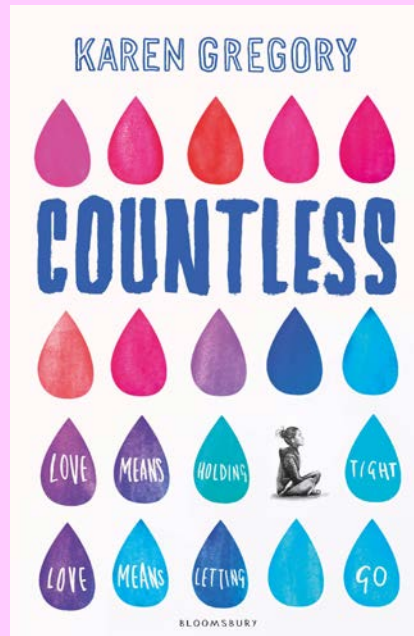


Teachers' Notes

Countless

By Karen Gregory



ABOUT THE BOOK: SYNOPSIS

Hedda is in the grip of an eating disorder. She's even given it a name, Nia, and Nia just won't let Hedda go. While she's been deemed well enough to be released from Yewlings clinic, Hedda still makes regular visits to see her key worker, but spends most of her time alone. Her relationship with her family is strained, to say the least, and so Hedda lives on her own in a damp, musty flat, calculating her volume of food intake, counting calories.

When Hedda discovers she's pregnant, her immediate reaction is that she's not fit to carry a baby, let alone to be a mother, but she begins to wonder about adoption, and forms a truce with Nia: 'When the baby is safely here and I've found it some proper parents, then Nia can have me back' (p.34). Hedda's mother's angry reaction to the news of her pregnancy comes as no surprise, and she's more alone than ever, until she forms a pivotal friendship with a new neighbour, nineteen-year-old Robin. While he has his own closely guarded reasons for not living with his family, Robin cooks for Hedda, he listens, and even makes her wonder if she might be capable of bringing up her baby. And so Hedda *does* keep baby Rose, and accepts her parents' invitation to return to the family home. However, old tensions soon flare and Hedda decides that 'it will be better when it's just the two of us', and she and Rose move out. But the odds are stacked against Hedda – emotionally, physically and also financially after she misses an assessment and her benefits are stopped. Further upheaval comes when both

Robin and her parents reveal unexpected truths, and Hedda has to summon every vestige of strength to make a courageous admission of her own.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Gregory is a graduate of Somerville College, Oxford, and a project coordinator by day who's become adept at writing around the edges (strong coffee and a healthy disregard for housework help). A confirmed bookhead since early childhood, Karen wrote her first story about Bantra the mouse at the age of twelve, then put away the word processor until her first child was born when she was overtaken by the urge to write. Karen lives in Wiltshire with her family. *Countless* is her first novel.

FOR DISCUSSION

1a) 'I guess numbers are my thing, for better or worse' (Hedda, p.17)

'You use numbers as a crutch' (Felicity, p.120)

Discuss the significance of numbers and counting throughout the novel. Do you agree that Hedda uses 'numbers as a crutch'?

1b) Think of two alternative titles for *Countless*.

2) 'What. The. F.?' (Hedda, p.7). Reread page 7. Discuss how the author conveys Hedda's state of mind when she discovers she's pregnant.

3) How did you feel about Hedda's initial wish to 'get rid of it' (Hedda, p.14)? What did you think of the following remark made by Mary, the specialist midwife: 'But an abortion isn't impossible. Given your history, it might well be the safest option' (Mary, p.25). Why does she say this? Do you think she was right to say this?

4) 'Nia's voice still needles under the thud of my footsteps. *Fat Cow*' (Hedda, p.9). 'That **Thing** inside you is going to make you fat. *Disgusting*' (Hedda, p.16).

Why do you think Hedda personifies her condition? Why does her caseworker advise 'you need to stop referring to your eating disorder by that name' (Felicity, p.6)?

5) 'I'm keeping her' (Hedda, p.164). Why do you think Hedda changed her mind? Consider Mary's comment on page 28: 'It's not a game and it's not only your life you'd be playing with. If you have this baby then you have to eat'.

6) Consider the truce Hedda makes with Nia on page 34: 'When the baby is safely here and I've found it some proper parents, then Nia can have me back. All I have to do is eat for seventeen weeks and then everything will be like before'. Do you think Hedda really believes that 'everything will be like before'?

7) 'If you wanted to, you could see it as a game. Who could get one over on the staff. Diddling the scales. Trying to get away with it, to win. Us against them. I was good at it. Except there wasn't much of a prize in the end' (Hedda, p.29). Were you surprised that the patients in Hedda's unit saw their situation as a competition? How did this make you feel?

8) 'It's like she was casting a spell for how my life should go. Because the thing is ... I'm still here' (Hedda, p.47).

'It's not too late for you. You can have an amazing life' (Molly, p.131).

Discuss Molly's enduring effect on Hedda's life.

9a) 'I knew you were selfish before, but even I never thought ... You could damage it, you know. What right do you have to do that to an innocent child?' (Mum, pp.60-61).

What did you think of Hedda's mum's reaction to her pregnancy? Do you think Hedda is selfish?

9b) 'She wrote me off a while ago, to be honest, and I can't blame her' (Hedda, p.11). Do you think Hedda's mum has completely written her off? Why is their relationship so strained? Did you feel any empathy for her mum? Did your opinion of her change as the novel developed? Consider, for example, the conversation Hedda overhears between her mother and sister on p.177.

10) 'I consider tearing the picture out, to rip into a million shreds or fold away for thinspiration' (Hedda, p.69). Reread the paragraph on page 69 in which Hedda describes a magazine. Discuss the conflicted messages Hedda observes here and their possible impacts on the magazine's readers.

11) Discuss the role played by compassionate strangers in Hedda's story, with reference to two characters.

12) 'Suddenly, I take in the flat through his eyes ... And I feel shame in every single part of my body, right down to my toes' (Hedda, p.110). Why does Hedda feel shame when Robin sees her flat?

- 13) What impact do Hedda and Robin have on each other's lives? What might have happened to them if they hadn't met?
- 14) 'I see her, in dreams, always walking. Sometimes I think she might be me' (Hedda, p.93). Discuss the role of the Walking Woman. What does she represent?
- 15) 'We want you to come home, darling. You and the baby' (p.128). Were you surprised when Hedda's parents offered to raise her baby? Did you expect Hedda and Rose's move to the family home to work out?
- 16) How did you feel when Hedda decided against taking Rose to hospital (pp. 209–212)? Do you understand her decision? Do you think it was the right decision?
- 17) 'I sit her on my lap and just look at her, like she's a map I'm trying to read so I don't have to ask for directions any more' (Hedda, p.235). In what sense is Rose like a map to Hedda? Discuss the symbolism of this description.
- 18) Did you think Hedda was right to move out of her parents' house? Did you agree with her view that 'it will be better when it's just the two of us' (Hedda, p.189)? What would you have done in this situation?
- 19) '*Don't leave us here alone. We need someone to look after us*' (p.253), Hedda wants to yell at her dad after he drops off a new cot for Rose. Why doesn't she say this aloud?
- 20) Were you surprised when the truth about Robin's situation was revealed? Why do you think he kept it secret from Hedda? Was he right to try to make things work with Jade even though he doesn't love her (p.335)?
- 21) 'Control. That's the biggest self-deception of them all, don't you think?' (Felicity p.291). Discuss the importance of self-control to Hedda, and why Felicity suggests that it's a form of self-deception. Do you think it is?
- 22) Reread Hedda's lists of pros and cons on pages 240–241, and her notes to Felicity on pages 287–288. What have you learned about anorexia from reading this novel? Did anything surprise you?
- 23) 'I spot myself, a long smear like a ghost in a shop window' (Hedda, p.8). What does Hedda's use of imagery here reveal about her character and self-perception?
- 24) 'Now, with the buggy, I'm just another teenage mum, invisible to everyone except those who get a kick out of disapproving' (Hedda, p.305). What does this novel reveal about attitudes to teenage mothers? Has reading Hedda's story changed your own perception?
- 25) 'Is love something you feel or is it something you do?' (Hedda, p.313). What do you think?

- 26) Which moments in the novel did you find most moving? Why? How did the author create this atmosphere?
- 27) Did any scenes or lines in the novel make you laugh? Does humour play a role in how Hedda manages her situation?
- 28) What was your first impression of Felicity? Did it change during the course of the novel?
- 29) How satisfying was the ending of the novel? Did it fulfil your expectations?

BEYOND THE BOOK

Creative activities

- a) Write an email from Hedda to Robin set at the same time as the epilogue. Consider how she's doing personally, and how she feels about Robin. Consider, also, the tone of Hedda's email, how she speaks, and turns of phrase she might use. Then write Robin's reply to Hedda's email. Is he still living with Jade? Does he have any regrets? How has his life changed?
- b) Reread pages 56–63 and write this same scene from Hedda's mum's point of view. Think about her state of mind, her concerns, and why she reacted in this way.
- c) Research attitudes to teenage pregnancy in the media. You might want to analyse newspaper headlines, and read real-life accounts of teen parents.
- d) Write your own back cover copy for *Countless*. Think about which elements of the story potential readers should know about. Think about the style and tone of your copy – it needs to grab the attention of potential readers and give a flavour of the book, without giving too much away. You might like to consider including a short excerpt, or posing a question that will draw readers in and convey the essence of the novel.
- e) Create a visual representation of the novel. Perhaps it could feature photographs that evoke the characters, themes and atmosphere of Hedda's story, excerpts from the novel, or your own illustrations.

Further reading

Wintergirls, Laurie Halse Anderson
Paperweight, Meg Haston
Panther, David Owen
Elena Vanishing: A Memoir, Elena Dunkle
Trouble, Non Pratt
The Baby, Lisa Drakeford
Boys Don't Cry, Malorie Blackman
Slam, Nick Hornby

A Personal Note from the Author

In Countless, Hedda is struggling with a variety of issues: her long-standing eating disorder and unexpected pregnancy, difficult family dynamics, the challenges of living on her own and the options she has for the future.

Many young people struggle in secret with similar issues. Like Hedda, they may not feel able to talk to their family and this is why it's so important to create an atmosphere at school where young people can find someone to confide in. This could be a teacher or other adult, or it may be one of their friends.

It's not always easy to know what to say to someone who is struggling with difficult issues. It can feel overwhelming and frightening. However, if you are experiencing difficulties, it helps enormously to realise you're not on your own and to find a person who can listen without judgment.

There are a number of organisations who can offer help and support such as YoungMinds and it can be helpful to signpost both the person in difficulty and their friends to these.

Schools can play a crucial role in debunking myths and reducing stigma around mental health issues. Research carried out by YoungMinds suggests that 'young people with mental health issues are more likely to experience higher levels of stigma than adults' and that this can stop them from seeking help, yet we also know early intervention is critical.

(<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/assets/0000/1324/stigma-review.pdf>)

The PSHE association has recently released a resource pack for teachers on teaching about mental health and wellbeing, which can be found here:

<https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/curriculum-and-resources/resources/guidance-preparing-teach-about-mental-health-and>

The Guardian also has a number of useful links in the following article:

<https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2016/mar/21/how-to-teach-mental-health>

Talking about mental health issues in school may not be easy, but with mental distress at a record high, it's becoming increasingly vital we have these conversations.