

A Reading Group Guide

Counting Coup

By Kelli Donley

About the book: Happily consumed with her academic career, Professor Avery Wainwright never planned on becoming sole guardian of her octogenarian Aunt Birdie. Forced to move Birdie—and her failing memory—into her tiny apartment, Avery’s precariously balanced life loses its footing. Unearthed in the chaos is a stack of sixty-year-old letters. Written in 1951, the letters tell of a year Avery’s grandmother, Alma Jean, spent teaching in the Indian school system, in the high desert town of Winslow, Arizona. The letters are addressed to Birdie, who was teaching at the Phoenix Indian School. The ghostly yet familiar voices in the letters tell of a dark time in her grandmother’s life, a time no one has ever spoken of. Torn between caring for the old woman who cannot remember, and her very different memories of a grandmother no longer alive to explain, Avery searches for answers. But the scandal and loss she finds, the revelations about abuses, atrocities, and cover-ups at the Indian schools, threaten far more than she’s bargained for.

Discussion guide:

1. What are the implications of the novel’s title phrase, *Counting Coup*, in connection with the characters’ lives and the novels’ themes? What does the phrase counting coup mean to you?
2. How does Donley create different voices among the women in the novel? Who is the protagonist? Who is the villain? Are there more than one?
3. What do we learn about cultural, social, religious, and other differences between America in 1951 versus modern times? How do these differences play out in Avery’s discovery?
4. What is the significance of the ritual of bathing Ezra and Thompson when they arrive at the Winslow church? What other religious metaphors did you notice in the story?
5. How does Donley portray the themes of loss, grieving, and recovery?
6. In what ways does Avery resemble her grandmother, Alma Jean? Her Great Aunt Birdie?
7. How is the importance of family and family history demonstrated in *Counting Coup*?

Author bio: Kelli Donley was born and raised in Arizona. She has been an avid reader and writer since childhood, which led to studying journalism in college. After volunteering in west Africa with the Peace Corps, she returned to school to study public health.

She is the author of three novels, *Under the Same Moon*, *Basket Baby*, and *Counting Coup*. Inspiration was found working in the developing world in international health.

Kelli currently lives with her husband Jason in Mesa, Arizona. She continues to work in public health for the State of Arizona, and blogs at www.africankelli.com and www.kellidonley.com

She can be found online on twitter: @arizonakelli and on Facebook: Kelli Donley, author

Other books by Kelli Donley:

Under the Same Moon: Abena Udate was selling mangos on a humid market day in her Mozambican village when she caught the eye of a wandering foreigner. Kidnapped and brought to live in suburban America, the African teenager struggles with the glaring cultural and social differences of her new life. Abena is expected to play along with her kidnapper's story--she's just another hungry child plucked from a desolate country and saved by foreign adoption. As her younger brother Kupela searches for clues to explain her disappearance, Abena must decide whether to remain with a family she doesn't love for a life of luxury, or find a way home to those she loves in a world of despair.

Basket Baby: Reeling from the loss of their first baby, Macy Duncan and her husband Ben flee their grief and enter an unknown world as Ben accepts a job offer that takes them to the far reaches of Southern Bolivia. While Ben's work takes him into the dangerous politics of coca farmers and indigenous rights, Macy sinks deeper and deeper into a bottomless depression, one that threatens to never lose its hold. Seeking to run away from it all, Macy trips over a mysterious basket left on her doorstep. A basket that begins to cry. In *Basket Baby*, a tale of loss, grief, and the overcoming power of love, Macy and Ben must embark on a journey to find the mother of this abandoned baby and, maybe, find the path back to each other along the way.