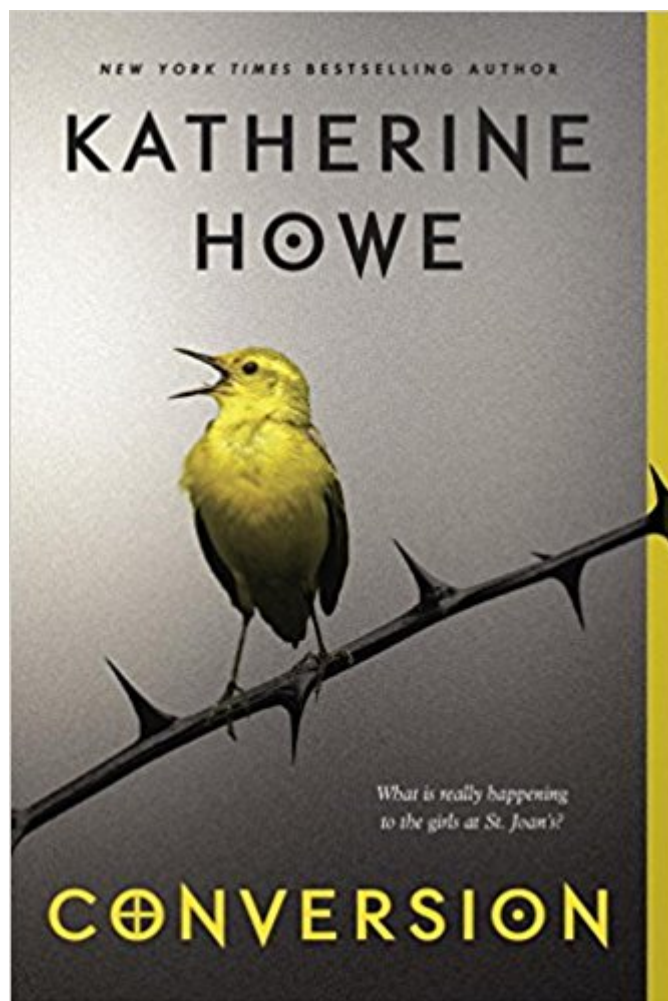


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# Conversion



## Synopsis

A chilling mystery based on true events, from New York Times bestselling author Katherine Howe. It's senior year, and St. Joan's Academy is a pressure cooker. Grades, college applications, boys' texts: Through it all, Colleen Rowley and her friends keep it together. Until the school's queen bee suddenly falls into uncontrollable tics in the middle of class. The mystery illness spreads to the school's popular clique, then more students and symptoms follow: seizures, hair loss, violent coughing fits. St. Joan's buzzes with rumor; rumor erupts into full-blown panic. Everyone scrambles to find something, or someone, to blame. Pollution? Stress? Are the girls faking? Only Colleen—who's been reading *The Crucible* for extra credit—comes to realize what nobody else has: Danvers was once Salem Village, where another group of girls suffered from a similarly bizarre epidemic three centuries ago. Inspired by true events from seventeenth-century colonial life to the halls of a modern-day high school, Conversion casts a spell. "[Howe] has a gift for capturing the teenage mindset that nears the level of John Green." *USA Today* "...this creepy, gripping novel is intimately real and layered, shedding light on the challenges teenage girls have faced throughout history." *The New York Times* "A chilling guessing game . . . that will leave readers thinking about the power (and powerlessness) of young women in the past and present alike." *Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

## Book Information

Paperback: 432 pages

Publisher: Speak; Reprint edition (June 16, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0147511550

ISBN-13: 978-0147511553

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1.1 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars 151 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #207,437 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #144 in Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Social & Family Issues > Depression & Mental Illness #697 in Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Social & Family Issues > Friendship #765 in Books > Children's Books > Science Fiction & Fantasy > Spine-Chilling Horror

Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

Gr 9 Up—Howe skillfully blends a modern medical mystery based on real events with the historical Salem Witch panic to create an engaging story. The prelude begins with Ann Putnam arriving at her minister's house in Salem, Massachusetts in 1706, finally ready to confess her part in the Panic more than 12 years before. Ann's tale continues in between glimpses into the life of Colleen Rowley, a senior at the exclusive St. Joan's High School of Danvers, Massachusetts in 2012. The pressure in the final semester is intense for Colleen and her classmates, who are all competing for places in top colleges. Her usually uneventful morning is disturbed, first by an apparent seizure of the very popular Clara Rutherford, and then by the unexplained replacement of the young AP History teacher. As the semester continues, more girls fall victim to a panoply of symptoms. Meanwhile, Colleen begins work on a research paper for the history substitute on an actual person absent from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Amid a growing media circus, diagnoses are offered and then dismissed. The protagonist's research persuades her that the cause of the Salem Witch trials was far from supernatural and that the same "force" might be at work at St. Joan's. The author convincingly writes in the voice of current and historical teens, and major characters undergo significant growth in this intense tale. Howe's use of red herrings and the "ripped from the headlines" narrative will keep readers guessing until the final reveal.—Eric Norton, McMillan Memorial Library, Wisconsin Rapids

St. Joan's Academy in Danvers, Massachusetts, a well-to-do private girls' school for the best and brightest, is usually only home to hysteria of the college-admissions kind. But when Clara starts convulsing in class, a media frenzy fixates on the St. Joan's mystery disease. Is it a reaction to the HPV vaccine? Or are students under so much pressure they're beginning to crack? As more and more girls fall ill, Coleen, gunning for valedictorian, researches the Salem witch trials and begins to notice eerie echoes among her peers. Howe, author of the New York Times best-selling *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane* (2009), returns to similar territory here in her young-adult debut. In propulsive scenes, the story alternates between Coleen in 2012, who narrates the growing atmosphere of intense competition and pressure that is thankfully tempered by some heartening and realistic friendships, and Ann Putnam in 1706, who recounts her complicity during the Salem Panic and comes clean about the girls' accusations of witchcraft. A simmering blend of relatable high-school drama with a persistent pinprick of

unearthliness in the background. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: With a major motion picture in development, this novel is getting a media campaign to match. Grades 8-11. --Sarah Hunter

The Salem Witch Trials, as fictionalized by Arthur Miller in "The Crucible", was an object lesson in the twisting and denial of the life energy of young girls by an entire society. Revisiting of the power of the psyche on mass hysteria events have been popular. Sometimes this is induced by society itself as in the mass orgies of "Brave New World" or in the preternatural crowd events of Hitler. Still the true conversion reaction has been relatively scarce among adolescent girls. We think them free in many ways and thus immune to the need for hysteria. The term conversion itself, once a huge message in Freud's theory, is rarely invoked but almost always a diagnosis of the individual in the far more popular diagnosis post traumatic stress disorder. In New York, a group of girls displayed the symptoms noted in this novel. An event of altered perception of reality and physical palsies draws into question the very ability of the society to protect its girls. In this narrative, the speaker is invoked as a close friend of the afflicted girls. In a literate move, she is assigned to study "The Crucible" and slips further into the observer stance. Alternately, we read the confession of Ann Putnam who did in fact admit to her conscious part in the hysteria of Salem. This book ably and simply puts forth the conflict of the microcosms of afflicted girls. It brings into question the strictures of privilege and expectation. In a world of mystery illness such as autoimmune spectrums and the publishing of other syndromes by pharma intent of selling us the cure, this book reminds us of the steel bound link of body and mind. While doing so, the story of Colleen is clear and beguiling. The author resists the temptation to take the incidents to causes of undue pathos or unneeded drama leaving Colleen's observations to shine in unity with Ann Putnam from years ago.

Until I sat down to write this review, I didn't realize how annoyed I was with this book. I'm very disappointed because it had so much potential and it fell completely flat for me. From the beginning I found it hard to like with Colleen and I really struggled to stay invested. While I don't want to sound overly critical, I had a lot of problems with this story. Colleen's behavior ranged from annoying to infuriating. Throughout the book I thought of her more as Cher from Clueless rather than a girl fighting for the top spot in a private school. While we are reminded over and over again that Colleen is very intelligent, she isn't written that way. There are many things Colleen ignores or is oblivious to, and while the reader puts the pieces together, Colleen takes much longer. This makes the story drag! For me the biggest problem in this book was I didn't believe any of it. I didn't believe Colleen would be oblivious to all the things she was. I do not see how it was possible the student body didn't

have any real sympathy for their classmates and instead viewed each other only as rivals for college admissions. Colleen was entirely focused getting into Harvard while her classmates were dropping to this illness like flies. I understand Howe was trying to create a competitive atmosphere between the students. However, it felt like she was writing down to her audience the whole time and didn't believe they could figure anything out. Throughout the book I was much more interested in the Mystery Illness and the focus didn't shift to that until much later in the book. This didn't track for me. I thought this was going to be the main plot line of the whole book and Mystery Illness never became the sole focus of the story. I was compelled to keep reading, but only to find out what the Mystery Illness was. That explanation didn't give me many answers though so I was just frustrated overall by this book. Am I the only one though? I haven't heard many people talk about this and I feel like I'm picking apart this book. I was this frustrated while reading, but am I the only one who had issues with this book? Quick Thoughts: Though this book was based on true events, I didn't find the characters very believable. The budding romance in this book was cute, but even puppy love couldn't offset the other problems I had with this book. By the end of the story I was annoyed with everyone and the ending did not give me any answers.

Conversion has been on my must read list for a while. I was finally able to order and reading it, only to be disappointed. The book did not leave me riveted. It did not leave me on the edge of my seat, or evoke anything. It just left me empty as it ended. The story seems more of a theoretical commentary filled with characters that are confused and duplicitous. The narrative switches between the confessions of Ann Putnam and the main character Colleen, attempting to draw parallels between what is happening at St. Joan's and the Salem witch trials. However, toward the end of the book this all seems pointless as another theory is added. Strangely, it didn't even leave me questioning what the truth was. I just didn't care. The storyline had potential that was never reached. The narrative was so flat, I just didn't care, which saddens me. I love to read and I love all the dynamics offered by books, but this just flatlined for me.

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