

# ***Be Counted!***

## ***The Diary of Amy Phelps, Dunedin, 1893***

**Author: Janine McVeagh**

### **Synopsis**

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Amy Phelps is a thirteen year-old girl with a difficult life. She lives in the tiny central Otago settlement of Hills Creek with her mother, father and younger brothers. Ever since her father lost his business as a jeweller he has become an alcoholic, drinking away what little money he is able to earn in the local tavern. Amy is frequently required to seek credit at local stores so that the family is able to eat. She finds this humiliating and degrading but what choice does she have? Amy often feels anger and hatred towards her father for bringing the family to ruin, so when her rich Aunt Delia urges her to come and live in Dunedin, she jumps at the opportunity.

Amy's new life in Dunedin contrasts sharply with her existence in Hills Creek. She lives in a grand house and has servants. Amy attends Otago Girls' High and works hard at all of her subjects, especially art, which she is passionate about. Amy realises how lucky she is to have left her life of poverty behind. It is because of this that she becomes intrigued with Mary, who has recently left her Aunt's employ. Mary is only her age and when her mother dies she disappears from her factory job. When Amy learns that Mary is missing she becomes obsessed with finding her. Her search leads her to some unsavoury parts of Dunedin and she becomes concerned that Mary may have succumbed to illness or been forced to make her living as a prostitute. When she finally tracks Mary down it becomes clear to Amy that some people can't simply be saved, they must make their own way in the world.

Amy's Aunt Delia is determined to improve the lives of women like Mary by getting women the vote and trying to introduce prohibition by shutting down the pubs. She campaigns tirelessly to achieve these goals and Amy becomes involved by helping to collect signatures. Their task is not easy however. Many powerful men are against women having a say in parliament and if the suffragettes are successful, New Zealand will be the first country in the world where women will be able to vote.

Amy loves her new life in Dunedin, but when her mother loses her baby, she is forced to return home to look after her. When her father dies tragically soon after Amy fears she will have to return to Hills Creek to live. Will her mother be able to cope with supporting and looking after her family alone, or will Amy have to give up her dream of becoming an artist and return home to help her?

## Text Type

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*Be Counted! The Diary of Amy Phelps, Dunedin, 1893* is the latest novel in Scholastic's *My Story* series. The story is told from Amy Phelps's point of view and through her diary entries the reader is given an in depth look at life during the late 1800's in New Zealand. The novel will appeal particularly to girls and students interested in New Zealand history.

The story is set in New Zealand, in the tiny settlement of Hills Creek and the large city of Dunedin. The reader is given insights into different social classes and the challenges that they face. Amy's mother and father are extremely poor and they are often forced to rely on the charity of others to survive. In contrast Amy's mother's sister Delia is affluent and lives in a mansion with servants. Her husband is a doctor and she wants for nothing so is able to dedicate her time to organisations such as The Women's Christian Temperance Union and The Women's Franchise League.

Students will be fascinated by the historically accurate information contained in the novel and the Historical Note at the end of the story. Women such as Aunt Delia were brave, committed and unwavering in their conviction that for women's lives to improve they needed to have a say in the running of the country. So successful was their campaign that New Zealand became the first country in the world to give women the vote. Students will be interested to see how the role of women has changed since the late 1800's and how women fought to gain this equality.

Themes in *Be Counted!* include poverty and its devastating effects, the dangers of alcohol abuse, the opportunities that money can provide, the challenges that women faced in the 1800's and the determination and fortitude they showed to overcome them.

## Sharing the Novel

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*The novel has been divided up as follows: Historical Note (pp. 177-189) and pp. 5-13, pp. 14-81, pp. 82-137 and pp. 138-176.*

*During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Have them read the historical note and carry out some library research before beginning the novel so that they understand the historical context of the story. Encourage students to analyse Amy's character and explain how she is shaped by her experiences. Have them compare their lives today with Amy's in the late 1800's. Students should discuss how the role of women has changed over the years and what attributes were displayed by brave women such as Aunt Delia who made these changes possible.*

## Introducing the Novel

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Have students study the front cover of the book and read the blurb.

- Who does the diary belong to? What do you expect from a novel told in this form?
- When and where is the story set? What do you know about this time?
- What do we learn about the main character from the blurb?
- What is Aunt Delia trying to achieve with her campaign?
- What do you think the “dark side” of life in Dunedin might be?

Students read the Historical Note and study the photographs (pp. 177-189).

- Why was 1893 a major turning point in New Zealand’s history?
- What were the main occupations for women? What *weren’t* women allowed to do during this time?
- What was the Sweating Commission? Who was Harriet Morison? What did she achieve?
- Why did many people blame the “beer barons” for the hardship that poor households faced?
- What were the goals of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union? Who was their leader? What was the Women’s Franchise League focussed on?
- How did the lives of women in the 1800’s contrast with the lives of women today?

***Teacher reads pp. 5-13 aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.***

## Comprehension pp. 5-13

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- What is the date of the first diary entry?
- Who is Aunt Delia? Where does she live? Why doesn’t she get along with Amy’s mother?
- Why is Amy so excited by what Aunt Delia’s letter says?
- Who are the members of Amy’s family? How old is Amy? Why does she sometimes feel older than her age?
- Why does Amy often get angry with her father? Why does she consider him weak? What did Amy’s dad do previously for a living? What does he do now?
- Why does Amy have mixed feelings about Aunt Delia’s offer? Why does her mother have to pawn her engagement ring?
- What does Amy decide to take to Dunedin to remind her of her family?

### Discussion

- What do we learn about Amy and her family through her diary entries? What sort of life does she lead? What challenges does her family face? How does her father's alcoholism affect the family? Why does she feel so much trepidation about moving to Dunedin and starting a new school?
- When and where is the story set? How does Amy's life in the 1800's contrast with your life today?
- How does Amy feel when she learns that her Aunt Delia wants her to move to Dunedin and carry on with her schooling? What are the advantages of moving to Dunedin and living with Aunt Delia? What are the disadvantages?
- Is getting an education important? How would a child who is not allowed to go to high school be disadvantaged?

*Students read pp. 14-81 independently before the next shared session.*

### Comprehension pp. 14-81

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- Why does Amy's mother insist that she go to the store and ask for credit? How does Amy feel about this? What other clues are there in the novel that suggests Amy's family is poor?
- Describe Amy's journey to Dunedin. What new experiences does she have?
- Why is Amy so astounded when she first arrives in Dunedin? Describe Aunt Delia. How is she different from Amy's mother?
- What does Uncle Joshua do for a job? Why is he frequently away during meal times and at night?
- Describe Mary. Why is she in the McAllans' house? How does she react when Amy tries to help her? Why does Amy feel so uncomfortable being waited on?
- Why does Amy feel so anxious about starting her new school?
- What Union is Aunt Delia a member of? What is their goal?
- Why is Mary so scornful of Amy's drawing? What would she do if she had free time?
- Why does Amy believe that Aunt Delia is "not the usual type of person"? What does she talk about at the dinner table? What does Mary mean when she says that Delia and her friends have "a lot of time to fill"?
- How is Amy's new school different from her old one? Who does Amy meet on her first day? What does she think of her English teacher?
- What does Amy learn about Mary when she has her first real conversation with her?
- Who calls out to Amy when she walks past her house on the way to school? What does Amy learn about her family?

- What Bill does the Women's Franchise League want passed in Parliament?
- Which two subjects does Amy enjoy the least at school? Which ones does she enjoy the most?
- Why is Amy worried about introducing Stella and Hannah to Mary? Why are her fears unfounded?
- How many signatures is the Women's Temperance Union aiming to gather for their petition? How do they plan to collect these signatures?
- What news does Amy learn from her mother's letter? Why doesn't Amy know whether to be happy about this or not? What news does Amy learn from Maria's letter?
- Describe the incident that occurs after church. Why do you think some men are opposed to women being able to vote?
- Where does Mary get a new job? Why does she want to leave Aunt Delia's?
- Describe Stella's home and family. Why is Amy slightly envious of her friend?
- How does Amy feel when she goes with her Aunt to collect signatures for the petition?
- How does Mrs Harrison die? Why does this put Mary in such a precarious position? Why do you think Aunt Delia refuses to let Mary live with them? What are Mary's ambitions for the future?
- What conclusion do Aunt Delia and Uncle Joshua jump to when Amy asks them if she can borrow a book? Why doesn't she correct them?
- What does Amy learn about Mary from Hannah? What happens when Amy visits the factory where Mary works? What does Pamela tell Amy about the working conditions at the factory? Where does Pamela think that Mary is staying?
- Why was the Sweating Commission set up?
- Where does Amy see Mary? Why doesn't she go after her? Why does Amy feel that she needs to find Mary even more urgently after this encounter? What suggestion does Uncle Joshua come up with for tracking Mary down?
- Why is Aunt Delia upset when she learns that John Ballance has died?

### **Discussion**

- Why do you think Amy's mother agreed to let Amy go and live in Dunedin when she could do with her help at home?
- Compare and contrast Amy's life in Hills Creek with her new life in Dunedin. How are her living conditions different?
- Should alcohol be banned? Justify your answer.
- What qualities and attributes does Aunt Delia have? What challenges do she and the other women face? Why do you think mainly affluent women take on the job of fighting for women's

rights and exposing the plight of the poor? Is politics “just a thing men do that is nothing to do with ordinary people’s lives”? Explain your answer.

- How would Amy’s life have been different if she didn’t have a rich Aunt to step in?
- Describe Mary. Why does Amy find her so interesting? How is her situation different from Amy’s? What challenges did women in the 1800’s face if they wanted to go to university and study for a profession?

***Students read pp. 82-137 independently before the next shared session.***

### **Comprehension pp. 82-137**

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- What realisation does Amy have during the class discussion facilitated by Miss Fraser?
- Why do the unemployed of Dunedin have a meeting in the town hall? Why is it so important to Hannah that her brother helps support her family?
- What illness does Amy suffer from?
- What idea does Amy come up with when Stella discovers the picture that she drew of Mary? Why does Mrs March think that Amy is wasting her time trying to find Mary? What affect do her comments have on Amy?
- What is happening to Mary when Amy catches a glimpse of her? Why doesn’t Hannah run after her?
- What information does Pamela provide Amy with about Mary? Why does Amy become more determined than ever to find her friend after this conversation?
- What startling news does Uncle Joshua read about Mary in the newspaper? How does Aunt Delia react when Amy suggests that they go and find her? Why does she react like this? Where does Aunt Delia visit Mary? Why isn’t she allowed to leave?
- Why does Amy enjoy the exhibition so much? Which artist’s work does she find particularly inspiring?
- Why does Aunt Delia send telegraphs to the Prime Minister and Amy’s father? What terrible news does Amy’s father give her in his reply?
- Why is Amy so terrified when she sees her mother? Why does Amy believe that her father is “useless”? How does Amy help her family when she returns home? What is the terrible outcome of Amy’s mother’s illness? What other dreadful news does Amy receive while she is in Hills Creek?
- How does Amy react when she learns about her father’s death? Does her reaction surprise you? Why/why not? How does Aunt Delia help her sister deal with her loss? Why doesn’t Amy’s mother want

- to move to Dunedin? How does she plan to support herself and her family?
- How does Amy feel when she visits her father's grave? Should she feel ashamed of how she feels? Why/why not?
  - Why does Amy think that in some ways Aunt Delia doesn't understand her mother at all?
  - What news does Uncle Joshua give Amy about Mary when she arrives home? Why does Aunt Delia think that Amy should stop worrying about Mary? Why does Amy feel such a strong responsibility towards Mary? Who does Amy write to in regards to Mary? What does she learn when she receives a reply? How does Mrs March help Amy with her search?
  - Why is Amy so relieved when she reads her mother's letter?
  - Why is Amy so excited about the art exhibition at school? Who attends the exhibition?
  - What information is contained in the letter from Mrs McKay?
  - What information does Amy put on the posters that she makes about Mary? Why does she decide to put the posters up early in the morning?

### Discussion

- Why does Amy love Miss Fraser so much? What qualities does she have that make her a good teacher? Who is your favourite teacher? What is it about him or her that you like so much?
- Describe the working conditions in many of the factories. What were the unions trying to achieve for the factory workers? Why were many women reluctant to join the unions?
- What options were there for young women like Mary in the 1800's? How does Aunt Delia believe getting the vote will help someone like Mary? What resources and assistance would be available for a young woman in her position today? Will Amy be able to find Mary? If so, how will she help her?
- Describe Amy's mother. What attributes does she possess? What challenges and hardships does she face and how does she overcome them? What does the fact that she wants Amy to carry on with her schooling despite her husband's death suggest about her character?

*Students read pp. 138-176 before the next shared session.*

### Comprehension pp. 138-176

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- How does Aunt Delia react when she finds out what Amy has been doing? What positive outcome results from Amy's actions?
- Where does Amy spend her holidays? What does she do during her time there?
- Where does Uncle Joshua find Mary? What illness is she suffering from? Why is her future so uncertain?

- How does Amy celebrate her fourteenth birthday? What exciting news does the family receive on Amy's birthday?
- Why won't Amy's Uncle and Aunt do for Mary what they have done for Amy? Are they being reasonable? Why/why not? What does Amy overhear when she eavesdrops on the conversation Mary has with her Aunt and Uncle? What do they decide to do about Mary's future?
- How do Aunt Delia and her friends fill up their time now that the Bill has been passed in parliament?
- What does Amy give Mary when she leaves so she will have to return?
- Describe Amy's visit to Miss Hodgkins. What does Aunt Delia say to Amy when she gets back that surprises her?
- Why does Amy feel so much better about being away from her family after her mother and brothers visit? How have their lives changed since the death of Amy's father?
- Why is it so important that Amy do well at her exams?
- What does Amy learn from Mary about her new start when she returns the book? What does Mary reveal about the terrible time that she had after she left her last job?
- When is Election Day? Who is responsible for insuring that working women and the middle-class sign on? How is Mr Fish discredited?
- What plans does Mary have for next year? Why is Amy envious of her?
- What are the results of the election? How many women voted?
- Why does everyone cheer so loudly for Hannah at prize giving? Which subject does Amy achieve the top mark in?
- Why is Amy's Christmas in Hills Creek tinged with sadness? What does Amy's mother give her for Christmas? What do Aunt Delia and Uncle Joshua give her?

### **Discussion**

- Discuss how Amy develops and changes during the course of the story. What lessons do you think her experiences have taught her?
- What do you think might have happened to Mary if Amy was not so determined to find her?
- New Zealand was the first country in the world where women won the right to vote. What impact do you think this landmark victory had around the world? What other advances have there been in the women's movement since the 1800's?
- Why is it so important to think for yourself and question things rather than just accept things the way they are?

### **Activities**

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**Plot** – Construct a timeline that shows at least 15 important events that occur in Amy's life.

**Research** – Conduct a research assignment about Kate Sheppard. Formulate 3 open-ended focussing questions to guide your research. Use a range of written, oral and visual sources to gather your information. Present your information in role as Kate Sheppard.

**Newspaper Article** – Write a newspaper article about women winning the vote. Use the inverted pyramid style of writing where all of the most important information (the what, where, who, when and how) is contained in the first two paragraphs. Add additional information as the article progresses and include quotes from people involved.

**Debate** – Conduct a debate on the topic “alcohol should be outlawed”. Each speaker should talk for at least 3 minutes with a 2 minute right of reply.

**Static Image** – Design a poster that encourages women to fight for the right to vote on parliament. Combine verbal and visual features to convey your ideas.

**Research** – Choose a person or an organisation mentioned in *Be Counted!* and conduct a research assignment on your chosen subject. Present your research findings on a poster. Include a research log that details the processes that you went through to gather your information, a list of sources and at least one visual resource such as a picture, map or photograph.

**Writing** – Write several paragraphs about Amy’s relationship with her mother and father. Use quotes and examples from the novel to back up your ideas.

**Writing** – Explain how Amy’s life would have turned out if she had remained in Hills Creek with her mother.

**Letter** – Imagine that you are Mary. Write a letter to Amy thanking her for her help and explaining your ambitions and hopes for the future.

**Review** – Write a book review suitable for publication in a school newspaper. Include a brief summary of *Be Counted!* Explain the importance of the setting in the story and describe the main characters. Include information about the main themes and ideas presented in the story and give your personal opinion about the book.

**Editorial** – Imagine that you are a male newspaper editor in the late 1800’s who is opposed to women being allowed to vote. Write an editorial about this issue. Remember to make your views on this subject very clear!