

By Varsha Bajaj

# COUNT ME IN

A Teacher's Guide





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Varsha Bajaj ([www.varshabajaj.com](http://www.varshabajaj.com)) also wrote the picture books *The Home Builders* and *This Is Our Baby, Born Today* (a Bank Street Best Book). She grew up in Mumbai, India, and when she came to the United States to obtain her master's degree, her adjustment to the country was aided by her awareness of the culture through books. In addition to her previous picture books, she wrote the middle-grade novel *Abby Spencer Goes to Bollywood*, which was shortlisted for the Cybils Award and included in the Spirit of Texas Reading Program. She lives in Houston, Texas.

# PRAISE FOR COUNT ME IN

*“Count Me In is a gem of a book both funny and heartbreaking in equal measure. With its deeply moving portrayal of the healing power of empathy, this is an important and necessary story.”—Aisha Saeed, author of the New York Times bestseller Amal Unbound*

*“It wouldn’t surprise me at all if this heartfelt novel started a movement of its own! Readers will want to stand up and cheer for Karina and Chris and Papa, and shout to every corner of the world, ‘COUNT ME IN!’”—Kathi Appelt, author of the Newbery Honor winner The Underneath*

*“Karina and Chris draw on their friendship, their families, and the unexpectedly unifying power of social media for strength against fear and hatred.*

*Fast-paced first-person narration alternates between Karina and Chris. This accessible read tackles weighty issues like racism and hatred, while the warmth of the growing friendship among Karina, Chris, and Papa carries readers through the book’s stressful conflicts to its satisfying conclusion. A solid recommendation for fans of books like Hena Khan’s *Amina’s Voice* and Gita Varadarajan and Sarah Weeks’s *Save Me a Seat*.”—School Library Journal*

*“Compassionate, relatable characters. The story celebrates resilience, the power of community, and even the benefits of social media during a time when hate crimes against the Indian Diaspora are on the rise. The alternating chapters between Karina and Chris show that Americans come in all colors. Karina’s message, that we are stronger together, will easily resonate with readers.”—Booklist*



## SYNOPSIS

**An uplifting story, told through the alternating voices of two middle-schoolers, in which a community rallies to reject racism.**

Karina Chopra would have never imagined becoming friends with the boy next door-after all, they've avoided each other for years and she assumes Chris is just like the boys he hangs out with, who she labels a pack of hyenas. Then Karina's grandfather starts tutoring Chris, and she discovers he's actually a nice, funny kid. But one afternoon something unimaginable happens-the three of them are assaulted by a stranger who targets Indian-American Karina and her grandfather because of how they look. Her grandfather is gravely injured and Karina and Chris vow not to let hate win. When Karina posts a few photos related to the attack on social media, they quickly attract attention, and before long her #CountMeIn post "What does an American look like? #immigrants #WeBelong #IamAmerican" goes viral and a diverse population begin to add their own photos. Then, when Papa is finally on the road to recovery, Karina uses her newfound social media reach to help celebrate both his homecoming and a community coming together.

# QUESTIONS

1. In Chapter 1, Karina says “Chris Daniels and I are like separate planets orbiting in the same galaxy.” What do you think she means? Have you felt the same toward someone in your life?
2. From the beginning of the book it’s clear to you, the reader, that Chris is not really one of the hyenas. He wonders, “Why is it so hard to do the right thing?” Why does Chris feel this way?
3. In Chapter 3, Karina describes the list as a “basic degrading grading system for girl human beings.” Why is treating human beings like objects wrong? Does society sometimes encourage such behavior?
4. How does life change for both Karina and Chris when Papa/Mr. C moves in with Karina and her parents?
5. Chris describes his and Karina’s houses like two chocolates in a box. But he says, “On the inside they have different centers.” How are the Chopra and Daniels families similar and different? Do you have friends from different cultures and countries? What are some of the traditions or aspects of your life that are not known to your friends?
6. As Karina gets to know Chris, she discovers that Chris is not at all like she expected him to be. Have you had a similar experience? Why is it good to sometimes give people a second chance?
7. Teachers can transform lives. Mr. C makes math accessible to Chris. Have you had a teacher who changed the way you think about learning? Do you wish Mr. C was your teacher?
8. When Papa is physically and verbally attacked, Karina and Chris are witnesses. They both have to grapple with the ugly reality of hate crimes. Have you read or heard about hateful actions on TV or in the newspapers? Discuss why they are wrong.
9. After the assault, Karina takes pictures of the smashed berries, the shattered glasses, and Papa’s sandals. What do these images say that she is unable to express in words?
10. Chris stands by his friends after the hate crime. He stands up to Quinn and finds the courage to visit Mr. C in the hospital. If he had deserted his friends, how would that have changed the story?
11. As we get older, sometimes we begin to see things differently than our elders. While Karina’s parents and grandfather love Karina, they at first don’t understand her sharing the pictures on social media. Is this difference generational? What other factors contribute to these differences?
12. When Karina is interviewed, Mrs. Maxwell says, “So you have become an accidental activist?” What does she mean? What drives Karina to speak up and say, “Count me in.”?
13. Ashley, Trevor, and Diego start a memorial around the tree where Papa was attacked. Is it an act of love and solidarity? How does it bring the community together? How does it say #Saynohate?

# PERSONAL RESPONSES

Are there things that you can be “counted on” to speak up and support?

Karina couldn't have brought the community together without the support of her friends and family and like-minded supporters. Who are the people you can count on in your life?

Are you friends with someone who is older and from a different generation? How is the friendship different from and similar to being friends with someone your own age?

Karina loves and recites the words from a picture book from her childhood. Do you have a favorite line or words that comfort you?

Social media can be a force of good or bad. What have your experiences been?

Karina and Chris become friends even though they weren't in the beginning. Have you ever had a similar experience? Or have you been close to someone and then discovered that they weren't what you assumed?

# RESEARCH / ESSAY TOPICS

If you were to become an activist, what cause or issue would you champion/support?

America has welcomed immigrants from around the world in the last two hundred years. Research and share five facts about America's history of immigration.

Imagine Karina and Chris as freshmen in high school. Are they still friends? What are they doing?

Ashley is a supporting character and Karina's best friend. Can you write a chapter from Ashley's viewpoint about the events in Karina's life?