

DISCUSSION GUIDE

COUNTDOWN

BY DEBORAH WILES



45 R.P.M.

1962

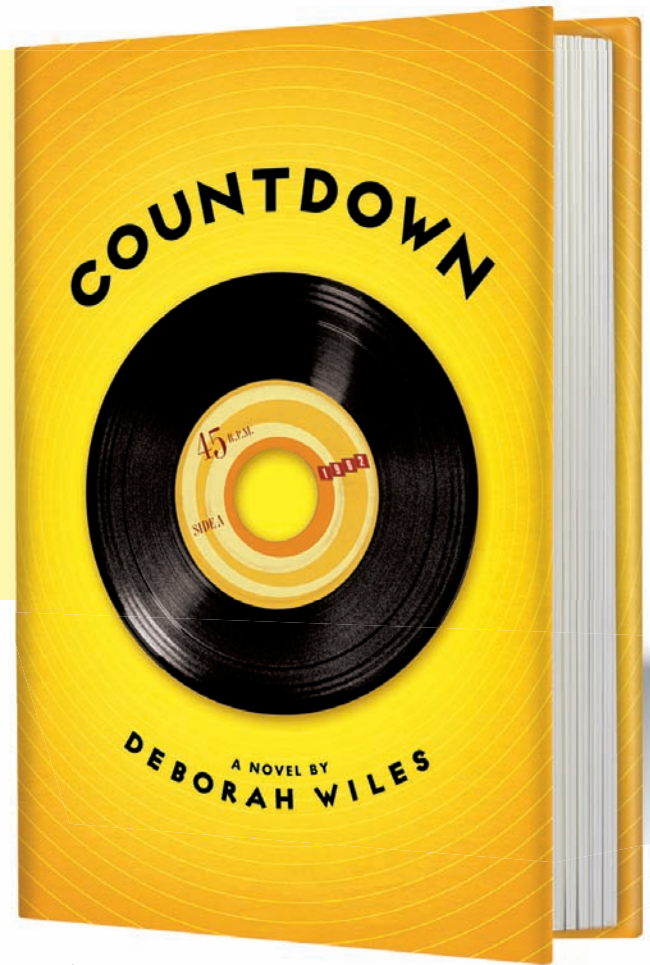
SIDE A

ABOUT THE BOOK

Franny feels invisible—to her teacher, to her family, and to her friends. At age 11 things are not going right in her world of school and in the larger world around her. The year is 1962 and the United States and Russia have reached a nuclear standoff, feeding the fears of children and adults alike. Franny's worries about her great-uncle's behavior, her older sister's mysterious activities, and a fight with her best friend all contribute to a climax in her own life that coincides with the international crisis. It is only then that Franny realizes the reserves of courage and character that lie within her.

PRE-READING

Do some research—in books or on Web sites—into the life, popular culture, and early history of the 1960s. As you read *Countdown*, make note of things that are different in the story from the world you live in today. The author has included collages of advertisements, song lyrics, and news items to help you experience the world in which the story takes place. Note how many you recognize from your pre-reading research.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CHARACTERS

1. Everyone in Franny's family seems to be focused on his or her own problems. What are the most important concerns of each member of the Chapman family—Franny, Uncle Otts, Jo Ellen, Drew, and Franny's parents?
2. Why does Franny feel “invisible”—is she really being ignored by people or does it just feel that way to her?
3. Why does Franny hide behind a bush when Uncle Otts appears in the neighborhood after school? Why is it easier for Drew to handle his great-uncle during that scene after school?
4. When Uncle Otts starts to dig up the yard, how does Franny deal with the situation? Why is Uncle Otts so anxious to build a fallout shelter?
5. How does the disagreement between Franny and Margie begin? Who do you think is to blame? How does Franny try to patch up her friendship with Margie and how does that turn out?

6. What role does Chris Cavas play in the story? Why does Franny tell Chris she is going to have a Halloween party?
7. Why is Jo Ellen secretive about her activities and what do you think she is doing when she stays away from home? Who do you think is sending her the letters she receives?
8. Why does Jo Ellen let Franny go to the party at Gale’s house when she knows their mother would not approve?
9. Why does Margie say that Jo Ellen is a spy? Do you think Franny and Margie can become friends again after the party and the incident at the gravel pit? Why or why not?
10. Why does Franny run after Margie when she leaves the party, after Margie has been so mean to her? What would have happened to Margie if Franny didn’t follow her?
11. Would Margie and Franny have been likely to say the things they say to each other in the dark woods if they were in a different situation? Why does Franny stay with her?
12. What has Franny learned at the end of the book—about her family, about friends, about the world around her?

SETTING

1. What effect does the air raid drill have on the students in the first chapter? What effect does it have on the teachers?
2. What does Franny learn about Uncle Otts’s experiences in the past and how they affect his behavior in the present?
3. What are some of the activities that college students became involved in during this time? Based on the scrapbook collages in the book, which of the movements of the early 1960s do you think Jo Ellen is becoming involved in?
4. How does each of the famous people profiled throughout the book—Harry S. Truman, Pete Seeger, the Kennedys, and Fannie Lou Hamer—figure in the history of the times? Which of the characters in the story do these historic people remind you of? How does learning about them help you understand the events in the story?
5. Compare the standoff between the United States and Russia in Cuba with the culmination of Franny and Margie’s fight in the woods after they leave the party. Can either truly solve their differences?
6. Compare the world of *Countdown* with the world you live in. What are the fears and concerns of people living today, nearly fifty years after the Cuban Missile Crisis? How are they different and how are they similar?
7. This is called a “documentary novel.” What does that term mean to you? How do the documents, images, and song lyrics included in the novel help you to understand the time in which it takes place?

POST-READING ACTIVITY

Brainstorm with your reading group ways in which each of us can create activities that will promote peace and friendship in our homes, our families, our neighborhoods, our schools, our communities, and our country.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

You say in your afterword to the book that you were nine years old at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, yet you made Franny eleven years old. Why is that?

I made Franny eleven because I wanted her to be old enough to have some experience living in the world and to think critically about her life, to have plenty of pizzazz, personality, and independence. I also wanted her to be in fifth grade, because I particularly loved being in fifth grade and remember it so well. I loved everything about being ten, eleven, and twelve years old, and seem to make most of my heroines and heroes that age so I can re-experience all those pitfalls and wonderful discoveries. It helps me to figure out my own life, when I write from that eleven-year-old place! I lived in Camp Springs when I was eleven (and when I was nine), visited the woods and the gravel pit, and attended Camp Springs Elementary School, so I pulled on those eleven-year-old memories of that time as well, although the story in the book is entirely fiction.

How much of that time, and the way you present it in the book, comes from your own memory and how much did you have to research?

I researched everything—even my old neighborhood! I relied on the memory of my heart to pull me through emotionally. For everything else, I needed to research the time period—to make sure I was as accurate as I could be about things such as television, movies, news, food, fashion, language, music, and social mores—and to make sure that my characters were authentic and that the places I was writing about were authentic to 1962. So I went back to Andrews Air Force Base and spent a wonderful afternoon wandering around with a good guide. I also walked my old neighborhood, from home to school, and took lots of photos. I walked in the woods at the end of Coolridge Road, which is now mostly a meadow and a park. The gravel pit no longer exists, but it lives on forever now, in a story.

I always say that I take my life and turn it into story, and I certainly did that with *Countdown*. Although the plot is fictional, I remember so well the details of Franny's life—those TV dinners, the tree house, watching Disney on Sunday nights, singing in Glee Club, fighting with a friend, feeling hopeless about the science fair, longing for a boyfriend and having a crush on every cute boy in the neighborhood, loving music madly and deeply, learning French, having lots of rules at home and school, trying to be a good student and a good daughter ... and sometimes feeling invisible.

Why did you pick the songs that you chose to intersperse with the images of life, politics, and popular culture of the times?

Each song helps me define my characters and tell their story, so the songs are an integral part of the storytelling. The book starts with "You'll Never Walk Alone," which felt perfect to me. The song was written by Rodgers and Hammerstein in 1945 for the musical *Carousel*. Shirley Jones and Howard Keel starred in the movie version of *Carousel*, which was filmed in 1956, so the song was still very popular in 1962 and served (in *Countdown*) as a bridge from the 1950s into the 1960s. (I actually remember singing this song in Glee Club when I was in fifth grade.) The first line of *Countdown* is, "I am eleven years old, and I am invisible." Clearly, Franny feels she is walking alone, so "You'll Never Walk Alone" accompanies our getting to know Franny.

The songs are selected carefully in this way to become part of the narrative, and they progress with songs that were popular in the early years of the 1960s. I remember my mother singing "Que Sera, Sera" while she did the dishes ... and it had perfect lyrics for Franny's life—"When I was just a little girl/ I asked my mother, what will I be?/ Will I be pretty? Will I be rich?/ Here's what she said to me/ Que sera, sera! Whatever will be, will be!/ The future's not ours to see! Que sera, sera!" You'll see that we advance from Broadway to folk to rock and roll ... there are even hymns sprinkled in—all kinds of music for all kinds of people and their stories.

How did you choose the famous people whose biographies are scattered throughout the book?

I chose the four biographies for the same reason as the songs—they are a storytelling device and are part of the narrative structure just as the scrapbooks are. So often, we don't realize that the very moments in which we live become our history, our story. I wanted to explore that and to give readers a way to see that history isn't just a bunch of dates tied to events; history is biography, individual stories that affect our collective stories.

So ... what was the Cold War, and how did we get into it, and how did it lead to us almost blowing up the world in 1962? Harry Truman helped me tell that story. He and his advisors and our Congress collectively made many of the decisions that brought about the Cold War. Truman fought in the Argonne forest during World War I, and so did Uncle Otts. I wanted to draw that parallel, and show the real face of war, not only for a real human being—Truman—but for my fictional Uncle Otts, who didn't escape the Argonne in as good shape as Truman did. The men had different childhoods and different destinies, but a common connection.

Why did we so revere the Kennedy family and how did Jack and Jackie set the political and social—and emotional—tone for this country in the early 1960s? Telling their story helped me explore those questions and deepen the narrative—it helped to humanize JFK and Jackie while, at the same time, they were being mythologized. I wanted readers to see how that mythology is created. Is it real? Do we treat it as real? When JFK spoke to the nation about the Russian missiles in Cuba—was that real? Yes, it was real ... it's not just a note from history. A real man—who was a sickly boy and an adult in constant physical pain—guided the country through this scary time. It seems fiction now, but just as fictional characters can seem so real, JFK was a real person and the Cuban Missile Crisis was fact.

Pete Seeger's story helped me reveal Americans' fear of communism—why was it so pervasive? Truman's story helps set the stage for Pete's, and Pete's story helped me to give a real face to marginalized Americans during this time, which was important to me in developing empathy for them. I wanted the reader to feel empathy for other marginalized characters, both in fact and fiction, including Uncle Otts, and also because I wanted to show that Margie's accusation that Jo Ellen is a spy was unfounded in much the same way that the U.S. government's accusation about Pete Seeger (and many other Americans) being a spy was false. But fear and ignorance make us do and say things we might not otherwise do and say. And there are reasons for our fear and ignorance. I hoped readers would make these sorts of connections in their own lives. Also, with Pete Seeger, I wanted to explore the power of music to transform our lives.

Fannie Lou Hamer has always been a hero of mine. I have long wanted to write about her, and *Countdown* gave me a chance to tell her story in light of Jo Ellen's awakening to the civil rights movement. It gave me a way to separate Jim Crow from slavery ... often I find that young readers don't realize that a hundred years separated the end of the Civil War from the climax of the civil rights movement. It gave me a chance to talk once more about character and perseverance and the changing face of America in the early 1960s. I also used it as a springboard to the second book in the series that takes place in 1966. The last scrapbook material is also looking beyond 1962, as I end the story of *Countdown*.

History happens to real people with real feelings and real lives, everyday lives. Heroic things are done by ordinary, everyday people, every day. In *Countdown*, I consider each character no less heroic than those in the biographies I tell. My characters have more everyday lives, perhaps, but so did Harry and Fannie and Jack and Jackie and Pete, when they were young. And my readers were once kids, or are kids, and I want them to know that they also live lives full of everyday heroics. They make history every day. Every choice they make reverberates and becomes a part of their history, and affects others' history as well. I chose to extend the biographies in *Countdown* to the present day, in order to show how every choice we make affects not just our own lives, but history as a whole—everything is connected, which is something Franny finds out for herself in *Countdown*.

What feelings and life lessons do you hope a reader will take away from this story?

Mostly, I want readers to enjoy this story—to be absorbed by it, entertained by it, and fall in love with these characters that I love so much. That, in itself, is a gift a writer can give a reader ... and in return, it's a gift the reader gives to the writer. A story shared back and forth is just about the most perfect symbiotic gift. It's a bit like love. No, it's a lot like love.

That is why we treasure our stories, and need to tell them, need to hear them. They tell us who we are. They offer us a place in the world. And they whisper to us that we are part of something larger than ourselves. We are courageous. We are capable of good deeds and sacrifice and rising up to be better people than we ever thought we could be. We can care for one another, be tender to one another, and become willing to be known to one another, so we can begin to understand one another. It all begins when we tell our stories.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Wiles, like Franny, grew up as the daughter of an Air Force pilot and lived in many places, but she spent most of her childhood summers in Louin, Mississippi, listening to family stories. Her first book, *Love, Ruby Lavender*, tapped into the memory of those summers with a cast of real, lovable characters and was named an ALA Notable Children's Book. Her picture book, *Freedom Summer*, won the Ezra Jack Keats award for both the author and the illustrator, Jerome Lagarrigue, and the story expressed the confusion Wiles felt about the segregated society of the early 1960s in the South. Her next novel, *Each Little Bird That Sings*, earned widespread recognition when it was named a 2005 National Book Award finalist for young people's literature. The mother of four grown children, Wiles now lives in Atlanta, Georgia. Her motto in life is stated by one of her most memorable characters, Uncle Edisto in *Each Little Bird That Sings*: "Open your arms to life! Let it strut into your heart with all its messy glory!" In each of her books, Deborah Wiles helps her readers do just that.

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Seriocomic indictment of arms races between nations.

WEB SITES

Background information about the 1960s:

www.thepeoplehistory.com/1960s.html

Official Web site of Andrews Air Force Base:

www.andrews.af.mil/main/welcome.asp

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library on the Cuban Missile Crisis, where you can listen to Kennedy's speech to the nation, October 22, 1962:

http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfk/cmc/cmc_calendar_map.html

International Day of Peace:

www.timeanddate.com/holidays/un/international-peace-day

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is available from your local bookseller or usual vendor. Teachers and librarians may order from Scholastic, 2931 East McCarty Street, P.O. Box 7502, Jefferson City, MO 65102. Call toll-free 1-800-724-6527.

Discussion Guide prepared by Connie Rockman, Youth Literature Consultant, adjunct professor of children's and young adult literature, and Editor of the 8th, 9th, and 10th books in the H.W. Wilson Junior Authors and Illustrators series.



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