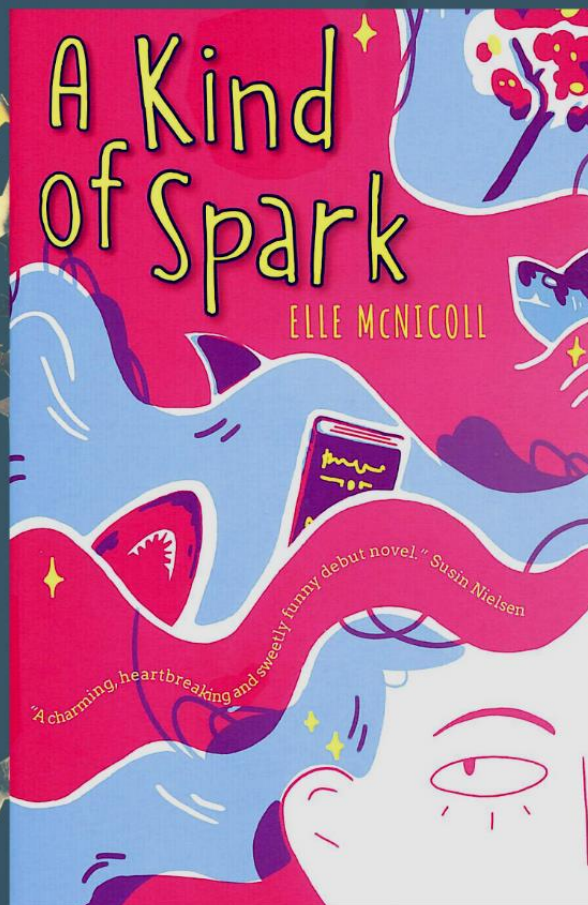


**Scottish  
Book Trust**  
inspiring readers and writers



## ***A Kind of Spark* learning activities**

Learning activities to support a class project on *A Kind of Spark* by Elle McNicoll

**CFE Third Level**

**Resource created by Scottish Book Trust**

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## Contents

About this resource .....	2
Reading the book together .....	2
Learning activities .....	3
Further resources .....	11

## About this resource

*A Kind of Spark* by Elle McNicoll follows Addie, an autistic 11-year-old who campaigns for a memorial in her town in remembrance of the women killed during the Scottish witch trials.

This resource contains learning activities to reflect on the book's themes of:

- Metaphors and similes – including identifying and using metaphorical language
- Empathy – what empathy is and how it influences how we treat others
- The Scottish witch trials – both in history and how they are remembered today

Though this book represents autism and neurodiversity positively, there are some scenes of bullying including ableist language. With all our resources, we highly recommend that you **read the book before using it with your class** and use your best judgement on whether teaching about this topic is appropriate for the children in your class.

## Reading the book together

Read the book together as a class. There are twenty chapters, most of which are short. After each chapter take some time to reflect. Here are some questions you can use to shape discussion throughout:

- How does the novel depict autism? How is it similar or different to other portrayals you've seen in other books, films or TV shows?
- How does the novel depict bullying?
- Who in Addie's life understands her feelings, and who fails to understand her?

- What do you think of Addie’s relationship with her parents and each of her sisters?
- How much did you know about the Scottish witch trials before reading this book? Did this book change your perspective?

## **Learning activities**

### Activity 1: Metaphors and similes

ENG 3-12a, ENG 3-19a, LIT 3-14a, LIT 3-15a, LIT 3-16a

Throughout the book, Addie uses metaphors and similes to describe herself. Ask the pupils if they know the difference between a metaphor and simile – if they do, ask them to write a short definition of each and a three examples of each. If not, explain the difference:

- A simile makes a comparison using “like” or “as”, for example: Her eyes were as blue as the sea.
- A metaphor makes a comparison by saying one thing is another – the comparison is much more direct. For example: Her eyes are the sea.

Split the class into groups and assign them one of the earlier chapters to read to find as many similes and metaphors as they can and write them down. Ask each group to feedback to the class.

### Activity 2: Sharks vs. dolphins

ENG 3-17a, ENG 3-19a, LIT 3-16a, LIT 3-20a

Read chapter 1 together. Start at the section where Mr. Allison, the librarian, gives Addie a book about sharks, and finish at the end of the chapter.

- Why does Addie like sharks? Can they find some examples in the text?
- Why does Addie relate to sharks?

Read the end of chapter 11, start from the section where Audrey asks what Addie is reading and finish at the end of the chapter.

- What is the difference between sharks and dolphins?
- Addie says ‘*I feel that maybe we weren’t talking about sharks and dolphins at all.*’ What were they talking about?
- Is the running comparison of Addie to sharks a metaphor or a simile?
- What adjectives could you use to describe both Addie and sharks? (e.g. misunderstood, smart)

Ask the pupils to think of an animal, plant or object they could compare themselves to using metaphor and simile and ask them to write a short paragraph starting with the sentence “Why I am like a . . .”

### Activity 3: What is empathy?

LIT 3-16a, ENG 3-19a, HWB 3-01a, HWB 3-04a, HWB 3-05a

Throughout the book, the word “empathy” is repeatedly used. Ask the class what they think the word means, and if they can give any examples of using empathy in their lives.

Next, look at the difference between **sympathy** and **empathy**:

- Sympathy – to acknowledge when someone else is in distress or upset
- Empathy – to understand how someone is feeling or their perspective

Ask the pupils to write down their definitions of empathy and provide an example.

Ask the pupils who in the book shows empathy towards Addie. Ask them to draw a table of the characters and some of their empathetic acts, for example:

<b>Character</b>	<b>What they do</b>	<b>Why they do it</b>
Audrey	Asks Miss Murphy if she can stay with Addie during the school trip	She can see Addie is upset and wants to keep her company
Mr. Allison (the librarian)	Finds Addie a new book to read about sharks	Knows that Addie really likes sharks and the book will make her excited

Notice how a character having empathy towards someone inspires them to act. Ask the pupils to rewrite what that situation would look like if they'd used sympathy instead of empathy.

Who doesn't act with empathy? Some of the characters don't use empathy towards Addie in the book. Ask pupils to create a second table. For example:

<b>Character</b>	<b>What they do</b>	<b>Why they do it</b>
Nina	Puts Addie in her make-up video	To gain views on her video and to show a different perspective of autism
Emily	Destroys Addie's thesaurus	She's jealous of Addie's ability to read without difficulty, something she finds humiliating

Look at how some characters apologise for their actions whilst others do not. Nina, for example, apologises for putting Addie in her make-up video. Discuss how an apology can also be an act of empathy – it encourages us to recognise when we hurt someone else and what impact that had.

You could also discuss the character's motivations. Do the pupils agree Nina wanted to raise awareness for autism, or do they think she was just focused on views? How do they think Emily felt when she saw Addie in the bookshop and knew she'd overheard her father talking about her difficulty with reading?

Some of the characters also say they don't think Addie can have empathy because she's autistic. Ask the pupils if they can remember or find any moments in the book where Addie acts empathetically and write about what emotions she was experiencing or understanding. For example:

- Addie feels really panicked and overwhelmed when listening to how the women accused of being witches were tortured
- Addie tries to prevent her sister Keedie seeing the thesaurus, because she knows the ableist language written in it will make her upset
- Addie tries to hide in the bookshop so Emily won't know that she saw Emily's father humiliate her in front of Cleo, the bookshop owner

## Activity 4: Empathy Walk

LIT 3-20a, HWB 3-01a, HWB 3-04a, HWB 3-05a, SOC 3-16a

Use [Empathy Lab's resource](#) to go for an Empathy Walk where you identify different moments for potential empathy around your school and local area. As you go ask the pupils to note down anything they see and create their own map.

Watch [the Empathy Lab video from author Abigail Balfe](#) (8 minutes, 28 seconds) talking about her reaction to seeing someone unhoused whilst out for a walk. Start at the beginning of the video and watch until 2 minutes, 50 seconds. It's worth noting that Abigail, like Addie, is autistic – so she's another example of the fact that autistic people can, and do, empathise with others.

Ask the pupils to look back at their maps and reflect on what action they could take. This will inform parts of the next activity.

## Activity 5: Taking empathetic action

LIT 3-05a, LIT 3-07a, LIT 3-15a, SOC 3-15a, SOC 3-16a, SOC 3-20a

If you did complete Activity 2, make sure the pupils have their Empathy Walk maps with them. Ask the pupils why they think Addie wanted to build a memorial for the witches? Read the section of chapter 3 where Addie compares the memorials left for other people (page 25 of the Knights Of version).

Ask the class to share other examples of acting through empathy. Is there something in your town you could campaign or advocate for? Think about:

- The environment and nature
- Any local charities or groups
- People in your community who may have specific needs that aren't been met
- Food banks, donation centres, shelters

Ask them to write down a list of actions – small, medium and big – that they could do for people in their community. Ask them to share some of their ideas to the class,

and use them to shape planning an event, campaign or a way to raise some funds.

This could include:

- Writing to your local MP about an important issue
- Holding an event at school to raise money to donate to a charity
- Donating books/clothes/food to a food bank, local charity or organisation

Talk about what you'll need to do to make sure you act empathetically to create something that will help the people or cause you're passionate about. Use the example of Bonnie's story that Addie tells in chapter 8 (page 77 to 80 in the Knights Of version). People in Bonnie's life may have thought they were helping her, but committing her is cruel. The people who acted for Bonnie were not autistic, but because Addie and Keedie are autistic, they have a better understanding of why committing Bonnie was wrong.

Explain to the pupils that any good act must involve listening to the person you're helping to understand what they need. This could involve researching charities or organisations run by, for or with, the people you're interested in helping.

### Activity 6: What is a witch?

LIT 3-04a, LIT 3-16a, ENG 3-17a, ENG 3-19a, SOC 3-01a, SOC 3-06b

Read chapter 3 together. Start from where Miss Murphy introduces the topic of witches and read on until Addie goes to the library.

Ask the pupils to find how Miss Murphy and the classmate's reactions are described, making a list of the key words or adjectives the author uses. Now, ask them to do the same for Addie's reaction. For example:

<b>Miss Murphy and classmates</b>	<b>Addie</b>
Fun	Unfair
Entertained	Angry
Laughing	Distressed

Discuss how Mrs. Murphy taught about the witches:

- How does she introduce the topic of witches?
- Does she give any insight into the real women?
- Does she name any of them?
- Does she offer any empathy to these women who were killed?
- Why do you think the author has used lots of exclamation marks in Miss Murphy's dialogue? What does this show us about how she talks about the witches?

Use [The University of Edinburgh's Survey of Scottish Witchcraft](#) to learn the facts about the witch trials in Scotland. Compare this with what Mrs. Murphy says – how much of what she says is correct?

### Activity 7: The witch trials and disability

LIT 3-04a, LIT 3-16a, ENG 3-12a, ENG 3-17a, SOC 3-01a, SOC 3-06a, SOC 3-06b, SOC 3-16a

Now read chapter 7. Discuss how Mr. Patterson talks about the witch trials and the women killed. What does he do differently to Miss Murphy? Do you think he has more empathy for the women who were murdered?

Mr. Paterson describes some of the women as 'madwomen' or 'imbeciles', referring to the fact that some women were accused of witchcraft because they had disabilities or were neurodiverse, like Addie is. It's worth talking to your class about the fact that Mr. Paterson's language is ableist and harmful – you can draw attention to how Addie says she hates that word.

Visit [the National Library of Scotland website](#) to access the poem "Janet Horne" by Edwin Morgan and read it aloud to the class. Display the poem on the whiteboard and ask pupils for their original reaction to the poem.

- Why do you think people accused Janet of witchcraft?
- Who do you think the poet is addressing? Does it change throughout the poem?



- How do you think the poet feels about the witch trials and Janet Horne? Ask them to highlight specific stanzas or phrases that demonstrate how he feels.

Now read about [the true story of Janet Horne](#). Note how her daughter's disability was vilified and turned into gossip that became part of the accusation, and how, whilst she was being tried, it's likely she was living with dementia. Revisit the poem together:

- How does knowing Janet's story change how you read the poem?
- How is Janet's daughter's disability mentioned? Is Janet's dementia mentioned?
- The poet uses rhyme throughout the poem, except for the final line: 'O heart never harden!' why do you think this is? What do you think this line means?

### Activity 8: History and immediacy

LIT 3-02a, LIT 3-07a, LIT 3-09a, SOC 3-01a, SOC 3-06b

Read chapter 8 together, start from the beginning and stop after the sentence where Addie says she notices Mrs. Murphy also wears a mask (page 69 in the Knights Of edition).

- What do Mr. Paterson and Miss Murphy identify as the cause of Addie's meltdown during the school trip? Do you think this is fair?
- How does Mr. Paterson talk about Addie's autism?
- How does Miss Murphy talk about Addie's autism?

Ultimately, Mr. Paterson and Miss Murphy think Addie needs to change, not how they teach about the Scottish witch trials. Revisit the part where Mr. Paterson tells Addie '*History can be a difficult subject if you get too emotionally attached [...] Wars, famine. Witch trials. You have to detach yourself from it all.*' In chapter 7, Mr. Paterson is surprised Addie is upset at the story he tells about Mary and Jean, women accused of witchcraft because he says '*it was a very long time ago*'.

Split the pupils into groups and ask them to discuss:

- Group 1: Is it possible to look back at historical events without any emotional reaction or compassion for the people involved? Should we?
- Group 2: Can they think of something they've learned about in history class that made them feel something (whether happy, angry, sad, inspired etc.)? Why did it make them feel that way?
- Group 3: Does something happening a long time ago make it feel less sad, frightening or unjust?

Ask someone from each group to feed back to the class.

Use [The University of Edinburgh's Witches Map](#) to look at how many accused witches there were in your local area. Click on each icon to find out more about the accused, their occupation and social class, where they lived and where they died. Ask the pupils how learning the individuals' names and seeing them on a map near where they live changes their perspective. Is it easier to empathise with them?

### Activity 9: Memorials

LIT 3-01a, LIT 3-06a, EXA 3-07a, SOC 3-01a, SOC 3-16a

Ask the pupils why they think we have memorials and if they think they're important. Explain that memorials are physical sites that encourage people to reflect on people who have died or faced injustices.

Look at some images of [the Steilneset Memorial to Victims of Witch Trials in Vardø, Norway](#). The memorial is made up of a building and a sculpture. Read aloud the description of them:

#### **The memorial building**

*'The memorial building consists of a long structure made of a pine scaffold. Between the supporting poles hangs a cocoon made of wood that houses a black, 125-metre*

*(410-foot) long corridor, lit by 91 small windows, one for each of the victims. On the walls inside are 91 plaques, one for each victim.'*

### **The sculpture**

*'The sculpture by the Franco–American artist Louise Bourgeois' (1911–2010) entitled "The Damned, the Possessed and the Beloved" is a perpetual flame that projects through a steel chair, which in turn is placed inside a hollow concrete cone. The flames are reflected by seven circular mirrors, like judges surrounding the accused. The entire installation is housed in a black glass cube.'*

Ask the pupils:

- How does the memorial and sculpture make them feel?
- What do they think the architect was trying to convey with the building?
- Why do they think the building is shaped like a 'cocoon'?
- What do they think the artist was trying to convey with the sculpture?

For some examples of memorials to women murdered during the witch trials in Scotland, you can look at the [Witch's stone in Littletown \(for Janet Horne\)](#), [Maggie Wall's Memorial near Dunning](#), [The Witches Well in Edinburgh](#), [Grissel Jaffray in Dundee](#), [Lilias Adie in Fife](#) or [The Witches Stone in Forres](#).

Use [The University of Edinburgh's Witches Map](#) to find people accused of witchcraft in your area. Ask each pupil to create fact-file posters that you can display to commemorate these women.

## **Further resources**

### **Scottish Book Trust**

- Use our book lists to find [more books featuring empowering girls](#) or characters with [disabilities and neurodiversity](#).

- For more learning activities on Scottish history, see our [Scottish myths and legends resource](#).
- For more resources on social justice and activism, see our [Read Woke learning resources](#).

### Elle McNicoll

- A Q&A with Elle McNicoll on *A Kind of Spark* on the [We Need Diverse Books website](#).
- Elle McNicoll [reading from A Kind of Spark](#) (8 minutes, 21 seconds).
- Find out more about [the A Kind of Spark TV adaptation from the BBC](#), launching March 31 2023.

### The Scottish Witch Trials

- The National Library of Scotland's [resources on witches in Scottish literature](#)
- The University of Edinburgh's [Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database](#) including [interactive graphs](#) and [maps](#)