

# ELLE McNICOLL

## Author Study Guide



# About the Books



## Ever since Ms. Murphy told us about the witch trials

that happened centuries ago right here in Juniper, I can't stop thinking about them. Those people weren't magic. They were like me. Different like me.

I'm autistic. I see things that others do not. I hear sounds that they can ignore. And sometimes I feel things all at once. I think about the witches, with no one to speak for them. Not everyone in our small town understands. But if I keep trying, maybe someone will. I won't let the witches be forgotten. Because there is more to their story. Just like there is more to mine.

## My family never talks about me being autistic.

I don't know why. I don't see anything wrong with it. It is like they all forget . . . until Pomegranate.

My brother's company, Pomegranate Institute, creates incredible lifelike holograms that allow people to talk to actors, musicians, and even family long after they're died—and they want to make a Gram of me. Because I am autistic. Because I see things other people miss, and there's a lot that neurotypicals can learn from my brain.

My best friend, Adrien, doesn't think it's such a good idea. But Adrien isn't here right now. And I know what it's like to lose someone. I don't ever want to have to say goodbye again.

## Ramya Knox is used to feeling cursed.

People only notice her long enough to call her a *troublemaker*. Except Grandpa. He sees Ramya and her neurodiversity as enchanting. But when Grandpa dies, Ramya's world loses its charm . . . until she discovers he left behind one big secret: that magic is real and Ramya can see it.

Trolls, vampires, kelpies, and more fantastical beings hide in the shadows for Ramya to discover. But the Hidden Folk need protection from the most dangerous creatures of all: the sirens. These beautiful monsters use their voices to get whatever they want, and lately they want power. And anyone who resists, anyone who is different, simply . . . *disappears*. It's up to Ramya to finish her grandpa's work and expose the sirens for the villains they are—before their voices drown out the human and Hidden worlds forever.



Photo by Aashifa A. Anwar

## About the Author

Elle McNicoll is a Scottish and neurodivergent writer, happily living in London. Her first children's novel, *A Kind of Spark*, was a Carnegie Medal nominee and a Schneider Family Honor Book. Her second novel, *Show Us Who You Are*, is her love letter to neurodivergent friendships and her belief that differently abled kids belong in genre fiction!



## Questions for *A Kind of Spark*



1. In *A Kind of Spark*, Addie asks the Juniper Village Committee for “a plaque or a statue that commemorates the people who were unjustly sentenced to death.” (page 30) Discuss why Addie is passionate about creating a memorial to honor those viewed as different in the past. How does she identify with the women who were believed to be witches?
2. Throughout the book, Addie speaks about the need to “mask.” An example can be found in chapter seven. While learning about some of the women forced to confess to witchcraft, Addie becomes upset and states, “Suddenly I come apart. The mask slips away, and I’m making a hoarse, bellowing sound.” Explore the concept of “masking” in the context of the book. What does it mean to mask, and why does Addie feel the need to mask her true self?
3. Throughout *A Kind of Spark*, Mrs. Murphy’s interactions with Addie offer insight into their relationship. Select a specific interaction from the text and reflect on the following (see pages 1, 58, 64, 96, 138 for examples).
  - a. How do Mrs. Murphy’s responses to Addie impact her self-perception and experiences within the classroom setting?
  - b. How do these interactions influence Addie’s learning and personal development?
4. On page 42, Addie mentions that her brain “switches off” when she finds something uninteresting. What do you think Addie means by this? Can you think of a time when this happened to you? Explain.
5. Addie is reliant on Keddie because she feels that she is the only one who truly understands her. Do you think it’s possible for people who are not neurodiverse to understand people who are? Using text evidence to support your answer, share why or why not.
6. Despite being rejected by the village council on multiple occasions, Addie did not give up on what she believed in. What about Addie and her life experiences makes her so determined?
7. Evaluate whether Nina featuring Addie in her online video was ill-intentioned. Support your views with examples from the book, considering Nina’s potential motivations and the implications of her actions.
8. Contemplate why Emily felt compelled to destroy Addie’s thesaurus. Discuss the emotions and thoughts Emily might have been experiencing and suggest alternative ways she could have managed her feelings.
9. What insights do you think Addie wishes neurotypical individuals had into the lives of people who are autistic? Support your thoughts with examples from the book.
10. What aspects of Addie’s speech persuaded the village council to reconsider their previous rejections of her request? Support your response with examples from the book.

## A KIND OF SPARK ACTIVITY: Expressing Your Voice

**OBJECTIVE:** Encourage students to articulate their thoughts and feelings on a subject they feel deeply about, emulating Addie's passion and determination in *A Kind of Spark*.

**PURPOSE:** This activity aims to empower students to find and use their voices constructively, allowing them to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences on subjects that are meaningful to them, much like Addie in *A Kind of Spark*.

1. Ask students to select a topic they are passionate about; the topic should not only be of personal interest but also one that would benefit from increased awareness and advocacy, like the maligned witches in *A Kind of Spark*.
2. Instruct them to compose a speech expressing their views, using their personal experiences to illustrate why the topic holds significance to them and why it should matter to others.
3. Remind students to consider the impact of their words and to construct their speeches in a way that is persuasive, respectful, and considerate of differing opinions.
4. After completing their speeches, provide an opportunity for students who feel comfortable to share their work with the class. Discuss the varied themes, perspectives, and advocacy approaches presented in the speeches.

## ACTIVITY DIFFERENTIATION: Expressing Your Voice

**OBJECTIVE:** Adapt the Expressing Your Voice activity to accommodate diverse learning needs and preferences, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to engage and demonstrate mastery effectively.

**EDUCATOR NOTE:** Remember to ensure a supportive and inclusive environment, acknowledging and valuing the diverse ways students choose to express their voices, much like Addie in *A Kind of Spark*.

### Differentiation Strategies

1. **Varied Presentation Methods:** Allow students the option to present their speeches in various formats to accommodate different learning preferences. Students may choose to create a PowerPoint, a poster, a flyer, or any other creative tool to effectively communicate their message.
2. **Choice of Medium:** Recognize that some students may express themselves better through written or artistic mediums. Allow the option to write an essay, create a piece of artwork, or develop another form of expression that aligns with their learning style and comfort level.
3. **Flexible Participation:** Understand that public speaking may be challenging for some students. Provide the choice to present in front of the class, in small groups, or to record their speech to share with the class at a later time.
4. **Scaffolded Support:** Offer structured support to students who may need it, such as providing speech-writing templates, graphic organizers, or opportunities for brainstorming and feedback during the speech-writing process.
5. **Adjustable Time Frames:** Recognize varied pacing needs by allowing flexible timelines for preparation and presentation. Some students may benefit from extended time to prepare their speeches and visual aids or from presenting over multiple class periods.
6. **Technology Integration:** Leverage technology to facilitate expression, such as using speech-to-text tools, video recording and editing software, or online design tools for creating visual aids.
7. **Peer Support:** Encourage collaboration by allowing students to work in pairs or small groups to brainstorm, provide feedback, and support each other in the preparation and presentation of their speeches.
8. **Reflection and Feedback:** Provide opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and receive constructive feedback from peers and the teacher, adapting the feedback methods to suit individual learning preferences and needs.



## Questions for *Show Us Who You Are*

1. Consider the dialogue on page 27; Adrien remarks, “I’ve tried all that, it’s why I’m homeschooled now,” in response to Cora’s emphasis on normalcy. Reflect on what Adrien might be alluding to when he says, “I’ve tried all that.” How might the pursuit or rejection of “normalcy” relate to his decision to be homeschooled?
2. Examine page 121, where Adrien challenges the concept of “normal.” Utilizing text evidence, infer why the term *normal* might be disdainful to Adrien and determine what experiences, both academic and social, might have led him to this perspective.
3. In Chapter 24, Dr. Gold shares with Cora why she feels compelled to alter or “fix” the Grams. Why does Dr. Gold believe people who are neurodiverse need to be fixed?
4. On pages 122–123, Adrien speaks to Cora about people who like to be considered dangerous. Using evidence from the text, explain what you think Adrien means when he says “dangerous.”
5. *Show Us Who You Are* explores themes of artificial intelligence and the construction of a “digital soul.” Engage in a reflective discussion about the ethical implications of utilizing AI. Do you perceive AI as ethical? Delving deeper, would the AI in the novel have been more acceptable if Dr. Gold had not manipulated the Grams?
6. On page 120, Adrien asserts, “They’re super smart, but no one can be clever about everything.” Ponder what he intends to convey with this statement. Engage in a discussion about the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse cognitive processes and learning modalities.
7. Reflect on Adrien’s comparison of ADHD and autism on page 51; he metaphorically relates them as cousins from the “same outer circle.” Interpret his metaphor in the context of how he and Cora process information and experience the world.
8. On page 96, Cora describes Adrien as someone who “sometimes talks and acts as if he has a hundred tabs open in his brain. Like he’s giving a speech and watching a movie and reading a book all at the same time. But then, when it’s something really important, he focuses so hard and so fully. Gives it the most undivided attention I’ve ever seen.” What does Cora’s insight tell us about how Adrien thinks and learns?
9. Given what you have learned about Cora throughout *Show Us Who You Are*, use text evidence to describe what you think it was like for Cora to stand up to Dr. Gold during the television studio recording.

## SHOW US WHO YOU ARE ACTIVITY: Reporting Advocacy and Courage in Two Ways

**OBJECTIVE:** Enable students to analyze and report on instances of advocacy and moral courage. The activity offers two variations, allowing students to explore real-life instances from media or history, or engage in speculative reporting within the context of the book.

**PURPOSE:** This dual-version activity is designed to deepen students' understanding of advocacy and ethical courage by allowing them to explore and report on real or hypothetical scenarios. It encourages reflection on the societal and personal impacts of standing up for one's beliefs and draws connections with the book's themes.

### Version 1: Reporting Real-Life Advocacy

1. Direct students to select and research an instance from media or history where someone stood up for a cause or their rights.
2. Instruct them to write a detailed newspaper article covering the event, the people involved, the issues addressed, and the aftermath or possible ramifications.
3. Encourage students to approach the task from a journalistic perspective, maintaining accuracy, objectivity, and completeness.
4. After completion, facilitate a sharing session where students can present their articles and discuss the implications of the reported acts of advocacy.

### Version 2: Reporting Cora's Trial Involvement

1. Guide students to develop a speculative account of Cora's involvement in the trial as depicted in *Show Us Who You Are*.
2. Students should draft a newspaper article for the *Spectrum* outlining Cora's role, experiences, standpoints, and the potential consequences and outcomes of the trial.
3. Reinforce the importance of journalistic values such as impartiality, thoroughness, and factual representation, even in speculative reporting.
4. Once finished, organize a session for students to share their speculative reports and reflect on Cora's stance and experiences.

## ACTIVITY DIFFERENTIATION: Reporting Advocacy and Courage

**OBJECTIVE:** Adapt the Reporting Advocacy and Courage activity in its two versions to a range of learning needs and preferences, ensuring every student has an equitable chance to engage and learn.

**EDUCATOR NOTE:** Maintain an environment of inclusivity and support, respecting diverse expressions and perspectives, aligning with the themes of *Show Us Who You Are* by Elle McNicoll.

### Differentiation Strategies

1. **Varied Presentation Methods:** Allow varied formats for presenting the articles, such as visuals, podcasts, or video documentaries.
2. **Choice of Medium:** Permit diverse mediums for expression, including essays, artwork, or digital creations.
3. **Flexible Participation:** Enable different sharing options, from whole-class presentations to small-group discussions or recorded submissions.
4. **Scaffolded Support:** Provide structured supports like templates, research aids, and brainstorming sessions.
5. **Adjustable Time Frames:** Grant flexible timelines and submission dates.
6. **Technology Integration:** Employ tech tools for research, creation, and sharing.
7. **Peer Support:** Encourage collaboration and peer feedback throughout the process.
8. **Reflection and Feedback:** Create spaces for reflective practices and constructive feedback, adapting to individual preferences and needs.



## Questions for *Like a Charm*

1. On page 18, Ramya describes the school as “gray. It’s metallic. The walls and floors are all designed so that any mess can be wiped clean instantly. There is hardly any color. No artwork on the walls. Instead, there are lockers and trophy cabinets.” Then on page 21, Ramya says, “[Mr. Ishmael] doesn’t understand that it would take an entire rewiring and reconstructing of the way this school is run for me to actually feel supported.” Based on Ramya’s descriptions and experiences in the book, imagine and describe a school environment where she would feel fully supported and included. Consider physical aspects (wall colors, structures) and social aspects (teacher-student interactions, peer relationships).
2. Using evidence from the text, describe what you think Ramya means on page 22 when she says, “But he doesn’t know what this outside-looking-in state of being feels like.” How does Ramya see herself as a learner?
3. Masking “refers to the way in which people who are neurodivergent may hide their symptoms in order to fit in with society.” On pages 62–63, glamour is described as “a magical shield. One that supernatural beings use to disguise themselves. [Hidden Folk] glamour themselves. So that humans can’t see that they’re different.” Considering your understanding of masking and glamouring. Explore the similarities and differences between the two concepts. How might they serve similar purposes for the individuals who utilize them?
4. On page 80, Ramya says, “It was a mistake to mention glamour” when referring to her conversation with the vampire in the library. Why might the term *glamour* alarm the vampire? Consider the context of the Hidden Folk? Explore possible reasons behind his hesitation to reveal his true identity to Ramya.
5. On pg. 84, Marley tells Ramya, “It doesn’t matter what it looks like. What you have to say is the most important part.” Using evidence from the book, explain how Marley might have known what Ramya was feeling in this moment.
6. On page 89, Ramya says, “It’s all I have ever wanted. My entire life. Just to be included.” Do you think she is only talking about her family? Use evidence from the book to answer why or why not.
7. On page 99, Ramya observes that “The other students around the table seem equally unnerved. They watch the baroness with a nervous distrust, the very same that I felt when I laid eyes on her in the dining hall.” Reflecting on the dynamics of Ramya’s workshop class and her interactions with her peers, explore why the other students might also feel uneasy in the presence of the baroness.
8. Using evidence from the text, what do you think Erica means when she says, “It’s not just about what you can see, Ramya. . . . It’s about what you cannot hear”? (page 115)

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## Questions for *Like a Charm* (continued)

9. On page 125, Ramya thinks to herself, “An island, waves crashing all around it, warning off travelers. Don’t come too close, you might get capsized. In fact, don’t come close at all. Yeah, I prefer this kind of art.” What is it about the Inchkeith painting that Ramya likes?
10. On page 258, Ramya says, “I suppose I knew deep down. That it was me. The leak in the house, the shattered glasses at school. I suppose a part of me always knew.” Using evidence from the text, what other events foreshadowed that Ramya may be a witch?
11. On pages 151–154, Erica, Freddy, and Ramya talk about “Division” and the idea of people becoming meaner. Can you identify any parallels between the characters’ discussion about ‘Division’ and instances in your own day-to-day life or in society at large?
12. On page 159, Ramya says, “In all the books you’ve spent your life reading, have you ever seen a ‘hero’ like me?” How do you define *hero*? Consider attributes, actions, and characteristics in your description, and reflect on whether a hero needs to conform to specific norms or expectations.
13. On page 163, Ramya expresses to her mother her frustration about the support her school is giving her. Ramya says, “I want them to stop making me feel like an insect under a magnifying glass. Let me use a computer! Stop singling me out in PE! Let me process things in my own time!” Discuss how different people may have different learning needs? How can we all be mindful and accommodating of these learning differences?
14. On pages 175–176, Murrey says to Ramya, “[The sirens are] not misunderstood. They’re not understood at all. If anything, they’re underestimated.” Explore why individuals who are perceived as different might be underestimated. How does this relate to societal perceptions and biases?
15. Using page 182 as a reference, what does the word *neurodivergent* mean? What does it mean in relation to how someone views and experiences the world around them?
16. On pages 200–201, Ramya is trying to better understand why she feels uneasy about Ren and uses a story about elephants to gauge her instincts. Ramya says to Ren, “[The elephants] had to hide something beautiful. They had to learn to conceal a part of what they are. All to avoid a predator. It’s a hard life. Burying parts of yourself just so you can move more easily. Be a little safer.” How might Ramya identify with the elephants’ need to conceal parts of themselves for safety, based on her own experiences and feelings? Explore the metaphorical connections between the elephants’ story and Ramya’s journey.
17. On page 280, Ramya reflects, “I’m starting to realize that if you’ve met one magical creature, that’s it. You’ve met one magical creature. They’re all so different.” Considering your understanding of neurodiversity, how might this sentiment apply to recognizing and valuing the unique experiences and characteristics of neurodivergent individuals? Provide examples or scenarios to support your explanation.



## ACTIVITY: Crafting Hidden Folk-lore

**OBJECTIVE:** Inspire students to explore creativity, empathy, and understanding by inventing their own "Hidden Folk" while also reflecting on themes of invisibility, misconceptions, and mutual understanding, as seen through Ramya's experiences in *Like a Charm*.

**PURPOSE:** This activity aims to engage students in creative thinking and empathetic understanding, exploring themes of visibility, misconception, and mutual respect, both in the fantastical context of Hidden Folk and in real-world scenarios.

### Instructions

Ramya has asked you to add to her book of Hidden Folk. This is your opportunity to create a never-before-seen member of the hidden community.

- 1. Invent a Hidden Folk:** Using the provided criteria, students will create their own Hidden Folk, imagining their appearance, personality, and experiences.
- 2. Explore Misconceptions:** Students should consider common misconceptions about their Hidden Folk and clarify what they are truly like, exploring themes of misunderstanding and stereotyping.
- 3. Understand Invisibility:** Reflect on why their Hidden Folk chooses to remain unseen by humans, drawing parallels with societal themes of invisibility and marginalization.
- 4. Express Wishes:** Identify what their Hidden Folk wishes humans knew or understood about them, fostering a discussion about empathy, respect, and understanding.
- 5. Share and Discuss:** Provide an opportunity for students to share their creations and discuss the themes, reflections, and insights that emerged through the activity.

## ACTIVITY DIFFERENTIATION: Crafting Hidden Folk-lore

**OBJECTIVE:** Adapt the Crafting Hidden Folklore activity to ensure accessibility, engagement, and meaningful reflection for all students, respecting diverse learning needs and preferences.

**EDUCATOR NOTE:** Maintain a respectful and inclusive environment throughout the activity, valuing all contributions and ensuring that discussions and reflections are empathetic and supportive, mirroring the themes of understanding and respect found in *Like a Charm*.

This activity encourages students to engage creatively with the themes of *Like a Charm* while also providing a platform for exploring and discussing broader themes of visibility, understanding, and respect in a societal context.

### Differentiation Strategies

- 1. Varied Creation Methods:** Allow students to present their Hidden Folk through various mediums, such as writing, drawing, sculpting, or digital creation, according to their preferences and strengths.
- 2. Choice of Sharing Method:** Enable students to share their creations in a manner that suits them, whether through a class presentation, a small group discussion, or a digital sharing platform.
- 3. Flexible Participation:** Ensure students can engage in the activity in a way that respects their comfort and participation levels, offering alternative assignments as needed.
- 4. Supportive Tools:** Provide tools, templates, and resources to support students in their creation and reflection processes, such as creation guides, reflection prompts, or art supplies.
- 5. Adjustable Time Frames:** Recognize diverse pacing needs by allowing flexible timelines for creation, reflection, and sharing.
- 6. Collaborative Options:** Allow students to work individually or collaboratively, respecting their social preferences and collaborative needs.
- 7. Reflection and Feedback:** Ensure a supportive environment for sharing and provide constructive, encouraging feedback, adapting feedback methods to individual needs and preferences.
- 8. Incorporate Technology:** Leverage technology to facilitate creation, reflection, and sharing, such as digital creation tools, online sharing platforms, or virtual presentation options.

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