

Varsha Bajaj



Varsha Bajaj (varshabajaj.com) also wrote the picture books *The Home Builders* and *This Is Our Baby, Born Today* (a Bank Street Best Book). She grew up in Mumbai, India, and when she came to the United States to obtain her master's degree, her adjustment to the country was aided by her awareness of the culture through books. In addition to her previous picture books, she wrote the middle-grade novel *Abby Spencer Goes to Bollywood*, which was shortlisted for the Cybils Award and included on the Spirit of Texas Reading Program. She lives in Houston, Texas.

Count Me In is an uplifting story, told through the alternating voices of two middle-schoolers, in which a community rallies to reject racism. Karina Chopra would have never imagined becoming friends with the boy next door—after all, they've avoided each other for years and she assumes Chris is just like the boys he hangs out with, who she labels a pack of hyenas. Then Karina's grandfather starts tutoring Chris, and she discovers he's actually a nice, funny kid. But one afternoon something unimaginable happens—the three of them are assaulted by a stranger who targets Indian-American Karina and her grandfather because of how they look. Her grandfather is gravely injured and Karina and Chris vow not to let hate win. When Karina posts a few photos related to the attack on social media, they quickly attract attention, and before long her #CountMeIn post—"What does an American look like? #immigrants #WeBelong #IamAmerican #HateHasNoHomeHere"—goes viral and a diverse population begin to add their own photos. Then, when Papa is finally on the road to recovery, Karina uses her newfound social media reach to help celebrate both his homecoming and a community coming together.

Relevant Vocabulary:

- Middle-grade fiction
- Stages of Plot
- Prediction
- Social Emotional Learning
- Bullying
- Karma
- Cognitive vs non-cognitive skills
- Empathy
- Safe space
- Racism
- Terrorist
- Hate crime

RRS connection to TEKS (4-5th grade): Please refer to TEKS for English Language Arts and Reading:

- **Comprehension skills:** listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts.
- **Response skills:** listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts.
- **Author's purpose and craft:** listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts.
- **Composition I:** listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts--writing process.
- **Composition II:** listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts—genres.
- **Inquiry and research:** listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts.

Pre-reading reflection and dialogue:

- What does an author do?
- What does an editor do?
- Think about the title of this book? What does it tell us about the story? What do you think the story is about?
- What do you know about fiction, middle grade books? Talk to your librarian and ask her to show you more examples of this genre.
- Look for information about Varsha Bajaj.

While-reading engagement:

Chapters 1-5

Start a character chart, describe Chris and Karina. Describe what happens to Karina on the school bus. What would you do? You can also describe the type of bullying that Karina experiences at school. Karina explains why she is being bullied at school. Talk about bullying and the many reasons why it happens. Also talk about ways we can stop bullying from happening. Now read about how Chris felt about what happened to Karina. Describe this conversation with his brother. What do you think? Can you help Chris? Can you help Karina? Make a drawing of Papa's arrival to Houston and his welcoming party. How does Karina's family feel about his arrival? Do you live with your grandparents? Share your experience with your classmates. Use your timeline to add more information about the story. What is happening to Chris in math class? What advice does Papa give Karina? Describe grandpa's new life in Houston. What does he like to do? How does the family feel?

How do you like the story so far? Each chapter explores how Karina and Chris feel separately. Do you like this way of writing a story?

Chapters 6-10

Write a summary of Chapter 6. What happens? Don't forget to include the struggles and great moments that Chris experiences. How do you think Karina feels about Chris' new friendship with her grandfather? Karina and Chris begin to build their friendship. How does Papa help Karina feel better about talking to Chris? How does he help Chris? Chapter 9 is difficult to read and understand. Sit in small groups and talk about the incident that Papa, Chris, and Karina experience. Talk about the five elements of a story: characters, the setting, plot, conflict, and the resolution. Make a prediction of how this conflict will be resolved.

Chapters 11-15

What happens after the incident? Talk about the trauma that this type of experience may cause for Papa, Chris and Karina. Chris goes to school the next day and experiences yet another difficult moment with the boys at school. Make a list of emotions he may be feeling. You can also talk about why the boys are so mean? What makes children mean? What do you think? Papa is out of surgery and Karina's family is still processing what happened. Talk to your school counselor and think about what you can do after a traumatic incident? Police officers come to the hospital to talk to Papa and also talk to Karina and Chris. The incident is considered hate crime and police will complete an investigation. What is a hate crime? Make a chart with examples of hate crimes? What is not a hate crime? Ask your librarian for help in finding more information about hate crimes. Karina post photos and information about the incident on social media. Is this the right thing to do? Why are her parents upset? How are young people using social media?

Chapters 16-20

Life settles back to normal but a few things change. How does life change after the incident? Papa is feeling better and slowly regaining his health. The police come by to inform the family about what happened to the perpetrator- what happens to him? Do you think this was a good way to give the incident resolution? At school, the kids find new friends. Kids in this story speak up- is this scary to do? Why? Papa shares his experience as an immigrant in the United States. Talk about immigration and the story of why people decide to bring their families to the United States.

Chapters 21-25

Papa gets discharged from the hospital! Papa doesn't like that Karina post personal information on social media. Karina feels that this is the only way to fight hate. What do you think? Share your opinion with your classmates. She uses the tags #CountMeIn and #IAmAmerican. You can take a few photos or make a few drawings to include under these tags. You can also make drawing to answer Who is an American? What does an American look like? If you do not feel like drawing, you can make a list of characteristics or just share your opinion aloud. You can work with friends or by yourself.

Chapters 26-31

Don't forget to note the final elements of a story. Talk about the conflict and resolution of the story. Decide if you like how the story is ending. Karina and Chris are still processing the incident and have to read a lot of negative comments on social media. Why do you think so many people have negative feelings about immigration and immigrants? What does diversity mean? What does inclusion mean? Papa is finally ready to go home. How does the family feel? So many great things happen as the story ends, write a summary to explain the ending of the book. Cake for dinner!

Post-reading and wrap-up:

- Discuss the take-home message and form your own opinion. With your teacher's help, look for reviews of this book. For example, Publisher's Weekly and Kirkus Reviews. Do you agree or disagree with the reviews? Write, draw, or share your thoughts.
- Provide recommendations for future readers: Should other 4-5th graders read this book? What do you think?
- Get inspired by Karina and Chris. They work together to solve problems. What's one problem you would like to solve at your school.
- Make a welcome banner for Varsha Bajaj! Decorate it with photos and drawings of your super cool friends.
- Prepare three questions you would like to ask Varsha Bajaj during her campus visit.

Useful links:

- Publisher's website: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/246245/varsha-bajaj>
- Author's website: <http://www.varshabajaj.com/>
- Kirkus review: <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/varsha-bajaj/count-me-in-bajaj/>
- Book Talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll-xpts50Zw>
- Hate crimes: <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/civil-rights/hate-crimes>