

An illustration of a young girl with dark skin and hair, wearing a yellow dress with a white collar and a dark blue skirt. She is holding a white rectangular sign in front of her chest with both hands. The background is a light teal color.

**THINGS
A
BRIGHT
GIRL
CAN DO**

SALLY NICHOLLS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Through rallies and marches, in polite drawing rooms and freezing prison cells and the poverty-stricken slums of the East End, three courageous young women join the fight for the vote.

Evelyn is seventeen, and though she is rich and clever, she may never be allowed to follow her older brother to university. Enraged that she is expected to marry her childhood sweetheart rather than be educated, she joins the Suffragettes, and vows to pay the ultimate price for women's freedom.

May is fifteen, and already sworn to the cause, though she and her fellow Suffragists refuse violence. When she meets Nell, a girl who's grown up in hardship, she sees a kindred spirit. Together and in love, the two girls start to dream of a world where all kinds of women have their place.

But the fight for freedom will challenge Evelyn, May and Nell more than they ever could believe. As war looms, just how much are they willing to sacrifice?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally Nicholls grew up in Stockton-on-Tees, and after school, travelled the world, working for a period at a Red Cross hospital in Japan. Sally's first novel, *Ways to Live Forever*, won the Waterstones Children's Book Prize and she has been shortlisted for the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize and the Costa Children's Book Award. She lives in Oxford.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Things a Bright Girl Can Do is told from the perspective of three teenage girls, over the course of four years. Why do you think the author, Sally Nicholls, chose to tell the story of women's votes and the First World War in this way?

Discuss how the campaign for women's votes changed after the outbreak of war and how it affects the three viewpoint characters.

Choose three male characters in the novel to compare and contrast. How do they react to the Suffragettes? Do you think they understand why Evelyn, May and Nell care so much about getting the vote?

'Is a vote worth dying for?' Sacrifice is one of the major themes of the novel: Evelyn goes on hunger and thirst strike for women's votes, while Teddy, Bill and many other young men join up to fight in the war. Do you agree that either of these causes are worth dying for?

Look back at the argument that May and Nell have in the chapter entitled 'Respect'. Discuss their respective positions and whether either or both were right to say what they did. Is it ever possible to accept another person's position if it goes against your principles?

Class is an important theme in *Things a Bright Girl Can Do*. The suffrage movement appealed to women across the class divide. Discuss the differences in the three young women's lives, and what they each stand to lose or gain in joining the movement.

Look at the seven parts and their epigraphs. How do each of these extracts and quotes relate to the part they introduce? Are any of them ironic, do you think?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

'May's mother thought behaving like this set back the campaign – who would want to be associated with crazy, violent women like that?'

'A righteous fury, condensed into the end of a fist.'

There are numerous arguments presented throughout the novel about the lengths in which suffrage campaigners should go to in order to win the vote. Can you find three different views? Can you think of any examples of this question in contemporary civil and human rights movements?

'To live in a world where she was accepted and loved for who and what she was. Was it possible?'

May identifies as a 'Sapphist', an early word for a lesbian. Both she and Nell have sexual relationships with other young women in the novel. Discuss how the characters' sexuality is presented in the novel. Do you think the world Nell dreams of has finally come?

Things a Bright Girl Can Do is full of historical detail about daily life in the 1910s and the suffrage movement. What was the most surprising thing you learned in reading it? Were any of your opinions about the period changed?

It is now a century since some British women gained the vote. How does this novel make you feel about this fact?

May and her mother campaign not just for women's votes, but also on a number of issues to do with fair pay, working conditions and diplomatic alternatives to conflict. Research the current situation for these political issues in this country. What has changed and what still has to change? Do you think May would be pleased with the progress on equality made so far?

Things A Bright Girl Can Do by Sally Nicholls
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