



# Book Club Kit

*Count the Nights by Stars*

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# Meet Michelle Shocklee

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Michelle Shocklee is the author of several historical novels including the Christy Award and Selah Award finalist *Under the Tulip Tree*. Her work has been included in numerous Chicken Soup for the Soul books, magazines, and blogs. Married to her college sweetheart and the mother of two grown sons, she makes her home in Tennessee, not far from the historical sites she writes about. Visit her online at [michelleshocklee.com](http://michelleshocklee.com).



Hello, book club members!

With so many wonderful books in the world, I'm honored you chose to read *Count the Nights by Stars*. I hope you enjoyed learning more about Nashville's history, the exposition, and the wonderful Maxwell House Hotel.

When I first read about the Tennessee Centennial Exposition, I knew I would write a story about it someday. What I didn't know was how the theme of **I see you** would become not only a driving force for the characters and their stories, but also a deep passion in my heart.

Like many of you, I try to meet the needs of others through donations to various charities, volunteering when time allows, and praying whenever the less fortunate come to mind. Yet as the characters in the book discover, more is needed. More helping hands. More time invested in people on the fringes of society. More of **I see you**.

How can a book club get involved in meeting the needs of others? A few ideas:

- Discuss opportunities for your book club members to volunteer as a group a few times a year
- Consider hosting a book club event for the residents of a local nursing home or retirement center
- Have each member donate the cost of one book and give the money to a local women's shelter or other ministry in your area

As Priscilla and Audrey discover, when we each do our small part, our BIG God is able to work through us and in us, all for his glory!

Thank you again for choosing to read *Count the Nights by Stars*.

Every blessing,

Michelle Shocklee



## Food from the Maxwell House Hotel Menu

My research for *Count the Nights by Stars* led me to several menus from the Maxwell House Hotel, including one from the very first supper served in 1869. You can find the menus on my [Pinterest page](#). Here is an abbreviated list of some of the more interesting items found on the menus as well as links to recipes for treats and desserts your book group might enjoy making for your meeting.

The Maxwell House Hotel's first supper was served on September 22, 1869, and included:

- Mock turtle soup
- Leg of mutton with caper sauce
- Mallard duck with orange sauce
- Calves' feet
- [Chow chow](#) (served with crackers)

Desserts included:

- Egg kisses
- Citron pie (lemon tart)
- Vanilla ice cream

Bringing the meal to an end with the heading "Finally," the menu offers guests:

- Coffee (Not the famous blend named for the hotel just yet! That didn't happen until 1892.)
- Corn cakes

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Throughout its history, the Maxwell House Hotel was well known for its lavish Christmas Day dinner. Some items on the menu in 1879 were:

- Saddle of Kentucky southdown mutton with red currant jelly
- Leg of Cumberland Mountain black bear
- Tennessee opossum baked with sweet potatoes, Old Virginia style
- Broiled pheasants, à la maître d'hôtel

Desserts included:

- [English plum pudding](#)
- [Sliced fruitcake](#)
- [Almond macaroon pyramid](#)
- [Peach tartlets](#)

In the book, Priscilla and Luca enjoy eating [peaches and cream](#) in the hotel's confectionary. Luca gives Priscilla a special nickname because of her fondness for the dessert.

### **Food from the Tennessee Centennial Exposition**

The exposition offered visitors food from around the world, including:

- [Cuban pork sandwiches](#), found in the Cuban Village
- Spaghetti, crusty bread, and [Italian ices](#) from the Blue Grotto restaurant on Lake Watauga
- Traditional German food, served at the Old Vienna Restaurant, including [bratwurst with sauerkraut](#) and [Kartoffelkloesse](#) (potato dumplings)
- Popcorn, peanuts, and pretzels, sold at stands throughout the fairgrounds

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I faced the same decision I had the first time I came to the shop. Satisfy my sweet tooth or enjoy something a bit more substantial, being that this was most likely my supper.  
“Peaches and sweet cream, please.”

*Count the Nights by Stars*



HISTORICAL DETAILS!

# A Note from Michelle Shocklee

Three simple words illuminate the theme at the heart of *Count the Nights by Stars*: **I see you**. Each of the main characters—Priscilla, Audrey, and Jason—saw people who were marginalized and ignored by society and, in their own small way, took action. For Priscilla, it was offering women like Gia a way out. For Audrey, the seed to becoming involved in helping those with special needs was planted by her devoted mother. And Jason’s desire to join the civil rights movement is something many people recognized—and recognize still today—as being vital to making the future a better place for everyone. Much work toward that goal was needed in 1961, and much work is still needed today.

The other main “character” in the story is the Maxwell House Hotel. The first time I read about it, I knew I had to set a novel there. Colonel John Overton Jr. began construction on it in 1859 and named it after his wife, Harriet Maxwell Overton. The hotel was so enormous, it was dubbed “Overton’s Folly” by the citizens of Nashville. But despite the unflattering nickname, the hotel soon became the place to stay, with Christmas Day dinner a highlight of the year.

Unfortunately, by 1961 the hotel was old and run-down. It had lost its place as the grande dame of Nashville and was now a residential hotel, housing approximately sixty long-term residents. Although there was an acting manager of the hotel at the time of the fire, I placed the Whitfield family—fictional characters born in my imagination—in the manager’s apartment.

"Three simple words  
illuminate the theme  
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the Nights by Stars*:  
**I see you.**"

Edwin B. Raskin was the owner of the Maxwell House at the time of the fire, having purchased it the year before, but I've tweaked his name for this story.

The sad events of Christmas night 1961 are as I've portrayed them in the book. Smoke was seen coming from the fourth floor at 8:45 p.m. The source of the fire was never discovered, and the hotel was a total loss. Tragically, one guest perished, but out of respect for him and his family, I did not include his name in the book.

Last but not least, I hope you enjoyed visiting the Tennessee Centennial Exposition as much as I did. Like the characters in the book, I sometimes stroll through Centennial Park, imagining what it looked like during the exciting days of the exposition. My research led me to the book *Tennessee Centennial: Nashville 1897* by Bobby Lawrence, and I highly recommend it if you're interested in learning more. Should your travels bring you to Nashville, do visit the Parthenon. It is magnificent.

Thank you for taking this journey with me. Sharing my passion for history and storytelling with you is truly an honor.



"A riveting historical romance . . . This is a  
timely and expertly crafted tale."

***Publishers Weekly on *Count the Nights by Stars****





# Discussion Questions

**Read these questions aloud in your book club to kick off your discussion of *Count the Nights by Stars*.**

- 1.) As *Count the Nights by Stars* begins with a potential tragedy, Audrey Whitfield finds herself in a position of needing to give comfort and assurance to her younger brother. What gives her the courage to be the strong one in that moment? What's behind the fear she's hiding? When you have been in a situation where life seems uncertain, where have you turned?
- 2.) In an age when women have few rights, outspoken Priscilla Nichols has strong opinions about the way things should be. What surprised you the most about life for women and children in 1897? Are there aspects of today's society that would have Priscilla speaking up now?
- 3.) Audrey is surprised when Jason points out how much she's been a help to her family since her mother died. What does it mean to Audrey to have someone see her? Later, Mrs. Meyer uses the story of Hagar in the Bible to remind Priscilla of one of God's names: "You are the God who sees me." What does this verse, this attribute of God mean to you?
- 4.) Injustice is a major theme in the story. Where are injustices at play in Priscilla's scenes? In Audrey's scenes? Today? What do Priscilla, Audrey, Jason, and others do to combat injustice? What can you do to bring more justice into the world?

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5.) Passion is another theme in *Count the Nights by Stars*. Audrey can see Jason's passion for his civil rights work. What calling does Priscilla find? What events inspire Audrey to find her passion? What cause makes you excited?

6.) Priscilla is convicted when she realizes her upbringing affords her wealth and privilege others don't have. In what ways does this change her interactions with those of a "lesser status"? Have you ever had an experience that opened your eyes in a new way to those around you? What happened as a result?

7.) Audrey has a lot of doubt about what she can do to make a difference. Do you believe one voice is all it takes to enact change? What advice would you give her?

8.) Priscilla creates a scrapbook full of details about the centennial exposition. In what ways do you preserve memories of happy times? Why might it be important to remember sad times or moments that carry mixed emotions? Why do you think Miss Nichols insists on giving Audrey her scrapbook from the exposition?

9.) Audrey's father tells her a story about how she impacted his life, and their whole family, when she was just a little girl. What does that moment say about the way God uses the people around us? Have you ever been convicted by the honesty or simple faith of a child?

10.) Priscilla notes that helping a prisoner escape from custody might not be something a good Christian woman would consider. How does she justify her actions? Is she right to take such desperate measures? Why or why not?

11.) Priscilla's mother, especially, is interested in seeing her marry Kenton. What reasons does she give Priscilla in favor of this union? What reasons does Priscilla have for avoiding it? What does it cost Priscilla to defy her mother's wishes? Is it fair to say Priscilla is a disappointment to her parents?

12.) When Gia first has an opportunity to find safety with Priscilla, she doesn't take it. Why? What reasons does Reverend Meyer give for why someone might return to a "life of ill repute"? Is there anything you would add to his list? What advice does he offer in response? How are he and his wife living that out?

13.) The title of the book, *Count the Nights by Stars*, is part of a sentiment about living life without looking back with regret. Which characters carry the weight of regret longer than they should? Which are able to let go of it? Is there anything in your life you regret? How do you move past it?

14.) When difficulties come to the characters in this story—whether it's the loss of Audrey's mother or Gia's disappearance—it's tempting to ask why God allows bad things to happen. What does Audrey's father say in response to her questions? What is your answer to the "why" question?



## What inspired you to write this particular story?

When my husband and I moved to the Nashville area in 2017, I felt like a sponge soaking up all the interesting history of the area. One of the most fascinating places we visited was the Parthenon, a full-scale replica of the real Parthenon in Athens. Discovering that it was built for the Tennessee Centennial Exposition in 1897 sent my imagination into overdrive, and Priscilla's story soon immersed.

## Q&A with Author Michelle Shocklee

### How did you decide to write a time-slip novel set in 1897 and 1961?

When I first read about the Tennessee Centennial Exposition of 1897, I knew I'd have to write a book about this one-of-a-kind event someday. I had the same feeling when I learned about the famous Maxwell House Hotel. Although the hotel was built in the late 1850s and was used by both armies during the Civil War, 1961 was an unforgettable year in the life of the Maxwell House. Bringing the two time periods together into one book was great fun.



Michelle Shocklee in front of Lake Watauga and the Parthenon in Centennial Park.

"*Count the Nights by Stars* is a beautifully-written reminder of our need to see—and be seen—by both God and others."

Jennifer L. Wright, author of *If It Rains*

### How much research did you have to do on the time period and setting for your novel?

Much research went into both time periods. I found a fantastic book about the expo, read official documents, and studied dozens and dozens of black-and-white pictures during the writing process. My hope is readers will feel as if they've truly been to the centennial exposition after reading Priscilla's story. I also tried to capture the unique vibe of 1961 within the pages of Audrey's story by including lots of references to music, clothing styles, and important events.

### What are the key themes in *Count the Nights by Stars*?

"I see you" is the main theme of the book. Each of the main characters has someone in her life who challenges her and her preconceived beliefs, forcing her to reevaluate what she thought she knew and understood about the world. "Love thy neighbor" is also a theme throughout the pages of the story. "Who is my neighbor?" each of the characters must ask themselves. Their answers are, I hope, the same answers you and I would come up with.

### What lessons can be learned from your main characters?

Both Priscilla and Audrey learn the valuable lesson of truly seeing people. All too often we don't take time to get to know others and instead make hasty judgements about them. Yet when we really see people what we first believed may not be true at all.

### What is your hope for *Count the Nights by Stars*?

My hope for *Count the Nights by Stars* is that it will remind us to truly see one another through a lens of love, acceptance, and grace. We are all unique creations of God, beloved and created with plans and purposes. What a terribly boring world it would be if we were all the same.



The Noelle Hotel where Audrey, her family, and Maxwell House Hotel residents takes refuge during the fire.

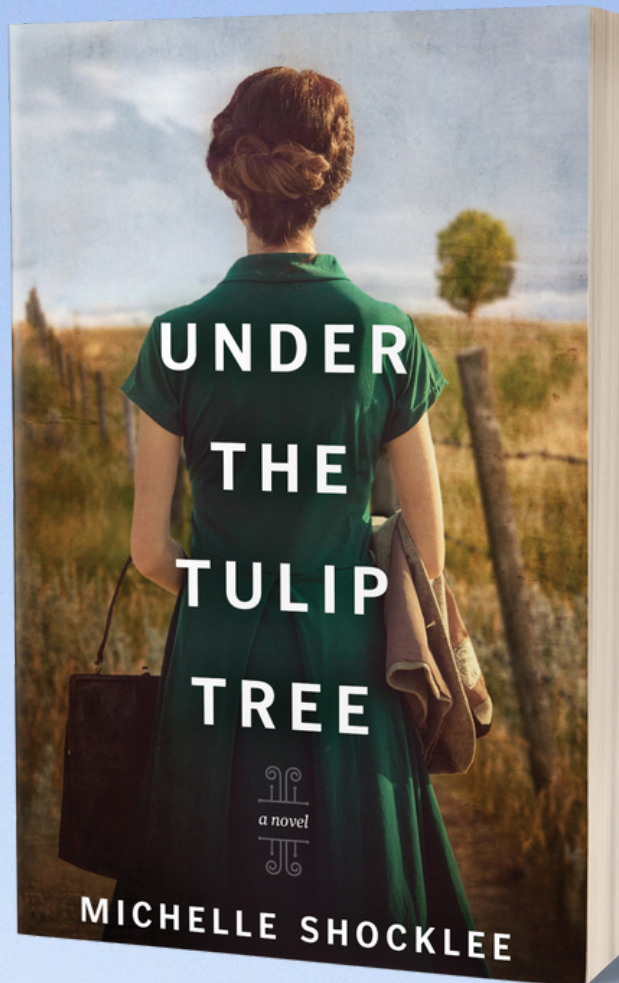
Photos in this section courtesy of Michelle Shocklee.

*"Count the Nights by Stars* is a timely reminder that caring for our neighbor is a privilege that requires our time, patience and resources, as well as the courage to step outside our comfort zones."

**Cathy Gohlke, Christy Award-winning author of *A Hundred Crickets Singing***



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# Keep an eye out for the next historical novel from Michelle Shocklee

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