

Counting on Grace

by Elizabeth Winthrop

Wendy Lamb Books/Random House

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY

Counting on Grace illustrates the problems of child labor through the character of a twelve-year-old girl, Grace. Grace lives with her family in a small town near Bennington, Vermont, in 1910. Immigrant families like Grace's came to New England to work in the textile mills. The working conditions were very poor in the mills. People worked long hours for small wages, and the mills were loud and dirty. Children often worked in the mills to help support their families.

Grace is one of the children who go to work in the mill where her mother, father, and older sister already work. Although she concentrates hard on learning her job as a bobbin doffer, she has difficulty because she is left-handed. The school teacher, who despises the mill because it forces children to give up their education, helps Grace and another boy at the mill write a letter to the Child Labor Commission about their work conditions. Lewis Hine is sent by the commission to secretly photograph the children working in the mill.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. People in Grace's town came to the United States from Canada and France to find jobs working in mills and on farms. Why do people immigrate to the USA today? What types of difficulties do immigrants face today?
2. Grace went to school in a one-room schoolhouse in which children of every age were taught in one room. Do you think this would be a better learning environment than having separate classrooms for each grade?
3. Children were supposed to be 15 years old when they went to work in the mills. What jobs are children allowed to do today, and at what age?
4. Grace and her sister also help the family with chores, such as laundry. What chores do you help with at home?
5. Grace's grandfather lives with her family. What advantages were there to this living arrangement? What disadvantages?
6. How is your family like Grace's? How is it different?

7. Which other character in the story is Grace most like? Which character is most different? Which character has the most empathy for Grace?

ACTIVITIES

1. **Weaving.** Make your own weaving using strips of paper or ribbon. To make a 12 inch square, cut 24 one inch strips of paper or one inch ribbon. Lay 12 strips next to each other vertically. Tape the ends to a piece of cardboard to help keep the strips in place. Use one of the remaining strips at a time to weave between the vertical strips. Go under the first strip and over the next. Continue this pattern until you use all of the strips.
2. **Writing.** Find a portrait of a person in an art book, such as the *Usborne Book of Art*. Write a description of the person in the portrait. What does the person look like? If the person is not named by the artist, what do you think his or her name should be? Try to imagine how the person acts. Is he or she kind or mean, happy or sad, and so on.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Elizabeth Winthrop is an award winning author of more than 50 books including *Castle in the Attic* and *Squashed in the Middle*. Her website is www.elizabethwinthrop.com.

ADDITIONAL READING

Denenberg, Barry. *So Far from Home: The Diary of Mary Driscoll, an Irish Mill Girl*. New York: Scholastic, 1997.

Hopkinson, Deborah. *Up Before Daybreak: Cotton and People in America*. New York: Scholastic, 2006.

Isaacs, Sally Senzell. *Life in a New England Mill Town*. Chicago: Heinemann Library, 2003.

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Meltzer, Milton. *Cheap Raw Material: How Our Youngest Workers are Exploited and Abused*. New York: Viking, 1994.

Parker, David L. *Stolen Dreams: Portraits of Working Children*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1998.

Patterson, Katherine. *Lyddie*. New York: Puffin Books, 1992.



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