



Vermont Reads *Counting on Grace*



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Discussion questions were developed by Larissa Vigue Picard, Vermont Reads program director.

- What is the importance of the title “Counting on Grace?” Is there more than one meaning to it?
- Well-written characters are complex—neither all good nor all bad. Discuss this in relation to some of the characters in *Counting on Grace*—Grace, Arthur, Grace’s mother, Arthur’s mother, French Johnny, P  p  , and Miss Lesley. What is each character’s best quality? What is his or her worst quality or character flaw?
- Why did the author choose Grace to narrate the novel? How would the novel have been different if another character had narrated it? Arthur? Grace’s mother? French Johnny? Lewis Hine?
- Grace is the protagonist, or main character, of the novel—the person who changes the most during the course of the story. Who or what is the primary antagonist? Who or what causes Grace to change?
- How does the experience of loss play out in the novel? What are the many ways loss is felt or experienced and what affect does this have on the characters?
- Why do you think the class is reading *The Red Badge of Courage* as the novel opens? Why might the author have chosen this particular book? What is the importance of Arthur continuing to read the story on his own—even in the mill—after he leaves school?
- Describe the relationship between Grace and Arthur. Why do you think these two are friends? What do they learn from each other?
- Why does Miss Lesley angrily tell Grace to leave school after Arthur is taken by French Johnny? Why doesn’t she try to encourage her to stay?
- Describe the relationship between Grace and P  p   and between Grace’s mother and P  p  . What does P  p   represent? How did the move from Canada to Vermont affect P  p  ?
- Why did the family move from Canada to Vermont in the first place? What are some of the ways the family keeps its French Canadian heritage alive in Vermont?
- How are they, and the other French families, treated in the village? Why does Papa say Mr. Dupree, the store manager, is cheating them? How does Grace try to stop him from doing so?
- How has Grace’s mother come to dominate the other workers at the mill? How does Grace view her mother’s role in the mill? How do you think Mrs. Forcier herself feels about her role? What is her role like in the home? Is it similar or different? Think about the relationship between Mrs. Forcier and Arthur’s mother. Between Mrs. Forcier and Miss Lesley. What does this reveal about the role of women in general in the early part of the 20th century?
- Why does Grace’s mother never tell Grace about the baby that died until Grace starts working at the mill?
- Why does Grace say “thinking is what gets me in trouble” about working in the mill? What does she do to stay safe as she works?
- How does life change in the Forcier household after P  p   dies?
- Why is Grace’s mother initially reluctant to let Grace take private reading (and math) lessons with Miss Lesley on Sundays?
- Why effect does Lewis Hine’s arrival and picture-taking at the mill have on Grace? How does she feel when she brings him home to board overnight at her house? Why does Hine tell Grace to write down her life story?
- How does Arthur get himself out of the mill? How do his actions impact his and his mother’s situation?
- Why does Grace’s mother rip up the picture of Grace that Lewis Hine took? What is she afraid of?
- By the end of the story, Grace has become the interim schoolteacher and seems saved from a life of millwork. Do you feel like this is an appropriate, or believable, ending for the book?
- Is this a happy ending? Do you think Grace will remain as the schoolteacher? If not, why not? What do you imagine might happen to her?
- (For children) Is it ever appropriate for children to work to help their families? How is “child labor” different than helping out? Give some examples of work that kids can, and should, do.

- Author Elizabeth Winthrop was compelled to write *Counting on Grace* after viewing a famous photograph of a girl who worked in the North Pownal Cotton Mill – the photo on the cover of the book. Why do you think this photo inspired her to write a novel? What words come to mind when you look at this photo? Look at the full photo inside the book of the girl. When you study her hair, dress, feet, pocket, what does the photograph tell you about the life and circumstances of that child?
- Why did Lewis Hine’s child labor photographs have such a strong impact on the country? Why wouldn’t a written description of the mill conditions have sufficed? How can photographs change history? What are some other examples of photographs that have been change agents?

Additional Ideas for a Dynamic Discussion

- Use a facilitator, preferably someone who loves literature, has experience leading discussions, and has taken the time to read and research the book carefully. He or she should be prepared with a list of stimulating questions (the above list is a good start) and try to include everyone in the conversation. He or she should also provide a brief biography of the author. Consult VHC’s list of suggested discussion facilitators for prospects in your area.
- Make every attempt to seat people in a circle. If the group is too large for this configuration, ask people to speak loudly and clearly so that everyone can hear, or, as appropriate, ask them to stand and face the group when talking.
- Don’t forget the introductions! Be creative – in addition to stating their names, people might briefly share their experience and knowledge of mills, manufacturing, and/or French Canadian people and culture, their reason for attending, or something about the book they want to be sure gets discussed.
- Discussion facilitators should use a “closer” to end the discussion. One example is asking everyone (or, if the group is large, volunteers) to share a final thought about the book or the experience they’ve just had discussing it. Or ask volunteers to read their favorite sentence or paragraph from the book.
- Serve refreshments!

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