

Our Little Inventor

By Sher Rill Ng

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Hardcover

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Recommended for 4-8-year-olds



Summary

Little Nell has worked hard to make an invention that will help clean up the pollution in the Big City. But she soon discovers that it can be hard for a girl to get the attention of the people in charge.

A wonderful picture book about a girl with a big idea and a determined spirit, who just needs a little help to make the world a better place for everyone.

Sher Rill Ng's lavish, warm illustrations are often broken up by panels using varied comic book techniques to push the narrative forward and convey atmosphere and emotion. When Little Nell first arrives at Big City, for example, the use of multiple panels conveys both the action wordlessly and sequentially, as well as a sense of the metropolitan hustle and bustle she encounters. And when she leaves the Town Hall, with its yawning, all-male city denizens, we are treated to a scene like a multiple exposure photo, with the dejected young inventor moving across the page within one illustration, doing different things at different points. Elsewhere illustrations are inserted to add action to a full-page picture, such as the close-up of the lever pulled by Little Nell to clean the city's air.

Use in the curriculum

Our Little Inventor expresses:

- The value of having people believe in and support you. (Grandmother, Uncle, Miss Li)
- Girl power, in particular girls with aspirations in STEM subjects.
- Cultural diversity
- Authority structures dominated by older (white) men.
- Changing one's opinions in the face of evidence. (Her parents and Little Brother)
- The power of an individual to change the world (with some help).
- How courageous kids can change the world.

Themes

- girl and kid power
- inventions
- pollution
- environmental action
- determination and courage

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Discussion questions

Before reading *Our Little Inventor*, examine the front cover image.

- What do you think the word inventor means?
- What type of person might you expect an inventor to be?
- Look closely at the little girl on the cover and describe any details that suggest she is an inventor. [Hint: glasses, pencils behind her ear, multiple plans tucked under her arm.]
- Look closely at the clouds, what do you see here and how might it be linked to the idea of inventions?
- Look closely at the city in the bottom right-hand-corner and decide whether you think it looks like a nice place to live.
 - What problems might the city be experiencing?
 - Do you think that the girl on the cover might be inventing something to solve that problem?
- Look at the girl's machine and see if you can tell what she might have invented it for.

After-reading exercises

Comprehension questions:

1. What problem is Nell's invention designed to solve?
2. What do the powerful men in the city say is the reason they don't want to listen to Nell explain her invention?
3. Look closely at the images of the powerful men and decide for yourself whether they really are too busy doing important things.
4. Why are there three images of Nell on the page showing her exit the place where the important men meet?
5. Does Nell give up when no one will pay attention to her machine?
6. What does she build when she returns home after being ignored?
7. Describe in your own words how the invention cleans the pollution in the city?
8. Look closely at the last image of Mrs Li and see if you can tell how her job might have changed?

Visual literacy

Turn to the double-page spread where Nell is farewelling her uncle. The text says, 'The journey was long'. What are some of the ways the illustration depicts this fact visually? [Hint: look at perspective, colour and space, to name just a few visual devices.]

The book's creator uses framing to convey different effects as the story progresses. Why do you think she uses wide unframed shots of life outside the city and then switches to multiple framed shots on the first page where Nell encounters city-dwellers?

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Compare and contrast the first image of the city with the one at the end of the story. How does colour and light change how we view the city? Do you think the fact that Nell is looking at the reader in the second image changes the mood of this image, too?

Look at the close-up image of Nell when the 'men in charge' tell her they are too busy to hear about her invention. What do you think she is feeling at this precise moment in the story? There are no words on the page so what is it in her face that leads you to think that? Now do the same thing with the close-up of Nell's face after she returns home. How is she feeling here and, without any words on the page, how do you know she is feeling like that?

Discussion and Retell

What is climate change and how do you think the story might relate to this real-life issue?

Imagine this was called *Our Little Inventor's Little Brother* and tell the story again from Little Brother's point-of-view. How does his attitude about his sister change between the beginning and end of the story? Try retelling the story from Mrs Lilith Livingston Li's point-of-view.

Author's motivation

'I drew a sketch of a man wearing a steampunk mask. He carried a device on his back that contained a plant. It was a fleeting idea that I promptly forgot about until almost a year later, when I attended the Montreal Workshop. We were given the task of fleshing out a character, that we then needed to paint. The steampunk theme is a very niche genre, but I liked the idea of a gritty adventure. Liked it enough to run with it. I'm not exactly sure why I decided to make the character younger, but I did. And so, I ended up with a young boy named Chet. A very serious young man, on a very serious mission...or at least, that's what he thought about himself.

'At this point, the story was still just an idea. It wasn't until quite a while later that I wrote down a story outline. But I do remember that once I had the basic story, I changed our protagonist to be a young girl. Why? Because there was an article released around this time about how girls from age six start to doubt their intelligence, in comparison to boys of the same age. Here I had a protagonist that was brilliant and confident, but still a boy. Nell on the other hand, would be the young girl we all wished we had been, or wish we could be.

'Also, the city the story is based in is Melbourne, but in an alternate universe. One where White Australia didn't really take full control. It isn't immediately obvious, but hopefully I've left enough hints to suggest it. Cultural diversity is an issue that is personal to me, and I hope the younger readers will see the diversity in this alternate universe and comprehend it as normal.'

— Sher Rill Ng

The author

Sher Rill Ng is a Melbourne-based illustrator. At age 9 she was inspired by the drawings of a fellow classmate and promptly acquired a 'How to draw' book, soon becoming 'that-kid-in-class-who-draws'.

She graduated from RMIT with a Bachelor of Design and has since been working as a web and mobile UX/UI designer.

Though she's dabbled in photography, music and games design, Sher Rill always comes back to her passion: art and illustration. Much of her work is inspired by animated films, and from the books she reads. Her illustrations have been featured on numerous websites, and she has exhibited in several group exhibitions, including the Light Grey Art Lab (Minnesota) and Gallery 1988 (Los Angeles).

