



Countdown

Deborah Wiles

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Franny Chapman just wants some peace. But that's hard to get when her best friend is feuding with her, her sister has disappeared, and her uncle is fighting an old war in his head. Her saintly younger brother is no help, and the cute boy across the street only complicates things. Worst of all, everyone is walking around just waiting for a bomb to fall.

It's 1962, and it seems that the whole country is living in fear. When President Kennedy goes on television to say that Russia is sending nuclear missiles to Cuba, it only gets worse. Franny doesn't know how to deal with what's going on in the world -- no more than she knows how to deal with what's going on with her family and friends. But somehow she's got to make it through.

Featuring a captivating story interspersed with footage from 1962, award-winning author Deborah Wiles has created a documentary novel that will put you right alongside Franny as she navigates a dangerous time in both her history and *our* history.

Countdown Details

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Author : Deborah Wiles

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From Reader Review Countdown for online ebook

Naima F says

I absolutely loved this book!!! It is about a girl named Franny and sometimes for her life can be rough. Dealing with her crazy uncle, her older sister who she hardly ever see's, and the possibility that there can be bombs coming anytime. The part that I enjoyed the most is when it was Halloween and how there was some crazy stuff. Over all this book was GREAT

Joe says

Countdown is nothing if not a courageous book to market to the middle school set. Complexly structured, impressed with its own scope, and oftentimes old-fashioned, it is more a test of attention-span than it is a merging of history and fiction.

This is not to say I didn't enjoy the book. I did. At times, I truly loved it. The idea of a documentary novel isn't... uhh... *novel*, but in the hands of Deborah Wiles, it seems like the most revolutionary concept ever. Iconic images are laid under the lyrics of 1960s pop songs and ramrodded between gritty reminders of the Red Scare and the jarring, sterile, domestic bliss of that era's nuclear family.

Squeezed in between these collages is the story of Franny, a rather ordinary girl, whose world is slowly unraveling in the kind of pre-adolescent ache most of us remember so well. Her best friend, Margie, is drifting farther away. Her uncle's very public meltdowns are becoming an embarrassment. Her revered older sister is spending more time away from home with "thinkers" - liberal college kids invested in civil rights. Her mother is barely holding it together, acting severely toward Franny while trying to keep the family on even ground. The only glimmer hope on Franny's horizon is Chris, the cute neighborhood boy who has returned after a year in Pakistan.

Taking place in the span of the week - the very week that the United States is locked in a deadly staring contest with the USSR during the Cuban Missile Crisis - *Countdown* attempts to parallel Franny's personal crises with that of the world's. It works most of the time, only derailing when Wiles gets a little too artsy with her ideas. What's with the unexpected poetry and lyrics interrupting the otherwise straightforward narrative? It's weird for weird's sake. Do we really need the verses and chorus of "Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikini" interrupting the chapter about the Halloween party?

Not weird, but certainly extremely fascinating, are the brief, seeming inconsequential mini-biographies sprinkled at the end of some chapters. Readers meet Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Pete Seeger, and - best of all - Fannie Lou Townsend Hamer, a figure I'd never encountered in any history book. These interpolations may be slightly confusing to a less mature reader, but many teens will see the parallel to both the story and its historical context.

Best of all is how cleverly evocative the book is: Wiles has brought the early 1960s to life. Every meticulous detail is rendered accessibly and lovingly - you can almost smell the Old Spice wafting from Uncle Ott's body and the Bryl Cream in Daddy's hair. Even details that aren't explicitly stated come to life on the page, particularly the scandalous life led by the newly-divorced Mrs. Hoffman. Franny's mom's scorn for this woman is always lurking in the corners, but it never comes to life. Masterful, to say the least.

Countdown is receiving quite a bit of Newbery buzz, and I don't think the praise is unwarranted. The climax

is a bit of a letdown, but the book itself is an intriguing piece of work. It will not be an easy sell to most kids... which, let's face it, with the exception of *When You Reach Me*, has been the de rigueur of Newbery recipients in the last ten or so years.

Betsy says

I held this book up to the noses of the children's bookgroup I run. "Does anyone know what the Cuban Missile Crisis was?" I asked. My point blank question was met with pointedly blank stares. I tried a little word association on them. "Duck and cover? Bunkers? Castro? Bay of Pigs?" Nope. It's funny, but when you think of what parts of American history sort of get bypassed in school, the Cuban Missile Crisis is definitely one of them. To be fair, children's literature has kind of let them down. The Crisis will sometimes get a passing glance in most historical fiction as a kind of side note. It took a writer like Deborah Wiles to drag it front and center for one and all to see. *Countdown* doesn't just show you 1962. It plunges you headlong into that year, bombarding you with the songs, styles, images, and bold angry statements. Reading *Countdown* is like taking an immersion course in early 60s history with an expert who knows her stuff.

It starts out as just one small problem, and then billows out from there. It's 1962 and twelve-year-old Franny Chapman is frustrated to find that her teacher will not call on her to read aloud in class. It's infuriating! Still, that little problem feels like small potatoes after the bomb drill in school that day. And that problem pales in the face of her Uncle Otts and his mental breakdown at home. Add in her best friend's strange and mean behavior, her sister's secret activities, and the fact that the whole country might be going to war with the Russians soon over some missiles in Cuba . . . well it's hard enough to be twelve as it is. Franny's got a lot on her mind these days. The country? It feels the same way. Documentary media and biographies spot the text, putting the story in context.

The thing I like about Deborah Wiles is how good she is at putting you in a character's shoes. You may not agree with everything Franny thinks, says, and does but you empathize with her. You understand her. And when injustice is wrought against Franny you feel it in your gut. Whether it's her teacher skipping her in class when everyone's reading (a plot point that is elegantly tied up by the end) or her best friend stealing something that isn't hers, you feel for Franny. Heck, you'd push that no good, snide Margie in the girl's bathroom TOO if you had a chance. Rotten little thief. You see? I'm still in the book!

It's remarkable to think that this title started life as a picture book in 1996 (not that we aren't shockingly lacking in picture books about the Cuban Missile Crisis too). The book is so rich that imagining a pared down version of it feel faintly sacrilegious. That's partly because Wiles has a way with language. She knows how to put unspeakable emotions into words. You know when a toddler stumbles and then tries to decide if they're going to cry or not? Wiles makes it clear that the tween version of that consists of insults kids give to one another in the form of advice. As Franny says at one point, "I don't answer Margie. I try to decide if she has hurt my feelings." Her descriptions are also top of the charts as well. "Our kitchen is pink. Pink refrigerator, pink stove, pink walls, pink sink. The room looks like it's been hosed down with Pepto-Bismol." And then there are the sentences that will be perfect for bookgroups discussing this title across the country. "Over four million Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians perished. The middle initial S in Harry S Truman's name stood for nothing." You could probably read the book several times before you realized that most of it was written in the present tense too.

And accurate to the times? Brother, I don't know the last time I saw a mom smoke in a book where that looked normal. It was normal in the early 60s after all. Details of the time period don't boldly announce themselves but just sit there, giving the book the right atmosphere. After a while, I found that there was never a moment when I doubted Wiles's research. She's meticulous. The bibliography and websites are

superb. Exactly the kind of thing you would want in a book like this. You grow to trust Wiles so much that when a clap of thunder shocks Franny's family on the night President Kennedy talks to America about the crises you honestly believe that the author researched the weather reports of Washington D.C. for that exact date and time.

The media in this book poses a bit of a conundrum, though. Don't get me wrong. It's brilliant. The periodic breaks in the book are filled with photographs and ephemera. Some kids will skip these entirely to get to the plot and some kids will pore over the selections, disregarding the story. Most, though, will read both and gain a fuller knowledge of Franny's world as a result. It's entrancing, particularly when you notice that the text is also broken up with some biographies of famous figures at the time. These biographies sound as if Franny has written them for a report, but they're fun and urbane with meaningful asides printed in bold type. You don't get the sense that you're reading boring old facts with these portions. The book is beautifully broken up without ever losing momentum too. At the start it goes media, text, bio, text, media, etc. and you're right there along with it.

Yet the media isn't without some problems. As one librarian pointed out to me, periodically images are accompanied by unidentified song lyrics throughout the text. In the first section, for example, you can read "You'll Never Walk Alone", printed on top of a photo of an exploded bomb and later "Hold Your Head Up High" above an image of Bert the Turtle right before he ducks and covers. "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark" accompanies both the moon (with Kennedy's statement that "we choose to go" there) and some unrelated quotes. "You'll Never Walk Alone" repeats under a photograph of children hiding under their desks. Now as an adult reading this book, I understand that these quotes are from *Carousel* and are often meant to be ironic. Later the song is "Que Sera Sera" and the lines "the future's not ours to see" and "What will be will be" appear. But there is nothing to indicate that these are songs at all. If you were to inspect the backmatter you'd notice that there's a section crediting "Lyrics" but how many children will put two and two together? A lot of kids will read these lyrics straight through, without irony, which changes the entire meaning of the words. The quotes make perfect sense within the context of their songs. Without that context, child readers are left behind. Interestingly, these quotes are also from some pretty unhip songs (though "The Locomotion" does make an appearance). It's hard to say how they relate to Franny. Certainly her class has been singing, "You'll Never Walk Alone" at school, but how do the other songs apply to her? Strange that the songs she actually mentions in the story (like "Runaway") are never quoted. You'd expect a little more crossover.

The book is the first of a trilogy, I believe. This is good news for all of us. I, for one, want to keep going wherever Franny may lead me. Of course, there is the question of whether or not the book stands on its own. For the most part all the loose ends are tied up at the finish. There is the question of Franny's older sister to answer, though. You never really learn what it is that she's up to (my husband was hoping that The Highlander School would be mentioned, since it would tie everything up so beautifully). Much like the song lyrics in the mixed media portions, adults will probably have a good idea, but kids for the most part will be left baffled. However, I think the subsequent novels in this series will answer that question effectively. So I don't fret over not knowing quite yet.

There are plenty of books out there where kids find their relatives obsessed with digging some fallout shelters. *House of the Red Fish*. *Gemini Summer*. *The Wonder Kid*. *The Loud Silence of Francine Green*. *Francine Green*, for the record, is probably the book this title reminded me of the most, though it was more concerned with the Red Scare than the Missile Crisis. And few of these books really nail the paranoia of the time period. Kids today have plenty to fear, if they want to. They can be scared of terrorist attacks or epidemics or war even. When I was a kid in the 80s I spent my own nights worrying about what my President might do with the bomb. Franny may be a child of the 60s but she's dealing with issues that any generation can relate to and understand. So while it may be the most early-1960s children's novel I've ever read, I'm going to stamp the word "timeless" all over this puppy. Memorable and interesting, all at once.

Ages 10 and up.

Dena says

The storyline for Countdown follows Franny Chapman's life living in America during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Along with the story, Deborah Wiles includes footage from the 1960s. The storyline kept me on the edge of my seat and, despite living in a different time period I really connected with the main character. I learned a lot about the Cuban Missile Crisis and that time in American history that I wouldn't learn in a classroom setting.

I've read plenty of historical fiction but this one was formatted like a documentary with the pictures and quotes from the 1960s. I highly recommend it for anyone, whether you are an avid reader of historical fiction, or not. It's the first book in a trilogy about America in the 1960s and I'll definitely be looking for the next book.

Wendy says

This is going to be my annual "I don't get it" book, I guess. I'm puzzled by the almost-universal accolades. (Review will be especially long because of Newbery talk.)

The writing itself is good enough, though marred in my opinion by overuse of similes--some of which didn't make much sense. "By the time Saturday rolls around, we're used to living like emergency room patients." I have no idea what that's supposed to mean. "I answer as if the pope himself called me and told me I could go." ??? Franny isn't Catholic. It felt mired down in detail, as well; it was like a reference to the time period was shoehorned into every paragraph.

I felt like I've seen every character (especially the groovy older sister) several other places. People are excited about the cigarette-smoking mom--didn't they read *The Green Glass Sea*? Also, too many secondary characters in general; wait, which one is Denise Dubose and which is Judy James? etc. (I thought it rather odd that the author used the real names of her childhood classmates and made up characters for them. Especially the ones that aren't very nice.)

I think the book is needlessly confusing. While it's pretty obvious to the adult reader what the older sister is getting involved in, I doubt it would be to the child reader. Whether still not having any information about this at the end of the book would bother kids or not, I can't say, but I feel like when I was a kid I'd be all "wait, what about the big secret? what was going on? who is Ebenezer? did I miss a chapter in there?"

Then there's the issue of the documentary material. As others have mentioned, the longer historical/biographical passages really took me out of the story; sometimes they were more interesting than what was going on in the plot. And as others have also mentioned, most of the song lyrics were extracted and placed in such a way that (if one didn't know the song, and/or the significance of the picture on the same page) any meaning was lost. Some of the material I liked: the photographs, mostly, and the quotes from the preparedness film (although that was overdone by at least half) and the quotes from Kennedy's speech. From reading what others say, I gather the purpose is supposed to be that we feel like we're Right There With Franny, immersed in the early sixties. But this didn't work for me: for instance, there are several references to the death of President Kennedy, which doesn't occur within the time frame of the book. Franny is into Kennedy, of course, and she doesn't know he's about to be assassinated, yet the reader does. The adult reader already knows that, of course, and probably most of the child readers do as well. But the within-book consciousness of Kennedy's eventual death destroys the immediacy that might have been provided by the

documentary stuff.

Reading this (and it was a struggle to finish; I think it's overlong in general, especially at the climax), a similarity I couldn't identify kept niggling at me. I finally realized toward the end that I was being reminded of books that did something similar but, to my mind, did it better--don't laugh, but it's the American Girl books. (I haven't read one in twenty years or so and was bordering on too old for them when they came out, but still enjoyed them mildly.) These also had (have?) documentary material in them, at the end. I enjoyed poring over these as much as I enjoyed the thin plotlines. But I remember that it was fun having them at the end and finding out the rest of the story of the things mentioned in the text.

This book is fictionalized memoir--I don't know to what extent--and the other book it reminded me of a great deal was Judy Blume's excellent *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself*. I'm not a particular Blume fan, but that book works in historical references more naturally and has (to me) a more engaging plot--it feels story- and character-driven, not historical-reference-driven.

Comments on anything anyone disagrees with in my review are, as always, welcomed.

Earlier: I'm impatient with this book, which is feeling like nothing but a baby-boomer nostalgia piece. I doubt I'd continue if it weren't being Newberlyed-about.

Laura says

This particular book just didn't resonate with me. Deborah Wiles does a wonderful job capturing one family and community's reaction to the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis. What's particularly effective is that she captures it in a way that is realistic for a 5th grade living during that time -- she doesn't get bogged down with all the details but rather presents the fear and anxiety through the reactions of adults, air raid drills, and watching President Kennedy's speech on television.

I felt that Frannie, the main character, was an unreliable narrator. I still don't quite get why her teacher skips her to read in Social Studies and why her mother seems so uncaring and unconcerned about Frannie's fight and problems with her friend. Wiles also gives Frannie a few quirks and habits that are mentioned repeatedly, to the point where I wondered if Frannie was supposed to be presented as having some kind of social disorder. Frannie constantly 'telegraphs' her unspoken thoughts to others. Simple things like 'stop' or 'thank you.' A writing quirk or a character quirk? Frannie is also obsessed with her headbands, which I think reveals that she is a 5th grader who hasn't quite matured into one who realizes how she fits into the world.

This was a long read and I enjoyed the historical aspects of it. I did not, however, particularly connect with Frannie and her somewhat manic or compulsive way of seeing the world. Many of my Goodreads friends seemed to love this book, particularly the audio version, and I recognize that there are a lot of strengths to the work. Me though? This wasn't the right kind of historical fiction for me to enjoy.

Susan says

Reading this book was like taking a trip through time. The year in which the events took place was my last year in high school, so the songs, the photos, and the quotes were all familiar to me. Wiles does a great job of constructing the story of Franny, a fifth-grader, caught up in the country's craziness during the Cuban missile crisis. Interspersed among the chapters of Franny's story are visual reminders of the time.

I'm not sure whether to expect young adults would like this or not. If they do, it will certainly give them a vivid glimpse of that one moment in our nation's history. The civil rights movement is very briefly touched on, and there's a hint that it may be the focus of a future book.

I don't recommend listening to the audio version. I started that way and found it confusing. Then, when I picked up the hardback instead, I realized why -- there's no way for a reader to make up for the visual effect of the between-chapter pages.

Pamela says

Who as a child of the sixties remembers siren tests every Saturday at noon, and "duck and cover" drills in preparation for possible nuclear attack? I certainly do! Today, I still shudder at the memory. The onslaught of doomsday prepping and headline news, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, Communism and race riots scared the bejezus out of young impressionable children.

"We hope it never comes . . . a bright flash, brighter than the sun, brighter than anything you've ever seen. It could knock you down hard, or throw you against a tree . . . It's such a big explosion, it can smash in buildings and knock signboards over and break windows all over town . . . But if you duck and cover you will be much safer."

Readers of "Countdown" will time-travel back to 1962, experiencing an era of growing pains, conflicting ideologies, rumors of wars, pop culture, and the testing of innocence. A time when the Pledge of Allegiance AND the Lord's Prayer were recited every morning in public schools across America. Nancy Drew mysteries were best sellers. "It's a Wonderful World" and "Itsy Bitsty Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini" were top forty hits. John F. Kennedy was president. And Martin Luther King rallied peacefully for Civil Rights.

"Yes I am. I'm a square, in my Buster Brown Shoes and plastic headbands with my Nancy Drews . . . But you know what, Margie? You're mean. And that's worse."

I absolutely LOVE this book for a gazillion reasons. The story is captivating. Franny's interaction with her "embarrassing" family and her "thought-to-be" friends is classic coming of age chaos personified.

"What's worse: your best friend doesn't feel like your best friend anymore, or the whole neighborhood thinks your family is an embarrassment?"

There's a good bit of suspense, counterbalanced with humor. The characters are realistic; some touched with a bit of eccentricity. Uncle Otts - He's a hoot! There are tangible qualities to nuances and atmosphere. Simply put, Deborah Wiles' writing is sheer joy to read and to live, and relive.

"Beauty can't amuse you, but brainwork - reading, writing, thinking - can." - Helen Gurley Brown, as quoted in "Countdown."

Last, but far from least, I tip my hat to Scholastic Press and their design/style and editing teams. Wow! The insertion of newsreel tidbits, posters, song lyrics, key public figures' bios, The 007 poster, Atomic preparedness jargon/posters, numerous photographs..... Made this fictional memoir/documentary-story come alive with brilliant appeal!

"I feel sorry for anybody who would let hate wrap them up. Ain't no such thing as I can hate anybody and

hope to see God's face." - Fannie Lou Hamer, as quoted in "Countdown."

This book has the power to evoke dialogue for understanding between students and teachers, children and parents/grandparents. And it would make a great book club selection for youth and adults alike. Ultimately, it's stellar reading entertainment.

Absolutely, "Countdown" is on my 2015 Top Pick list – 5 – Stellar Stars.

Laura says

When my 9 year-old daughter said, "Mom, I don't think I'll ever find a book as good as Countdown," I pointed out to her that we'd read many books she loved and there would be others. She replied, "Yeah, but Countdown made me think." To me this summarizes how powerful this book was in hooking my daughter and me as we were transported to a different era. Interspersed throughout the novel is footage of the events that took place during the Cuba crisis in 1962 as it parallels the momentous events that are also happening in 11 year-old Franny Chapman's life.

Franny is living during the period when John F. Kennedy is president of the USA and the threat of a nuclear war between her country and Russia is very real. So real in fact that they are taught and trained at school what to do in case of a bomb attack. These events affect her family; her father, a pilot in the US army, her uncle, a war veteran who suffers relapses from the 1914 war he fought, her older sister who goes to college and is touched by the radical changes in society, and her Mom who has to keep her cool throughout. In addition, Franny finds herself at odds with Margie, her best friend while trying to deal with school and home issues. The entire story takes place in the span of two suspenseful weeks, and my daughter was addicted. She said she loved imagining what would happen next, and although the ending was not quite what she expected, this book is still one of her favorites.

I want to point out that Franny's mom is a smoker, and I explained to my daughter that in the 60s the dangerous effects of smoking were unknown. Smoking was popular then and was allowed in places not allowed today. Between this topic and all the others brought up in this novel, my daughter and I had many enlightening conversations.

Blending this story with anecdotes, quotes, news coverage and mini-biographies of prominent people of the 1960s made reading this novel unlike any others we have ever read. What a great way to get a history lesson! Deborah Wiles succeeds in bringing this time period to life. We even looked up on the Internet some of the songs mentioned and my kids fell in love with Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini. Remember that one?

My daughter and I are happy to note that this is the first book in The Sixties Trilogy. We eagerly look forward to the next one. If it's anything like this one, it will be a sure hit.

Blake says

This book overall was a quick read, but it covered a lot of topics, which I didn't personally know about, and is very interesting in my opinion. Something I found interesting about the book, was on how short of a time span it actually took place in. It felt as if the story went by very quickly, as it was very interesting.

Catherine says

I liked it fine, but don't put me on the list of people who are crazy about it. It may have been better if they toned down the photos, quotes, and documentary pieces that interspersed Franny's story. They were earnest and provocative, but they evoked a college art installation more than they did October, 1962. Also, while I knew all of the songs being referenced, and could sing them in my head, and I know who the Breck girl was, I'm not sure a lot of 21st century kids would. Not that kids have to know every cultural reference in everything they read, but this book was quite heavy with them, and I just don't believe they are going to have a similar experience as an adult reader.

Msjodi777 says

Not really sure if this would be considered a YA book or not, but as old as I am, I really enjoyed it. Could have been because like the main character, I lived thru the Cuban Missile Crisis, on an Air Force Base (actually only a couple hundred miles from where this book takes place) and the book gives such a true account of what those 2 weeks were like for us. This book brought back quite a bit of what it was like to live in the early sixties, with the language we really used - Heavens to Murgatroid! But it also helps us to see the history, as it really happened, not necessarily as it has been written by the winners.

Definitely recommend this one for anyone who lived thru the early sixties, as well as for those in the YA crowd who want to know what that time was like. All in all, my only complaint is that the narrator had to read the words to the songs of that era, and could not sing them.... but copyright laws are what they are, so there we have it. <><

Jenna Buss says

3.5 stars. It took me awhile to get into this book, particularly because of the fact that the book switches from the story to pages that contained quotes from the time period, flyers, newspaper pages... Even though at first this was confusing and something I was not accustomed to, now it is one of the main reasons that I enjoyed the book. It was an excellent way of depicting what time period it was, as well as it helped to foreshadow what was or wasn't going to happen later on in the story. I loved Franny's character, and her perspective of the story as it went on. I recommend this book to anyone who is looking for an out of the ordinary historical fiction book to read.

Donalyn says

In the fall of 1962, Americans lived in fear of nuclear annihilation during the 13-day Cuban Missile Crisis. Deborah Wiles reveals the fear and uncertainty of this time through the eyes of Frannie, a fifth grader. Frannie's older sister, Jo Ellen, sneaks off to secret meetings of a civil rights youth organization. Her father, an Air Force officer, waits on high alert at the base. Uncle Otts, a World War I veteran, barks orders at the neighbors and tries to build a bomb shelter in the yard. And her younger brother, Drew, the perfect one, clutches his copy of "Our Friend the Atom" and refuses to eat. Against this backdrop of civil unrest, Frannie

fights with her best friend, steals her sister's records, and crushes on a boy in her class. This book is a nice mix of historical and cultural information and a family story.

The innovative format of this book includes artifacts like photographs, advertisements, quotes, and song lyrics interspersed throughout the book.

This is the first book in a proposed trilogy about the 1960's.

Megan says

When I was in school, my Social Studies classes usually ended right around the end of the Civil War, with some information about World War I and II if we had time at the end of the year, and the 1950s onward covered only briefly. I didn't grow up knowing very much about the Cuban Missile Crisis or even very much about the Vietnam War. With that in mind I think this book is pretty valuable for kids to read - it covers a period of time they may not be very familiar with and it does so in an engaging and interesting way.

The book's narrative is interrupted with photos interspersed with song lyrics, movie narration, etc. While interesting, I think a lot of it would go over kids' heads. There's not a lot of background information about the people pictured except for a brief bibliography in the back of the book. I did like how the book essentially presented us with images and sounds that the main character, Franny, would have been exposed to during this time period. It also reminded me a little bit of the Fallout games, which have a lot of the same "atomic age" 50s/60s imagery.

I liked Franny a lot, and her personality really shone through. She's very accessible, with problems that anyone can relate to. In fact, while I read I was trying to think of any of my relatives who would have been Franny's age in 1962. (Not my parents, unfortunately... they were born in '66 and '67. Sorry if I just made you feel old.)

Monica Edinger says

Although it evidently has been in the works for years and years, I knew nothing about this book (although I had read the author's other works) until a few weeks ago when I saw one of my goodread friends was reading it. Curious I contacted the publisher for an ARC. They told me it wasn't ready yet and they'd send me a manuscript. Now I don't generally like reading manuscripts and so told them I'd wait for the ARC, but they sent it anyway. And am I glad they did.

How to describe it? On the one hand it is a very straightforward work of historical fiction. On the other hand it is also filled with primary sources, collages of them, and nonfiction vignettes. Wiles is calling it a "documentary novel." I loved, loved, loved it.

It is the story of Franny and her family and friends over the brief, but frightening time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Based on her own childhood memories, Wiles represents the time and place vividly. And her characters are nuanced and complex. Not a one-dimensional one in the lot. There is the beloved older sister who is off to college and activism. And the earnest younger brother who lugs around a beloved book on atoms and wants to be an astronaut. The very-60s mother who plays bridge, bowls, and is rarely without a cigarette. The great uncle who suffers from post-traumatic-stress (not that it is so identified as this is 1962, of course). The very-60s and often absent military dad. Most of all there is our protagonist Franny --- an

endearing and complicated eleven-year-old. As happens at this age, Franny's own world is changing as harshly as is the big world. She's facing-off her former best friend even as Kennedy and Khrushchev are on the world stage. On the brink. I enjoyed reading every bit of it.

Now would I have been as wild about it without the documentary stuff? Honestly? I'd definitely enjoyed the story, but this additional material, bricolage, the scrapbook stuff takes it to a really wonderful level. There are posters about duck and cover. About making bomb shelters. There are song lyrics. Photos. And lively small essays about significant figures, say Truman.

I can't wait to see the ARC and then the final book.

Alison says

To win a copy of this book go to [Alison's Book Marks Contest Ends 6/16/2010](#)

REVIEW:

A gripping Middle Grade novel which might also be educational - shh!

The first of Deborah Wiles's Sixties Trilogy, *Countdown* takes a fresh look at a coming-of-age story in the 1960s. Franny Chapman is a typical 12 year old girl, who reads Nancy Drew, has fights with her best friend, worries about how her hair looks, and has a crush on the boy down the street. We've all been there, and hundreds of books have been there as well. What *Countdown* does differently is it takes us back to the 1960s with a series of actual photos, news clippings, song lyrics, quotes, and ads from the 1960s, dispersed throughout the novel like a scrapbook. The real photographs bring an element to the novel which makes the era all that much more tangible for the reader.

While Franny Chapman was worrying about attending her first boy-girl party, she also worried about the frightening world in which she lived - the Cuban Missile Crisis, JFK, fall out shelters, and practicing how to duck and cover under her desk at school. Being twelve was hard. Being twelve in 1962 was exponentially harder.

Wiles writes with seemingly effortless ease about a difficult time in our nation's history, while never talking down to her audience, and powerfully tapping into those difficult tween years.

There is one scene early in the novel where Franny goes outside on the playground at recess, and isn't sure what to do with herself, who to play with, and is full of that insecure, unsure nervousness we all felt at that age.

"...without a book I don't want to be alone at recess - it looks bad and people think there's something wrong with you.

Already there's a kickball game going on. Do I want to play kickball? No. I'm a terrible kicker. Do I want to play jacks with Carol and Marcy? No. They don't like me all that much. Do I want to jump rope? I'm a great jump-roper, and there's my best friend, Margie, in the jump rope line, waiting her turn. She's deep in conversation with Gale Hoffman, a girl who lives in the neighborhood behind ours and whose mother lets her wear lipstick already and do whatever she wants."

Takes you back, doesn't it? But then, a few lines later...

"But before Gale can smile, before anyone can answer the sky cracks wide open with an earsplitting, shrieking wail.

It's the air-raid siren, screaming its horrible scream in the playground, high over our heads on a thousand-foot telephone pole -- and we are outside. Outside. No desk, no turtle, no cover. We are all about to die."

As an adult reading a children's books, I obviously got more of a jolt from seeing some of the photos from Life magazine than some tweens might, but the novel was not all nuclear missiles and the civil rights movement. Franny learns a few dance moves from her older sister, she eats TV dinners and talks about a brand-new restaurant called McDonald's.

When I first picked up Countdown, I wasn't sure what age group for which it was intended, and the publisher recommends ages 9 to 12, but I think that this book would reach older kids as well as some younger. It was wonderful and I highly recommend this book to be read WITH your children to make for a truly memorable experience.

Brody Ferko says

This book was an amazing book. I liked that it started with an ordinary family that was having a few problems. I thought that the character development was very good, I felt like I really knew the characters. The Cuban missile crisis was something I wished was more in the book and all about her life but I still liked the book.

Agata Wilusz says

I LOVED this book! I find it is so hard to find a good young adult, historical fiction book that isn't focused on WWII and the Holocaust. Countdown, however, did a wonderful job of introducing its readers to the frightening times our country went through during the 1960s. Wiles did an amazing job including historical facts, including SO MANY primary sources, throughout the novel. One of my favorite parts was when Franny was explaining her favorite things about dinner when her dad is on a trip and she was explaining

McDonald's and how it worked! So clever!! Really makes you stop and think about when these different things we are so used to (and even take for granted) came into existence. Highly recommend it!!

Megan says

Actually, I'm listening to it and I'm thinking that's the way to go with this book. It has so many cool sound-bites that make it seem so real!

This just might be my all-time-favorite audio book! It was wonderful! Frannie is a 5th grade girl living in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis in a suburb of D.C. While the book certainly is a kid-friendly history lesson on the early 1960s, it also has a story line dealing with friendships and relationships, both within families and with close friends.

I would love to do this with interested PAT/higher level readers that are interested in historical fiction. There are so many great investigations that kids could explore that would be related to the time period of the book. I would also love to have the kids listen to it, while following along in the book.
