



Authorgraph 226 Sally Nicholls

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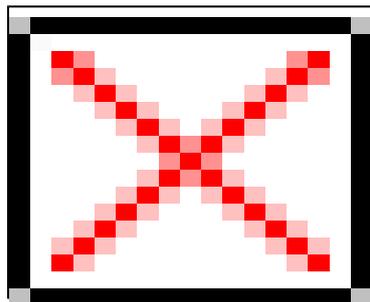
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Sally Nicholls interviewed by **Michelle Pauli**

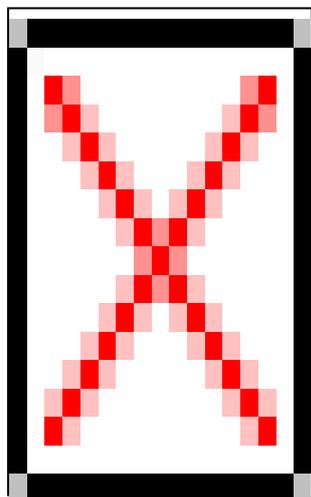


When we meet at the Ashmolean Museum's restaurant in Sally Nicholls's home town of Oxford, the author begins by quoting George Bernard Shaw: 'The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.'

It's an apposite summing up of not just the suffragette movement in general, which is the backdrop to Nicholls's latest book,

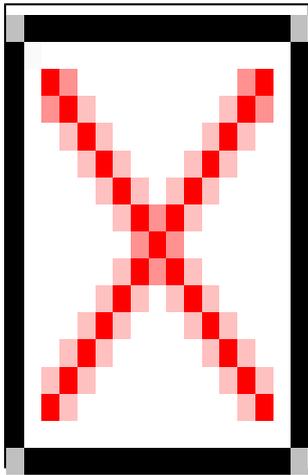
[Things a Bright Girl Can Do](#) [3], but also the novel's three main characters. Evelyn, Nell and May are captivating and infuriating in equal parts - and certainly 'unreasonable' enough to want to shape an unfair world to their view of justice. The three are teenage suffragettes from wildly different backgrounds and Nicholls's epic book covers their lives and loves against the backdrop of the course of the First World War. It's a fast-paced read that shifts between the characters every couple of pages or so, keeping the action moving yet still packing in a wealth of historic detail. Nicholls deftly weaves in real historical events and people and there is a fascinating depth of social history telling the story of those who are usually invisible in writing of and about the time, from the East End poor to the female pacifists arguing against the folly of the 'Great War'. She's brilliant on such details as the sheer weight of clothing that Edwardian women struggled under - and not a minor detail if you consider, for example, how constraining full skirts, stays and petticoats might be when trying to break through a police barricade. She is also revealing on the grinding poverty the war left women and children in when the main breadwinner was away fighting, and the daily, soul-destroying trek around Poor Law Guardians, Relieving Officers, Labour Exchange and pawn shop in an effort to get work and money for food.

Nicholls admits that, unusually for an historical novelist, she frequently found the research process for the book 'boring',



although she enthuses about some of the original sources she uncovered. 'One of the things that the research really does teach you is quite how biased a view of history you get,' she remarks. It wasn't research that Nicholls necessarily expected to be doing in her next book after the acclaimed middle grade adventure [An Island of Our Own](#) [4], which was shortlisted for the **Costa** award and the **Guardian children's fiction prize**, among others.

Unusually, **Things a Bright Girl Can Do** was conceived over a lunch with Charlie Sheppard, Nicholls's editor at Andersen Press. Sheppard had decided that she wanted a 'book about suffragettes' and that Nicholls was the person to write it, given that she'd written a short story, *Going Spare*, for the anthology **War Girls** about the two million 'spare women' of the 1920s and 30s who were left single after millions of young men died during the first world war. Nicholls and Sheppard discussed suffragettes and suffragists (the less radical campaigners) and decided that suffragettes were the more interesting 'you really do want to be writing about the people throwing the petrol bombs if you're writing a novel'. Then, 'she just kind of waved at me and said 'go off and write it!'. Which, Nicholls adds, was 'quite daunting'. Not least because 'being a suffragette isn't a plot. It's a background, a setting. You need characters who change and develop. You need things that happen. You need an emotional journey.'

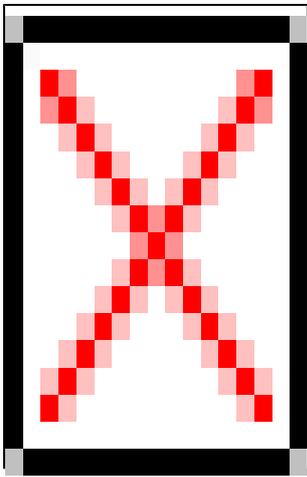


'And then I'm afraid I just quite lazily thought, a love story's got its own sort of plot. It's a bit like **Titanic**. You don't say, well, I'm going to write a film about the Titanic sinking. Because that's not a plot. That's a documentary. You say I'm going to write a story about two people who fall in love and who happen to be on the Titanic and that gives you a plot to hang your scenes of drowning men and screaming?'

Evelyn's love story is a socially sanctioned romance with a suitable young man, yet it still faces challenges, firstly as a result of her activism, which sees her imprisoned and on a vividly and harrowingly described hunger strike, and then later when her fiancé is fighting at the front and returns home traumatised. In contrast, the second love story, between Nell and May, crosses a class divide that proves more of a hurdle than the necessarily hidden nature of their love. That was a deliberate decision by Nicholls, who says, 'I read **The Well of Loneliness** and the standard narrative is 'oh it was all dreadful and I was excommunicated by my family and I had to go and throw myself off a bridge' type story. I very deliberately didn't want to write that story. Because it's just been so overdone. I read quite a lot of people on Twitter saying, 'can we have a story about lesbians where people don't die or come out and get disowned. Can we not just have love stories?'

Whereas alongside the suffrage campaign, Evelyn's personal fight is to go to university and Nell is battling poverty and her sexuality, May on the face of it has the easiest home life with a mother who not only accepts but supports her daughter's Sapphism, as May describes it.

Yet May's mother's principles are uncompromising, to the extent that she is prepared to see her daughter's treasured possessions removed by a bailiff (who lives with them for six weeks in an historically accurate and horrifyingly amusing scene) due to her refusal to pay her taxes - no vote, no tax. May herself is heartbroken at home and ostracised at school as a result of her unyielding pacifist views, based on her Quaker faith.



Nicholls also had a Quaker upbringing, attending a Quaker school for three years before it closed down, and remarks that, "it's only when I've grown up I've realised quite how unusual background it is. There's a bit in the book where May says, "well of course I'm antiwar, I'm also pacifist and anti-famine, isn't everybody?" That was what my childhood was like. The Quakers were, obviously we don't want to die in a bloody battle, why would you?" Nicholls moved on from the small Quaker school to a large comprehensive, which suited her better. A degree in philosophy and literature at Warwick University followed, then the Bath Spa MA in writing for young people. There she won the **Peters Fraser Dunlop** prize for the most promising writer on the course and a deal for [Ways to Live Forever](#) [5], her hugely successful debut novel about a boy with leukemia, which went on to win the 2008 **Waterstones children's prize**.

She seems almost embarrassed how straightforward it was. "I always feel a bit of a fraud," she says, laughing. "You do school visits and stuff and you feel like you want to say, oh I have 97 rejections in a big pile and I'm like well, actually, it was unusually smooth."

However, **Things a Bright Girl Can Do** represents something of a departure for Nicholls, and not only in the way it was commissioned. "I've not written a book like this before," she says. "This is the first full novel I've written that's been third person and it's the first novel I've written that's had more than one principle character." It also covers an arc of time and cast of characters that range far wider than her previous work, along with a subject matter that is close to her heart. Asked how she wants teenage girls to feel after reading and she immediately responds, "I want them to be inspired. These are women who transformed the life that we live. It didn't just happen. It was fought for – physically fought for. And that's part of our history, that's our social history."

Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children's books site.

[Things a Bright Girl Can Do](#) [3], Andersen Press, 978-1- 7834-4525- 7, £12.99 hbk

[Ways to Live Forever](#) [5], Marion Lloyd Books, 978-1- 4071-5933- 1, £6.99 pbk

[An Island of Our Own](#) [4], Scholastic, 978-1- 4071-2433- 9, £6.99 pbk

War Girls, various authors, Andersen Press, 978-1- 7834-4060- 3, £6.99 pbk

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