

SOMETIMES SEARCHING FOR THE  
TRUTH IS HARDER THAN . . .

# HOLDING SMOKE

ELLE  
COSIMANO



## DISCUSSION GUIDE

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS

## ABOUT THE BOOK

John “Smoke” Conlan is serving time for two murders—but he wasn’t the one who murdered his English teacher, and he never intended to kill the only other witness to the crime. A dangerous juvenile rehabilitation center in Denver, Colorado, known as the Y, is Smoke’s new home and the only one he believes he deserves.

But, unlike his fellow inmates, Smoke is not in constant imprisonment. After a near-death experience leaves him with the ability to shed his physical body at will, Smoke is able to travel freely outside the concrete walls of the Y, gathering information for himself and his fellow inmates while they’re asleep in their beds. Convinced his future is only as bright as the fluorescent lights in his cell, Smoke doesn’t care that the “threads” that bind his soul to his body are wearing thin—that one day he may not make it back in time. That is, until he meets Pink, a tough, resourceful girl who sees him for who he truly is and wants to help him clear his name.

Now Smoke is on a journey to redemption he never thought possible. With Pink’s help, Smoke may be able to reveal the true killer, but the closer they get to the truth, the more deadly their search becomes. The web of lies, deceit, and corruption that put Smoke behind bars is more tangled than they could have ever imagined. With both of their lives on the line, Smoke will have to decide how much he’s willing to risk, and if he can envision a future worth fighting for.

## COMMON CORE ALIGNMENT

This guide is aligned with the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (CCR) for Reading (Informational Text), Writing, and Language. The broad CCR standards are the foundation for the grade level–specific Common Core State Standards. Each question and activity in this guide includes a reference for the CCR strand, domain, and standard that is addressed. To support instruction, also reference your grade level–specific Common Core State Standards to scaffold the questions for your students.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are designed to create classroom discussion about *Holding Smoke*. They may also serve as writing prompts for students. The questions avoid story or plot questions and encourage critical thought about the themes touched on throughout the novel.

- 1 In *Holding Smoke*, Smoke and several of the other characters are judged in part because of their appearance, their personal history, and what part of town they are from. How accurate does this turn out to be? Do you think this happens in the real world? Compare this to your own personal experience. Are there instances when you have been judged, or judged others, based on appearance, personal history, or other external factors? Is this a positive or negative thing? (*Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: SL.8.4; SL.9.4; SL.10.4; SL.11.4; SL.12.4*)
- 2 Smoke and Pink form an almost instant connection, even though they aren't together very often. In spite of their connection, they argue with each other and aren't always comfortable with each other. Many great literary romances, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, start with "love at first sight." Is the connection between Smoke and Pink "love at first sight" or something else? Have students research other literary romances, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Wuthering Heights*, and discuss in class as a debate or write argumentative essays defending a point of view. (*Writing: Text Types and Purposes W.8.1&2; W.9.1&2; W.10.1&2; W.11.1&2; W.12.1&2; Reading: Craft and Structure: R.8.5&6; R.9.5&6; R.10.5&6; R.11.5&6; R.12.5&6*)
- 3 In one sense, Smoke's ability frees him—he can walk outside the prison walls—but in another, it limits him—he must alienate himself to use his gift and it might cost him his life. Stories of people with extraordinary gifts have been told from ancient times until today and they usually involve the gift coming at a price. Choose a unique gift or "superpower" and then contrast the positive aspects of it against the negative (i.e., what's cool about the power and what does it cost you). Is a gift like Smoke's worth it? (*Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: SL.8.4–6; SL.9.4–6; SL.10.4–6; SL.11.4–6; SL.12.4–6*)

- 4 In your opinion, is Smoke an admirable or “good” person? Why or why not? Do his thoughts match his actions? What about the other characters in the story? Are any of them “good” people? Rank the characters in the story from most admirable to least admirable and compare your list with your classmates. See if the class can come to a consensus. (*Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration: SL.8.3; SL.9.3; SL.10.3; SL.11.3; SL.12.3*)
- 5 The idea of the ghosts left on Earth becoming distorted and monstrous over time due to their emotional state is a powerful metaphor. What ideas can we take away from this image? How do our strong emotions distort us? Is Smoke’s father the living embodiment of a tortured soul like Ms. Cruz is beginning to become? (*Writing: Text Types and Purposes: W.8.2; W.9.2; W.10.2; W.11.2; W.12.2; Writing: Production and Distribution of Writing: W.8.6; W.9.6; W.10.6; W.11.6; W.12.6*)

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

- 1 Write the first chapter of the sequel to *Holding Smoke*. Where does Smoke end up? Does he ever see Pink again? Can he still use his powers or is he stuck in his body? Does the focus shift to another character like Mark Twain did in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? (*Writing: Text Type and Purposes: W.8.3; W.9.3; W.10.3; W.11.3; W.12.3; Writing: Production and Distribution of Writing: W.8.4; W.9.4; W.10.4; W.11.4; W.12.4; Writing: Range of Writing: W.8.10; W.9.10; W.10.10; W.11.10; W.12.10*)
- 2 Smoke’s ability to walk outside of his body is an integral part of the story. While it hints at the idea of an afterlife, the book doesn’t offer any clear insights about it. Smoke can’t offer Vivian any answers about her mother and even Pink’s information is limited. Research information about “near-death” experiences and write a comparison paper of real experiences vs. the novel. How close to those experiences is the novel? Does it matter? Why or why not? (*Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge: W.8.7–9; W.9.7–9; W.10.7–9; W.11.7–9; W.12.7–9*)
- 3 Elle Cosimano tells Smoke’s story in a nonlinear fashion. We learn about his history through a series of flashbacks over the course of the story. A very famous example of this is William Faulkner’s short story “A Rose for Emily.” Some people like this method of storytelling while others prefer stories to move in a linear fashion. Do you think the story would work as well if Cosimano wrote *Holding Smoke* in a linear fashion? Why or why not? Cite other literary

works to defend your position. (Reading: Key Ideas and Details: R.8.3; R.9.3; R.10.3; R.11.3; R.12.3; Reading: Craft and Structure: R.8.5&6; R.9.5&6; R.10.5&6; R.11.5&6; R.12.5&6)

- 4 *Holding Smoke* takes place in a fictional juvenile detention center in Denver called the “Y.” Use your research skills and compare the portrayal of the “Y” to actual juvenile detention centers. How accurate is it portrayed in the novel? (Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge: W.8.7–9; W.9.7–9; W.10.7–9; W.11.7–9; W.12.7–9; Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: SL.8.4&5; SL.9.4&5; SL.10.4&5; SL.11.4&5; SL.12.4&5)
- 5 How would you classify *Holding Smoke*? Supernatural thriller? Teen romance? Reform story? Research the different classifications of fiction and decide where you think *Holding Smoke* fits. Divide into teams and debate where *Holding Smoke* should be classified. Additionally, classify *Hamlet*, *Dracula*, *The Lottery*, and *Moby Dick*. (Reading: Key Ideas and Details: R.8.2; R.9.2; R.10.2; R.11.2; R.12.2)
- 6 *Holding Smoke* has two stories unfolding—Smoke is trying to unravel the mystery of the hooded man while the reader is uncovering the mystery of Smoke’s past. This sort of structure allows the reader to become more deeply involved with the characters and the story itself and is very common in plays. Compare the structure of *Holding Smoke* to *Hamlet*. How are they alike? Do the similarities serve the same purpose? (Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge: W.8.7&8; W.9.7&8; W.10.7&8; W.11.7&8; W.12.7&8)



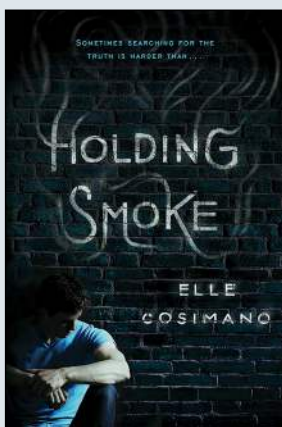
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**ELLE COSIMANO** grew up in the Washington, DC, suburbs, the daughter of a maximum security prison warden and an elementary schoolteacher who rode a Harley. As a teen, she spent summers working on a fishing boat in the Chesapeake Bay. A failed student of the hard sciences, she discovered her true calling in social and behavioral studies while majoring in psychology at St. Mary’s College of Maryland. Fifteen years later, Elle set aside a successful real-estate career to pursue writing.

Her debut novel, *Nearly Gone*, was an Edgar Award Finalist, winner of the International Thriller Writers’ Best Young Adult Novel Award, and winner of the inaugural Mathical Book Award recognizing mathematics in children’s literature. Elle lives with her husband and two sons in Mexico, somewhere between the jungle and the sea.

Kelly Johnston, a former English and Humanities teacher with over a decade of classroom experience, created these discussion questions/study guide.

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