.

4. Have students notice the sources of the various quotes at the beginning of each chapter, such as from Ben Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac, and follow up to learn more about the book they came from.
5. Have students learn more about the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793. How many people were killed? What made it one of the worst epidemics in United States history? Who were some famous people touched by the fever? What role did Walter Reed play in conquering Yellow Fever?

##### D. Science and Math:

1. Have students find out about medicine at the time. How were diseases generally treated? Why did doctors drain blood from patients? In what other ways was medicine primitive?
2. During the time of the story, the stethoscope and the thermometer had not been invented. Have students learn about the invention of these medical tools. How were they invented? Why are they important in treatment today?
3. Have students learn more about Yellow Fever. What causes it? Could we have an epidemic like this today? Why or why not?
4. Have students learn more about the use of hot air balloons in scientific discovery. How does a balloon fly? How high can it go? How does it come back down?

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