

Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Elle McNicoll and Eishar Brar, author and editor of *A Kind of Spark*

Addie, central character of *A Kind of Spark*, is autistic and finds school difficult to navigate at the best of times. It's worse when her one friend seems to reject her. Fortunately, her family understand, especially big sister Keedie, who is also autistic. The story opens out when Addie's class begin to study local history and learn about a group of so-called witches. Though they lived hundreds of years ago, Addie identifies with these misunderstood, persecuted women, and determines to do something for them.

The judges described the book as 'phenomenal', and praised it for the way it deals with ideas of difference without being at all heavy handed. Elle McNicoll brings a brand new voice into children's books.

Q&A with author Elle McNicoll

When did you know you wanted to be a writer? How long were you thinking about or working on *A Kind of Spark* before it was published?

I've been a writer my whole life, I would say. I started very young and always kept it up. I worked on multiple versions of *A Kind of Spark* before Addie materialised, and that made the final draft so much easier to write.

What was it like working with your editor Eishar on the book?

Working with Eishar was so great because she was always so passionate about Addie's story. I can rework any structural problem, develop a scene, go deeper, go shallower as long as I know someone else believes in the story and Eishar really did. She believed in the book before I did.

What would you say was the most challenging thing she asked you to work on?

I'm not sure I can think of an example, because I was just so thrilled to be working on the manuscript with someone who really understood it. We mainly worked on developing the story and adding the odd subplot. Sometimes balancing the voice can be tricky but again, I wouldn't use the word challenging.

What is the thing you are most proud of about your book and why?

I'm really proud that *A Kind of Spark* subverts and challenges tropes that are often seen in books about disability, written by non-disabled author. Addie has an older sister who is autistic, she has a ton of agency and empathy, and the story is completely told with her in the driving seat. I'm proud of how beautifully people have responded to it. The letters from autistic readers have really meant the most.

What advice would you give to debut writers?

I would tell debut authors to find a community who can come with them on the journey. The pandemic arrived three months before my book came out, and I'm yet to do a physical event. I'm only just starting to hear from other authors. It's incredibly lonely. So, find yourself a group or a community who you can turn to.

Q&A with editor Eishar Brar

What most excited you about Elle's manuscript when you first read it?

The self-assured nature of her writing instantly blew me away; it was a short manuscript compared to most other middle-grade novels, but every sentence had impact. And the characters - particularly the relationship between all three sisters, as seen through Addie's eyes. There is a real thread of emotional honesty in Elle's writing, and that added a depth to her characters that moved our entire team to tears.

What were the main things you worked on with her as editor?

We worked on fleshing out certain characters, particularly the supporting cast, and making sure each story arc had a satisfying conclusion for readers. We also worked together on making sure we were preserving Addie's voice throughout, and distinguishing it from an older/adult voice.

This is your first appearance on the Branford Boase Award shortlist. Can you describe your path to becoming an editor and what do you most enjoy about your job?

Previously, I had only worked at large publishers (first in Rights, then in Editorial), and in quite junior roles. I knew I wanted to find underrepresented voices, and that led me to join **Knights Of** - and finding those stories is definitely one of the best parts of my job. Having full creative freedom, and extending that space to my authors, is also a total joy! For me, the most enjoyable part of the editing process in particular is that first round of notes; when it's focused on the bigger story strands and you can work with the author to really shape their idea into reality.

What advice would you give anyone wanting to become an editor?

Read! Especially if you want to be a children's editor; you'll need to show you have market knowledge. Publishing is slowly becoming more accessible, so definitely research some of the entry-level schemes and internships that are available.

What do you think marks out the most successful writers for children?

To me the most successful writers are the ones who reach their intended audience; if you know who you're writing for, and the book speaks to that reader, you've done your job.

A Kind of Spark is published by Knights Of, 978-1913311056, £6.99 pbk.

Thank you to **Elle McNicholl** and **Eishar Brar** for answering our questions.