

Counting Lost Stars **Reading Group Guide**

These questions are intended to spark conversation and give readers ways to connect with the novel and with one another. Explore the ‘Backstory Blog’ at www.kimvanalkemade.com to find additional resources to enhance your experience of discussing *Counting Lost Stars*.

1. Early in the novel, Rita Klein questions whether surrendering her baby for adoption is the right thing to do: “My eyebrows pulled together in a knot so tight it ached my head. Something wasn’t making sense. How could [David] be unwanted? No one had ever asked me whether or not I wanted my baby” (15). How did you react to Miss Murphy, the social worker, who believed that Rita’s baby would be better off with adoptive parents? What do you think motivates Rita’s parents to secretly send her away to the unwed mother’s home? In what ways do you think society’s view on single mothers has changed since the 1960s?

2. It takes a while for Cornelia to understand how her father’s census work at the Ministry of Information will be used by the Nazis: “For a Dutch person to be considered Christian or Jewish used to depend on what they believed and how they worshipped. Now, under the Nuremberg Laws—and thanks to her father—it’s determined by a list generated by a machine” (141). Did you ever hear about punch-card computer technology being used to organize the Holocaust? How do you react to something as barbaric as genocide being conducted with the efficiency made possible by the same computers that businesses and government agencies relied on? Do you think Cornelia’s work at the ministry, and later for Gertrud Slottke, makes her a collaborator?

3. Jacob Nassy is so traumatized by his childhood experiences in the Holocaust that he suffers from suicidal episodes: “[My mother] was up in the car already. I was still down on the tracks. I stood on my tiptoes and stretched as high as I could. We touched fingertips. Then [the Order Policeman] pulled me away” (256). How did you respond to Jacob’s struggles with trauma, depression, and mental health? What aspects of his character did you react to positively? At the end of the novel, are you hopeful for Jacob’s future?

4. In the novel, Rita is the only woman in her computing classes, yet women were involved with the development of computer technology from the very beginning: “I was the only girl in that class, too, and the guys left me out of their late-night study groups. When they found out I could diagram control panels, though, they were eager to get me to do their grunt work. As far as they were concerned, building computers took a man’s brain; programming them required the tedious attention to detail they figured women were good at” (70). Were you surprised to read about a woman learning to program computers in 1960? Are there any stories you can share about women being involved with computers early on? Do you think the field of computer science today is doing enough to encourage and support women and girls to become programmers?

5. When Cornelia first meets Leah, she mistakes her neighbor for a boy. As their romantic relationship develops, Cornelia is drawn to Leah's masculine characteristics: "In a way that confused her to think about, being near a girl who seemed like a boy allowed Cornelia to feel more like a woman than she ever had before" (95). How did you respond to their relationship? If Cornelia had been able to tell her mother about her feelings for Leah, how do you think Helena would have reacted? When the two women are reunited after the war, were you surprised that they weren't able to rekindle their relationship?

6. When Rita Klein discovers she's pregnant, she has few choices regarding her own reproductive rights. Later in the novel, she decides to take control of her life: "I racked my brain until I remembered the name of that doctor with the reputation among the girls at Barnard for providing expensive abortions. If he was willing to do that for the right price, I figured he'd be willing to prescribe birth control to an unmarried woman" (328). Did reading about Rita's experience in 1960 bring to mind current issues regarding women's reproductive rights in the United States? How does remembering the past inform your thoughts about the present?

7. A key plot point in the novel happens when Cornelia and Leah switch identities: "There's only one thing Cornelia can do to save the ones she loves. She lifts her chin. The officer plucks the identity card from atop the pile of sketchbooks. He shines his light on the face of the girl pictured there, the girl named Leah Blom. He moves the circle of light to Cornelia's face. They match" (216). How did you respond to this scene? In what ways did this switch impact the lives of each character? Do you think Leah would have survived the ordeal Cornelia endured?

8. Camp Westerbork is not as brutal as Cornelia expected: "It's a warehouse, she realizes, like those canal houses in Amsterdam where the riches of the world were once hoarded. Except this warehouse is stocked with human beings who have been numbered and shelved like goods ready for export. What does it matter to Commandant Gemmeker if the items in his stockpile play soccer or drink tea or send letters while they are here, as long as there is enough inventory to meet the weekly transport quota?" (261-62). How did the depiction of Westerbork in the novel compare to your idea of a Nazi concentration camp? Can you imagine the psychological impact of never knowing when your name will be called for the weekly transport?

9. Rita is surprised to learn that Cornelia, who later converts to Judaism, was born not Jewish: "I'd gone to a conversion once, for a high school friend who was marrying a Jewish boy. I remembered her being questioned by the *beit din*: Why would you want to become a Jew? Do you not know our people are persecuted, harassed, oppressed, and despised? At the time, the questions seemed pro forma, but imagining a victim of the Holocaust responding to a court of rabbis brought tears to my eyes. Yes, she must have said. Yes, I know" (355). Why do you think Cornelia converted? What do you think Judaism means to her after her experiences? Are there ways in which you can relate to this aspect of the novel?

10. Think back to some of the other characters in the book: Edith Silver, Frank McKay, Francie Plunkett, Gerard Vogel, Irving and Adele Klein, Fräulein Gertrud Slottke. Which characters did you react to most strongly, either positively or negatively, and why? What was it about that character that got your attention?