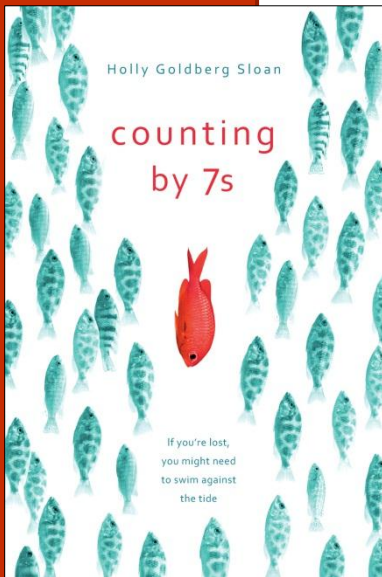


# COUNTING BY 7S

HOLLY GOLDBERG SLOAN



*I'm asking you to pay attention and view it all as being Alive. With a capital A.*

Willow Chance is a twelve-year-old genius, obsessed with nature and diagnosing medical conditions, who finds it comforting to count by 7s. As Willow pieces her life back together after the unexpected death of her parents, she discovers the connections that bind us all as families and as human beings.

**ISBN:** 9781743626535

**RRP:** \$16.99

## TEACHER NOTES

- Human beings are generally very anthropocentric – we observe and understand the world only as it relates to us. As Willow explains on p 12, however, there are myriad hidden worlds within our own. How is our world shaped by our existence and in what ways does it exist independently of (or in spite of) us? How does positioning yourself as only *part* of the world (rather than the centre of it) affect the way you observe life around you?
- **Counting by 7s** is told from seven different perspectives, but only Willow's is told in first person. Why do you think this is? How does this affect how you read her character and how you read the others around her? Are you more or less disposed to like a character represented in first or third person? Why?
- 'Dell Duke is not a bad person. He is just bad at *being* a person' (p 266). What kind of a character is Dell Duke? Are we positioned to like him? Does he grow in your esteem as you read the book? Why/why not? How does the author represent the changes – the mutations – in his character? Does he change more than any other character in the book? What is his purpose in the story?

- Consider Dell's '7 Groups of the Strange'. How effective is it to think of people in terms of labels? What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of such a carefully categorised worldview? Do you agree with Willow that 'It's possible that all labels are curses. Unless they are on cleaning products' (p 16)?
- Early on, Willow declares that she's never had many friends, but 'my garden gave me a window into other aspects of companionship' (p 19). What, if anything, is the difference between *friendship* and *companionship*? Do the people in Willow's life change from *friends* to *companions* or vice versa?
- How does Willow's experience with Fallen, the green-rumped parrot, characterise her? How is it later mirrored in the way Pattie Nguyen initially interacts with Willow?
- What is irony, as opposed to dramatic irony? For example, is the sign on the medical supply truck on p 96 an example of irony, or dramatic irony?
- **Counting by 7s** is, in many ways, about belonging – how we belong, the ties that bind us to others and why it is important to belong. Do you agree with this statement? Why/why not? Find examples of belonging/not belonging in the book.
- Why do you think we learn of Roberta and Jimmy's confrontation with potentially terminal breast cancer, only to have them pass away minutes later in a car accident? Willow later asks whether 'life so filled with random action that the very notion of caution is futile' (p 331). What do you think this suggests about the transience of life or the arbitrariness of death?
- There is a repetitive motif throughout the story of luck, fate, signs and lucky objects (eg the number 7, Willow's lucky acorn). For all that the characters seem constantly aware of luck, signs and fate, how much of a role do you think luck and fate play in the lives of these characters? How much of a role do you think luck and fate play in your own life? Why do you think we look for patterns such as luck or providence in our lives?
- Numerical sequences, such as Willow's preoccupation with multiples of 7, are all about patterns, eg all multiples of 9 add up to 9. How much do you think Willow's counting habit has to do with seeking patterns and order in her life?

- Re-read Willow's impressions of middle school students and culture in Chapter 4. How accurate do you find her observations? Over the course of a week, observe your own peers in your class or school. How are your peers socially stratified based on friendship groups, music choices, clothing etc? How would this present a challenge to a student entering a new school? You might also consider how the adoption of school uniforms attempts to unify students. Do you think uniforms are a particularly effective way of levelling the playing field in terms of the school socialisation?
- Read 'The Descent' by William Carlos Williams (you can find the full text here: <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/descent>). The author's use of it in **Counting by 7s** is an example of intertextuality, where one existing text is used to define, shape or otherwise add meaning to another text. How does 'The Descent' define, shape or otherwise add meaning to **Counting by 7s**?
- Class debate topics:
  - Rewarding and heartbreaking often go hand in hand (p 20).
  - Labels were important. And they were very effective (p 40).
  - Origins were so important. Even if you didn't know your own (p 72).
  - Endings are always the beginnings of something else (p 98).
  - The deepest form of pain comes out as silence (p 161).
  - What we expect rarely occurs; what we don't expect is what happens (p 198).
  - Does saying goodbye matter? Does it really end something (p 328)?
  - You can find labels to organise living things, but you can't put people into any kind of group or order (p 332).