Building Empathy And Understanding With “A Kind Of Spark”

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Book, Author, and Audience

A Kind of Spark is a middle-grade novel by Scottish neurodivergent author Elle McNicoll. The story follows Addie, an autistic eleven-year-old who campaigns for a memorial to women persecuted as witches in her small town. The book is suitable primarily for readers aged eight to twelve, though older students and adults can also learn from its treatment of disability, history, family, school, and civic action. Penguin Random House lists the book for grades three through seven, and it received a Schneider Family Book Award Honor. Its importance comes from allowing an autistic protagonist to interpret her own world rather than being described only through the observations of non-autistic characters (Penguin Random House; American Library Association).

Plot and Central Conflict

Addie learns that women in her community were accused of witchcraft and killed because fear and prejudice made difference seem dangerous. She becomes determined to persuade the town council to create a memorial. Her campaign faces dismissal from adults, hostility at school, and resistance from people who prefer a comfortable version of local history. Addie’s interest in the accused women is not a simple claim that autism and witchcraft are identical. She recognizes a pattern in which communities punish people they do not understand. The plot combines historical inquiry with present-day discrimination and shows that remembrance can become a form of public responsibility rather than a ceremonial act (McNicoll).

Addie’s Autistic Perspective

Addie experiences sensory intensity, direct communication, focused interests, and difficulty when social rules are inconsistent or implied. The narration treats these characteristics as part of her perspective rather than symptoms that must be removed for the story to end happily. She notices details and moral contradictions that others ignore, and her concentration supports research and persistence. At the same time, the book does not pretend that autism creates effortless special abilities. Noise, unpredictability, bullying, and lack of accommodation cause real distress. The

disabling barriers often arise from environments and people that refuse to adapt. This balance makes Addie a complex character rather than an inspirational stereotype (Chovanec).

Neurodiversity and the Social Model of Disability

The neurodiversity framework recognizes neurological variation as part of human diversity while still acknowledging that people may need support. The social model of disability asks how inaccessible environments, attitudes, and institutions create barriers. *A Kind of Spark* illustrates both ideas. Addie does not become less autistic; she gains allies, language, and opportunities to act. School becomes harmful when adults interpret distress as disobedience or require her to tolerate sensory and social conditions designed around other students. Accommodation is not unfair advantage. It allows participation by adjusting preventable barriers. The novel encourages readers to ask what must change around a person rather than assuming the person is the entire problem.

Bullying, Authority, and Miss Murphy

Miss Murphy's treatment of Addie demonstrates how adult authority can legitimize peer cruelty. She interprets autistic behaviour through suspicion, minimizes distress, and fails to provide safety. When a teacher humiliates a student or rewards conformity over understanding, classmates learn that exclusion is permitted. The novel is therefore not only about individual bullies. It examines institutional responsibility and the harm caused when professionals lack knowledge or empathy. A strong classroom response would include predictable routines, sensory awareness, clear language, anti-bullying intervention, and a willingness to listen to the student. Authority should reduce power imbalances rather than intensify them. The scenes also show why formal professional knowledge is ineffective when it is not combined with curiosity about the child's actual experience.

Family Relationships and Difference within Neurodivergence

Addie's family includes contrasting personalities and experiences, showing that neurodivergent people are not interchangeable. Her older sister Keedie is also autistic and provides understanding based on lived experience, yet her support is shaped by her own history and stress. Nina's perspective introduces other family tensions and ambitions. The sisters care for one another but do not always communicate perfectly. This complexity resists the idea that disability representation must portray families as either heroic or cruel. Love can exist alongside misunderstanding, jealousy, fatigue, and repair. Readers see that useful support involves taking Addie seriously without speaking for her in every situation or expecting one autistic person to explain all others.

The Witch-Trial Parallel

The historical women become meaningful to Addie because their difference was interpreted through fear, rumour, and social control. Accusations of witchcraft often reflected local conflict, gendered power, poverty, illness, religion, and community anxiety. The novel uses that history to explore how groups create outsiders and then justify cruelty as protection. A careful reading should avoid claiming that all women accused of witchcraft were autistic, because the historical record cannot support that broad diagnosis. Addie's connection is ethical and imaginative: she recognizes that people can be punished when others refuse to understand their behaviour. The memorial campaign asks the town to acknowledge injustice without pretending modern labels can fully explain the past.

Empathy versus Pity

The book promotes empathy, but empathy should not mean imagining that a non-autistic reader can completely know Addie's experience. It begins with listening, believing, and respecting her interpretation. Pity positions Addie as unfortunate and makes kindness dependent on her weakness. Empathy recognizes agency and asks how relationships and systems can become fairer. Readers are invited to understand why sensory overload, ambiguity, or exclusion matters, while Addie remains responsible for choices and capable of growth. The novel's ethical achievement is that it does not ask readers merely to feel sorry for her. It asks them to question habits that define one communication style or sensory profile as normal and superior (Milton).

Language, Voice, and First-Person Authority

McNicoll's narrative style gives Addie a clear internal voice. Readers encounter her reasoning, frustration, humour, and sensory experience directly instead of receiving a clinical explanation from an outside expert. Scholars of critical autism studies have described the novel as an example of autistic writing that challenges deficit-based accounts of sociality. Addie is not socially empty; she seeks connection, justice, and recognition, but she does not always follow neurotypical conventions. The distinction matters because communication failure is relational. Other characters misunderstand her just as she may misunderstand them. First-person authority allows the novel to show that autistic interpretation is meaningful even when it differs from majority expectations.

Civic Action and Youth Agency

Addie's memorial campaign turns historical concern into democratic participation. She researches, builds an argument, speaks publicly, finds supporters, and persists after rejection. The town council represents a system that may be changed through evidence and organized pressure, though the process is not easy. Children's literature often confines young characters to personal problems, but

Addie addresses public memory and local policy. Her activism shows that disability does not exclude civic leadership. It also teaches that advocacy requires allies, strategy, and willingness to revise communication for different audiences. The goal is not assimilation; it is making a justified claim understandable without surrendering the values behind it.

Representation and Authorship

McNicoll's identity as a neurodivergent author matters because publishing has often represented autistic people through outsiders, stereotypes, or narratives of cure. Shared identity does not guarantee that every reader will agree with the portrayal, and one book cannot represent the full diversity of autism. Race, class, gender, language, intellectual disability, and access to diagnosis create different experiences. The value of own-voices writing is that it expands authority and makes previously excluded perspectives available. The later television adaptation also involved neurodivergent actors, writers, consultants, and crew, demonstrating that representation should occur behind the camera as well as on screen. Inclusion changes both stories and working conditions (Walker).

Using the Book in the Classroom

Teachers can use the novel to discuss characterization, historical memory, disability, bullying, point of view, and civic argument. Classroom activities might compare Addie's internal interpretation with other characters' assumptions, research local memorials, examine the ethics of historical commemoration, or design accessible school practices. Discussion should not require autistic students to disclose diagnoses or serve as representatives. Sensory needs, reading formats, and communication preferences should be accommodated. Educators should also distinguish literary analysis from medical instruction. The novel can build understanding, but accurate autism education should include resources created by autistic people and qualified professionals rather than treating one fictional character as a diagnostic checklist.

Potential Limitations

The novel's connection between witch persecution and contemporary neurodivergence is emotionally effective but can be simplified if readers ignore historical differences. The story also centres a protagonist whose family and community context cannot represent every autistic child. Its resolution may appear more hopeful than the experience of students who lack supportive adults or access to advocacy. These limitations do not cancel the book's achievements. They provide opportunities for critical reading. Students can ask whose perspectives remain absent, what institutional changes would be needed beyond individual empathy, and how a community can remember historical injustice without using it only as a metaphor for the present.

Why the Book Builds Understanding

A Kind of Spark builds understanding by connecting emotional identification with structural questions. Readers care about Addie, but they also see how school rules, teaching practices, town politics, and historical narratives distribute power. The book challenges the belief that empathy is merely being nice to someone who is different. Genuine understanding requires changes in listening, accessibility, representation, and decision-making. Addie's campaign succeeds because she refuses the idea that authority determines whose suffering matters. Her "spark" is not a magical autistic gift; it is the combination of moral clarity, focused commitment, knowledge, and support that allows her to influence the community.

Conclusion

Elle McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* is a significant middle-grade novel because it places an autistic girl at the centre of her own story and connects neurodivergence with history, bullying, family, and public action. Addie experiences real barriers, but the narrative does not define her as broken or make cure the goal. Her campaign for the accused women demonstrates how empathy can become remembrance and civic responsibility. The book is most useful when readers move beyond pity and ask how schools and communities create or remove barriers. Its lasting lesson is that difference should be understood through listening, access, and respect, not fear, punishment, or forced conformity.

References

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