



## How to Use *The Smiling Students of Salem School* as a Classroom Read-Aloud

*A guide for teachers and librarians — with discussion questions, vocabulary activities, and creative extensions*

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*The Smiling Students of Salem School* was written with the classroom in mind. It's short enough to read aloud over three or four sessions, accessible enough for independent readers at Grade 3–4 level, and thematically rich enough to anchor a week of discussion and writing activities. This guide will walk you through how to get the most out of it.

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### Before You Begin

**Know your room.** The book's central fear — of not belonging, of losing your sense of self to fit in — resonates most strongly with children who are navigating real social complexity. For most classes of 8–10-year-olds, this is live territory. The story handles it thoughtfully, but be prepared for discussions that move beyond the text.

**A note on the ending.** The book does not resolve cleanly. Emma escapes, but the final image is ambiguous and quietly sad. This is a feature, not a flaw — it's designed to generate exactly the kind of thinking and discussion that makes a classroom read-aloud worthwhile. Preview the ending with your own read before you use it in class.

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### Read-Aloud Structure

**Session 1 — Chapter 1: The Smile That Wouldn't Stop** Introduce the book with the cover and title. Ask students what they already know about Salem. Read Chapter 1 aloud. Stop after the cafeteria scene (before Emma runs) and ask: *What do you notice about the other students? What does Emma notice?*

**Session 2 — Chapter 2: The Bell in the Tower** Read Chapter 2 aloud. Stop after Emma finds the journal and reads the entry. Ask: *What does the journal tell us? What does it change about what we thought was happening?*

**Session 3 — Chapter 3: The Last Bell (Part 1)** Read through to the twelve chimes and Emma walking toward the stairs. Stop there. Ask: *Why is Emma walking toward the clock tower when she just spent the whole book trying to get away from it? What is happening to her?*

**Session 4 — Chapter 3: The Last Bell (Conclusion) and Activities** Finish the book. Give students a few minutes of quiet before you open discussion. Then work through the questions below. Close with one of the creative extensions.

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## Discussion Questions by Chapter

### Chapter 1

- Why does Emma carry lucky pebbles? Do you have anything you carry for comfort or luck?
- Emma notices that the smiles in the photographs "don't reach the eyes." What does that mean? Can you tell the difference between a real smile and a fake one in real life?
- Why doesn't Emma ask for help when she starts to feel scared?

### Chapter 2

- The journal says "Day 47 of the Smile Spell." What does that tell us about how long this has been going on?
- Emma writes "FIND OUT ABOUT THE BELL" in her notebook instead of asking a teacher. Why? Have you ever had a problem you tried to solve by yourself instead of asking an adult?
- Emma finds the clock tower door unlocked. Why do you think it's unlocked?

### Chapter 3

- Stuart tells Emma the smile feels like "sunshine" and "never being alone." Do you believe him?
  - Emma's stubbornness protects her from the spell. Can you think of other stories where a character's flaw turns out to be their strength?
  - At the end, Emma can't quite remember her own smile. What do you think that means?
  - The school "lets people leave — it just never wants them to stay away for long." What do you think happens next?
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## Vocabulary: Word Detective Activity

The book includes a built-in Word Detective activity at the back. For classroom use, we recommend extending it:

**Before reading:** Display the five words (*eerie, ominous, silhouette, hypnotic, mysterious*) and ask students to write what they think each word means. Collect these.

**During reading:** When each word appears in the text, pause and ask students to use the surrounding sentences to guess the meaning. Do not define the word — let context do the work.

**After reading:** Return students' original definitions. How close were they? What changed? This before/after comparison is a concrete demonstration of how context teaches vocabulary.

**Extension:** Ask students to find one more word from the story that they didn't know and add it to their personal Word Detective list.

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## Writing Extensions

**Write the Next Chapter** (built into the book) What happens when Emma goes home? Does she tell her parents? Does she go back to school the next day? What does Stuart do? This prompt works well as independent writing or as a collaborative class activity where small groups draft different possible continuations and share them.

**The Journal Entry** Emma finds a journal in the clock tower written by whoever cast the Smile Spell. Students write another entry from that journal — from an earlier date, or from the day the spell was first cast. Who is writing? What do they want? Why are they doing this?

**A Letter from Stuart** Imagine Stuart, after the spell is broken (or before it took hold), writes a letter to Emma explaining what happened to him. What would he say? What would he want her to know?

**A New Portrait** If you could add a photograph to Salem School's portrait gallery, whose would it be? Write a description of the photo: who is in it, what year it's from, and what expression they're wearing — and why.

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## Cross-Curricular Connections

**History:** The book is set in Salem, Massachusetts. Use it as an entry point to the Salem witch trials of 1692 — not the supernatural elements, but the historical and social ones. Why might a whole community agree on something that wasn't true? How does fear spread?

**Social-Emotional Learning:** Emma's central struggle is belonging versus identity. The Smile Spell offers perfect social acceptance at the cost of selfhood. This maps directly onto conversations about peer pressure, authenticity, and what it means to be a good friend versus a follower.

**Art:** The "Draw Your Own Monster" activity at the back works well as a visual art prompt. What did Emma see when she looked in the mirror at the end? Students illustrate their interpretation.

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## A Final Note for Educators

The best thing about a good spooky story in the classroom is that children want to talk about it. The fear gives them energy. The ambiguity gives them something to argue about. The themes give them somewhere to put experiences they're already having.

Don't rush the discussion. The questions above don't have right answers, and students know it. Let them disagree with each other. Let them disagree with the book. The conversation is the point.