

November 10, 2022

Dear Elle McNicoll,

Navigating a neurotypical world as a neurodivergent person is a difficult process. Adults and figures of authority teach kids and teens to embrace “being unique” and “standing apart from the crowd,” but do they really mean it? No, of course not. What they mean is they’re encouraging anyone who’s not neurotypical to act “normal,” and I believed that, for a while. Then I picked up *A Kind of Spark*. Your book resonated deeper than anything I’d ever read. The main character, Addie, was like me: passionate, misunderstood, and, most notably, autistic. That’s right, I have autism. If you told people that knew me about my self-diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, they would probably laugh at you because I’m so good at masking.

I started toying with the idea that I might be autistic, or at least neurodivergent, when I was about nine or ten. I found it hard to interact with people and I seemed to notice things that no one else did. The phone chargers had been driving me crazy with the noises they made. I noticed all the little things, and I began to feel like I was living in 3D while everyone else was stuck in a two-dimensional world.

I never really told anyone that I was autistic. I was scared of the rejection. I didn’t want to have to deal with someone telling me I wasn’t autistic because I could \_\_\_\_\_. Talk, have complex thoughts, be independent, the list goes on and on. I finally decided my only consolation would be reading books with characters I could relate to. And so I found *A Kind of Spark*, and in turn, Addie. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Here was someone like me, written on paper for the world to see. Addie and her sister Keedie were sensitive to things harsh on the senses, like me. They were misunderstood and underestimated, like me. They faced challenges with society, like me. They were struggling to find out who they really were, like me.

On my journey of trying to understand my neurodivergence, I’m figuring a couple of things out. Number one: masking is a terrible thing. It takes a gigantic emotional toll on me, just like it does on Keedie in your book. Pretending to be like everyone else is comparable to being a cat trying to be a

goldfish. It just doesn't work. Number two: a professional diagnosis shouldn't be compared to a self-diagnosis. Autism occurs in the brain. It's very hard to *see* autism. Therefore, who's better at calling it: a professional, who has no clue what I'm going through, or me, who has access to everything in my brain?

I was going through a bit of a rough patch when I first read your book. I was a few weeks into my sophomore year of high school and getting tired of my fake life, which was what I called masking before I read your book and learned there was a word for pretending to be "normal." As a general rule, I read to escape. I read to fall into the life of someone with different problems than me. When I was reading Addie's story, I was looking at myself in a paper mirror. I didn't have identical issues to Addie, but that didn't draw away from the story. I still got every last word of it. I was hanging on every page. Unlike many of the books I've read, Addie's emotions fueled my own. I was rooting for a paper and ink character more than I did for most real people.

I read your book twice, back to back. *A Kind of Spark* was one of those books that I never wanted to put down. In a most indirect way, it taught me more life lessons than plenty of people had. Your book gave me the courage to write this letter, and to come out as an autistic person. Your book proved to me that despite my differences, I'm a passionate, smart, sensitive, and unique human being. After all, no one would stand out if we were all the same. We need to embrace our differences before we embrace everything else. While the way your book impacted me was very personal, it can and will impact everyone on a much greater scale. Thank you for being an autistic author who writes about autistic characters. Your distinctive voice changed my mind about myself, and I'm sure it can change the world, too.

Sincerely,

Greta