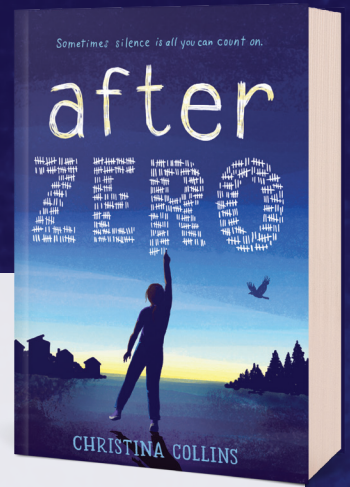


# AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE FOR *AFTER ZERO* BY CHRISTINA COLLINS

A Common Core State Standards Aligned Activity Guide for Grades 4, 5, and 6

Note: The activities in this guide align with Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts for grades 4, 5, and 6, but standards for other grades may also apply.

Prepared by We Love Children's Books



## ABOUT THIS BOOK

Elise carries a notebook full of tallies, each page marking a day spent at her new public school, each stroke of her pencil marking a word spoken. A word that can't be taken back. Five tally marks isn't so bad. Two is pretty good. But zero? Zero is perfect. Zero means no wrong answers called out in class, no secrets accidentally spilled, no conversations to agonize over at night when sleep is far away.

But now months have passed, and Elise isn't sure she could speak even if she wanted to—not to keep her only friend, Mel, from drifting further away, or to ask if anyone else has seen her English teacher's stuffed raven come to life. Then, the discovery of a shocking family secret helps Elise realize that her silence might just be the key to unlocking everything she's ever hoped for...

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**CHRISTINA COLLINS** grew up in Massachusetts and now lives across the pond in Northern Ireland, where she's always on the lookout for castle ruins and secret gardens. She holds an MFA in creative writing from George Mason University and is pursuing a PhD in creative writing at Queen's University Belfast. She has taught at both universities and been a writer-in-residence at the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts as well as the Art Commune program in Armenia. Her Pushcart Prize-nominated short fiction and poetry have appeared in more than a dozen publications, including *Jabberwock Review* and *NonBinary Review*. *After Zero* is her debut novel.



## PRAISE

**"A powerful and poetic novel about the power of words to shape who we are and who we can be. Elise's journey will speak to anyone who has struggled to find their voice, overcome their doubts, and discover their own self-worth."** —John David Anderson, author of *Granted* and *Posted*

**"An eloquent journey through the pain of growing up, this tender and truthful book stays with you long after the words have gone."** —Patricia Forde, author of *The List*

**"A gripping debut novel about a girl struggling to find her voice and discover her past."**  
—Carol Weston, author of *Speed of Life* and *Girlltalk*

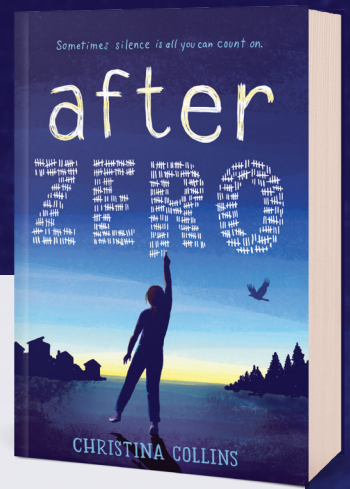
**"After Zero takes us into the world of selective mutism and helps us find a story in the silence... It is a story that will hopefully foster empathy and maybe even communication with all our 'quiet' peers."**  
—Wesley King, author of *OCDaniel*

**"Collins offers readers a compassionate portrait of selective mutism. Elise is so sensitively drawn, a truly memorable character."** —Sally J. Pla, author of *The Someday Birds* and *Stanley Will Probably Be Fine*



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## PRE-READING QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Review the cover, title, and tag line of the book. What sort of book do students think this will be? Do they think it will be funny or serious? Then read the description on the back of the book. Were students right in their expectations?

The main character in *After Zero* has an anxiety condition called selective mutism. Have students ever heard of this condition? Read the author's note together, where the author discusses her own experiences with this problem. Why do students think the author chose to write about a character with this condition? What challenges are there in writing about a character with a specific condition or problem? What steps would the author take to prepare to write this book?

## VOCABULARY

As students read the book, instruct them to be alert for words or phrases they don't know or that are used in an unfamiliar way. Have students make a vocabulary record sheet with four columns. Have them record the word or phrase and the page where it appears in the first column. Have them derive the meaning from context in the second column, and record the dictionary definition in the third column. In the fourth column, have them select a synonym that could have been used instead. Break students into pairs to discuss their vocabulary lists. Why did the author choose the words she did? Come together as a class to discuss the most interesting words from each pair and create a class vocabulary list. Have students try to use these words in their classroom conversations.

RL 4.4, 5.4, 6.4

SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

L 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

### Question of Character

Working as a class, create a character map of Elise using the following categories: physical description, what she says and thinks, what she does, and what others say and think about her. What can you tell about Elise as a person that is not explicitly stated in the text? Working independently, have students write a brief sketch of a few other characters. Their character sketches should include specifics from the text that support their inferences and shape their opinions.

RL 4.1, 4.3, 5.1, 6.1

W 4.10, 5.10, 6.10

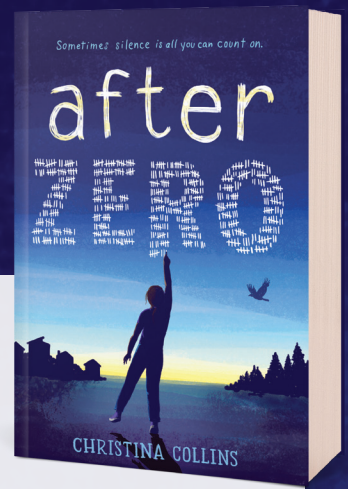
### Major and Minor Themes

The theme of a story is often defined as a lesson that the author is trying to communicate to the reader. A major theme is the central idea of a story. It is woven through the whole book, with the characters' actions and motivations reflecting the story's theme. Other themes might not be as central but are still important to the story. As in most books, there are many themes that run through *After Zero*. Come together as a class and create a chart to identify the different themes that run through this book. The first column should describe the theme (e.g., honesty). The second column should identify specifics from the text that address this theme. Which themes are



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major? Which are minor? Can a book have more than one major theme? How do characters respond to the challenges that are part of this theme? After you have created your list, break students into small groups. Have each group examine one theme and prepare a presentation showing how this theme is illustrated in *After Zero*.

RL 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 6.1, 6.2  
SL 4.1, 4.4, 5.1, 5.4, 6.1

## Timeline of Events

Elise goes through many changes in the course of the story, and even before it has begun. When we first meet her, she is keeping track of how many words she says, but she did not always do that. Through flashbacks and her descriptions of things that happened to her, she tells us how she acted before she came to school, as opposed to how she behaves now. Citing specifics from the text, have students create a timeline of Elise's behavior as described in the book. The timeline should include pivotal events that change her behavior (e.g., "Elise accidentally makes fun of Theresa's father") as well as how circumstances change (e.g., "Elise enters school"). Does creating a timeline make the events of the story easier to follow? How does it change the experience of reading the book?

RL 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.5, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.5  
SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

## Elise's Perspective

This book is told from Elise's point of view. Discuss the concept of the narrative voice (first person, third person, etc.) and the point of view character. Why do students think the author chose to write this book in first person? How does the choice of this point of view shape the book? How does it help the reader understand Elise and her silence? Does it make any events more surprising or more impactful? Have each student select a scene from the book and rewrite it from a different character's point of view. Break students into pairs to share their work, and revise it based on peer feedback. Have volunteers read their work and discuss how the new point of view changes the way the reader experiences the scene.

RL 4.3, 4.6, 5.3, 5.6, 6.6  
W 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.10, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.10, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.10  
SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

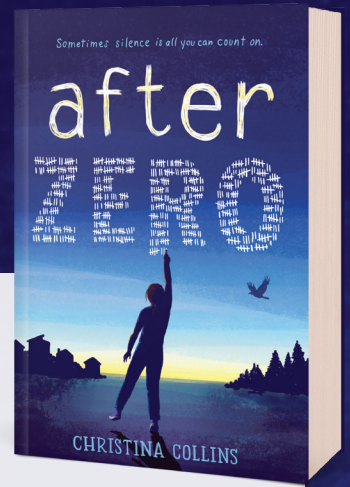
## The Raven

Throughout this book, Elise encounters a raven that seems to be following her. While some of her interactions appear to be part of her hallucinations, other people do see the raven and remark on its behavior. Often, the raven seems to be drawing Elise's attention to something or leading her in a specific direction. The raven also appears and helps her when she is threatened. Have students make a list of Elise's encounters with the raven. They should describe what happens, where it takes place, what Elise does as a result, and how that affects the story. Come together as a class and make a master list. Which interactions are imaginary, and which could be real? Would the story have been different without the raven in it? What do students think the raven represents? How does Elise feel about the raven? What does Miss Looping say about her stuffed raven,



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Beady? Are Beady and the raven that Elise sees one and the same?

RL 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.5, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.5  
SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

## Elise's Mother

At the beginning of the book, we don't know much about Elise's life and why she does not talk at school, nor about her family—especially her mother. Chapter by chapter, facts are revealed, but understanding how they fit together remains a puzzle. In chapter 21, we learn what really happened, and that changes the way the reader views everything that has gone on before. Instruct students to stop reading before chapter 21 and come together as a class to discuss their impressions of Elise, her mother, and the story to that point. What do students think of Elise's mother and her actions? Is there anything she says or does that confuses them? What kind of a person do they think she is? What do students think about Elise's grandmother and her brothers? How do they think the story will conclude? Next, have them finish the book. After they learn the full story, how are their impressions of Elise's mother different? What about Elise? Does she feel differently about her mother?

RL 4.1, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.5, 5.6, 6.1, 6.3, 6.5  
SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

## Every Picture Tells a Story

Some of the scenes in *After Zero* are very dramatic and described vividly. Have students select a scene that paints a very clear picture in their minds. Using whatever format they wish—photographs, drawing, collage, etc.—have them create a series of images, like a graphic novel, that tells the story of their scene. Come together as a class and discuss the experience. How is telling the story this way different from the way the book tells it? What was harder about telling the story with pictures? What was easier? Have students present their sequence to the class explaining what scene was illustrated, why that scene was chosen, and what details and elements were included. Create a display showcasing students' work.

RL 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.7, 5.1, 5.5, 5.7, 6.1, 6.5  
SL 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 5.1, 5.2, 5.4, 6.1, 6.2, 6.4

## Empathy, Sympathy, and Compassion

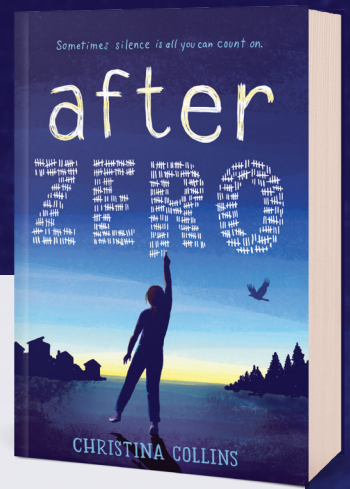
Come together as a class and discuss the terms *sympathy*, *empathy*, and *compassion*. Start with a dictionary definition and help students understand the subtle differences between these terms. How do they relate to each other? How are they the same? How are they different? Why are these concepts especially important in a setting like school? How can these qualities change the way people act? Break students into small groups and have them review the text and identify three scenes: one where a character shows sympathy, one where a character shows empathy, and one where a character is compassionate. Come together as a class and discuss the scenes students have identified. What scenes show up on multiple lists? Are any scenes examples of more than one of the above qualities?

RL 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.5  
SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1



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L 4.5, 4.6, 5.5, 5.6, 6.5, 6.6

## Selective Mutism Research Project

*After Zero* is a compelling story that helps illuminate the plight of a young person with selective mutism. This condition is rarely identified and can be devastating for children who have it. Using internet resources, have students prepare a brief explanatory text on selective mutism. They should address its causes, its symptoms, and its treatments. What can happen if it is not treated? What is the prognosis if it is treated? How can students create an environment that supports those who are at risk or who suffer from it?

W 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.7, 4.8, 4.10, 5.2, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7, 5.8, 5.10, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.10

## Why I Don't Talk

One of the central aspects of *After Zero* is Elise and her issues with speaking. Come together as a class and discuss Elise's condition and her circumstances. Ask students to empathize with Elise. What is she feeling? What events in the story brought her to this point? Based on what they have learned about selective mutism, identify what outside circumstances might have shaped Elise's condition and how she can best be supported. After focusing their insights through the class discussion, have students write a narrative from Elise's point of view. In it, they should explain her struggle with speaking, the events that lead to it, and the things she wishes she could communicate about herself to others. Have volunteers share their writing. Discuss their different views and insights into Elise's character.

RL 4.1, 4.3, 5.1, 6.1

W 4.3, 4.4, 4.10, 5.3, 5.4, 5.10, 6.3, 6.4, 6.10

SL 4.1, 5.1, 6.1

## INTERNET RESOURCES

### Christina Collins

For more information about the author of this book, visit her official website.

<https://www.christinacollinsbooks.com/books.html>

### SMart Center

Visit the Selective Mutism, Anxiety, & Related Disorders Treatment (SMart) Center's website for a comprehensive overview of selective mutism.

<https://selectivemutismcenter.org/whatisselectivemutism/>

### "The Twelve Brothers" by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

Christina Collins names this fairytale as one of the inspirations for *After Zero*.

<https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm009.html>