



Rebels with a Cause: Fen Coles on The Little Rebels Award for Radical Children's Fiction

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The **Little Rebels Award for Radical Children's Fiction** is now in its 6th year. Run by [Letterbox Library](#) [3] and **Housmans Bookshop** on behalf of the **Alliance of Radical Booksellers**, the award celebrates children's fiction committed to highlighting issues of social justice. The winner will be announced on June 2nd at the London Radical Book Fair (Goldsmiths College). Meantime, the 2018, eight-strong shortlist for this year's award has just been announced:

928 Miles from Home by Kim Slater (MacMillan Children's Books)

Clive is a Nurse by Jessica Spanyol (Child's Play)

Malala's Magic Pencil by Malala Yousafzai (Penguin Random House Children's)

[Mr Bunny's Chocolate Factory](#) [4] by Elys Dolan (OUP)

The Muslims by Zanib Mian (Sweet Apple Publishers and Muslim Children's Books)

Sky Dancer by Gill Lewis (OUP)

Tender Earth by Sita Brahmachari (MacMillan Children's Books)

[Welcome to Nowhere](#) [5] by Elizabeth Laird (MacMillan Children's Books)

As always, the **Little Rebels** shortlist is a rich and exciting mix of titles appealing to children across the award's age remit of birth right through to 12. This award is passionate in its belief that weighty political ideas can be just as easily siphoned into and spread across a handful of board book pages as they can be unpicked and explored over the full length of a novel. And so, a book like **Clive is a Nurse**, in which a group of toddlers leap and trample over gender stereotypes in their joyful, free role play, sits comfortably alongside the 400-page **Tender Earth** which slowly gathers up a wide range of social justice issues, folding them into an almost epic coming-of-age novel.

The shortlist is also, as ever, a clear demonstration of the faith many of us adults have that the youngest of minds can be woken up to the big social justice challenges of our times. A faith wonderfully expressed by a previous winner of the award, Viviane Schwarz, when she said, 'Picture books are not just for putting tiny children to sleep peacefully, they are for waking them up as well'. And so, these eight books explore our most peculiar and wholly oppressive English class system (**Sky Dancer** and **928 Miles**); they describe the journeys faced by refugees fleeing conflicts (**Welcome to Nowhere**, **Tender Earth**); cuddly chickens characters are cast as factory workers demanding fairer conditions and pay from a fat cat (or, rather, **Mr Bunny**); Islamophobic next door neighbours and bullying classmates are squashed with kindness and irrepressible humour (**The Muslims**); the biographies of real-life human rights icons who have endured

incredible sacrifice are translated into age-appropriate language and visionary artwork (**Malala's Magic Pen**).

This shortlist continues the eclectic and diverse traditions of previous **Little Rebels Award** shortlists. Past shortlisted titles have included fictionalised biographies (**Real Lives: Harriet Tubman**), graphic books (**Azzi In Between**) and near-wordless picture books (**Shh! We Have A Plan**); they've starred a boy who likes to knit rainbow-coloured scarves (**Made By Raffi**), a child who is ostracised for-quite literally - defying gravity (**The Terrible Thing That happened to Barnaby Brocket** [6]) and cat burglars who defy gender norms (**Hans and Matilda**); they have unreservedly taken on animal welfare, sexism, racism, mental health challenges, war & conflict and even the confines and nonsense of a (barely disguised) Gove-style educational agenda (**Uncle Gobb and the Dread Shed** [7]). Past winning titles have offered up powerful refugee narratives - **Azzi In Between** and **After Tomorrow** [8]; they have critiqued the care system - **Scarlet Ibis** [9]; celebrated girls' achievements in fields which have traditionally excluded them - **Ada Twist, Scientist**; and introduced vast existentialist questions on the meaning of life itself-all via a tiny birdie, **I Am Henry Finch** [10].

Of course, authors and illustrators are almost universally polite and appreciative in their award acceptances. But there is something quite special about the strength of feeling and pride **Little Rebels** provokes in shortlisted authors. As they accept the award, you can almost hear the winners sigh with relief that their work is (perhaps, at last) being recognised as, not simply great storytelling, but a vehicle for real change in the world. Last year's winners, Andrea Beaty and David Roberts enthused, *'To see [Ada Twist, Scientist] be recognized as a messenger to children for hope and justice in the world is beyond imaginable?'*

In their acceptance speech, Beaty and Roberts went on to describe an almost political agenda, certainly a political imperative, for children's books: 'We live in confusing and worrying times for kids? Kids might not fully understand what is going on politically, but they know that it affects them and the people and planet they love? We owe it to them to provide the tools they need so they might find their own bravery to tackle the tasks before them. We must help them become critical thinkers and doers? Is there any better way to do this than through stories? Is there any better way to empower them to prepare for their role in this era or any era than through books?'

If there is a common thematic thread to the books on the current Little Rebels shortlist, it is that nearly all place young people or children centre stage as they find their voices and pick up banners; both literally and metaphorically, these young protagonists take to the streets, calling the adults in their worlds to account, calling us all to account and passing on batons of protest to all their readers. In foregrounding young people's voices in this way, the shortlist is an announcement of something happening more widely. Beaty and Roberts talk about giving children the tools to equip them for change. By creating a new crop of fictional young activists, authors are both making young people the bearers of the change they want to see in the world and simply reflecting the real young people who are spearheading, agitating and often leading mass movements within our new climate of awareness, activism and hunger for social justice.

As knowledge of the **Little Rebels Award** has spread, so, of course, have the publisher submissions. But this year has seen by far the biggest leap in submissions - up by 62%, with a total of 38 publishers putting their books forward. The 8-strong shortlist is an indicator of the challenge of choosing a shortlist - double the size of the shortlist in the award's inaugural year. All of this testifies to a publishing industry which is responding to what we already knew was a demand, but one recently amplified by the wider political mood. Last year, Catherine Barter, from **Housmans Bookshop** (also YA author of the appropriately named **Troublemakers** [11]) said, 'We've never experienced a greater demand for children's books that tackle the social and environmental injustices of our time.' And the same is true at **Letterbox Library**: our biographies of BAME and women activists are more popular than ever with schools but, perhaps more noticeably, people want to see newly empowered and confident young protagonists in books, inspiring us, stirring us into action, riding waves of protest with optimism. Two years ago, in an issue of **Culture Matters**, former **Little Rebels** judge, Kim Reynolds, said: 'Radical writing has been around as long as children's books have been published. Radical writers recognise that the way the world is currently organised is not inevitable, and that even the youngest members can help to change it.' How true. Except that now, what the news and social media are showing us, what recent children's

books are reflecting back, what the **Little Rebels Award** is shouting very loudly and proudly, is that the youngest people *are* changing it.

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