



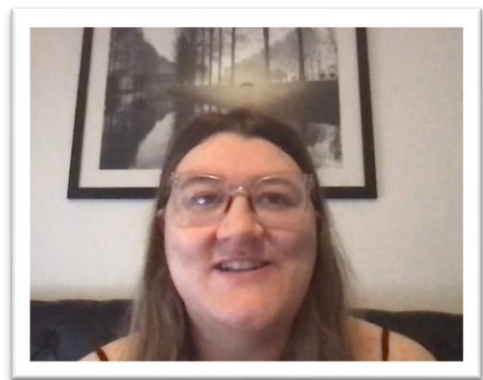
Stockbridge Primary School held our third annual BookFest in March 2022, bringing our school community together to celebrate stories. Our virtual author and illustrator visits were among the highlights of this year's BookFest.

# Elle McNicoll

Stockbridge Primary children love reading, but how often do they get to read a book in which the central character lives just round the corner from their school? This was just one of the many reasons why we were so thrilled for our P6 and P7 children to meet award-winning, bestselling author Elle McNicoll!

Sadly Elle's planned in-person visit had to be changed to a virtual event at the very last moment because she was unwell, but we were super-grateful to Elle for joining us despite feeling utterly rotten!

Elle is the author of *A Kind of Spark* and *Show Us Who You Are*, and has won the Blue Peter Children's Book Award and the Waterstones Children's Book Prize. She joined us to talk about her latest novel, the Edinburgh-set *Like A Charm*, and her experiences as a neurodivergent writer, in



this important and engaging session.

Elle began by saying that Ramya Knox, the central character in her new book *Like A Charm*, would have gone to Stockbridge Primary!

*"It was great that the book was set in Edinburgh – we all know the places and it's where we grew up."*

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She spoke powerfully and personally, sharing her own story and explaining that she has autism and dyspraxia, and that although she had wanted to be an author when she was a child, she had been told that writing books wasn't something that 'someone like her' could do. She was a big reader, but began to wonder why there were no people like her in books.

*"I really enjoyed it!! I liked the fact that the author told her whole story of how she became a writer."*

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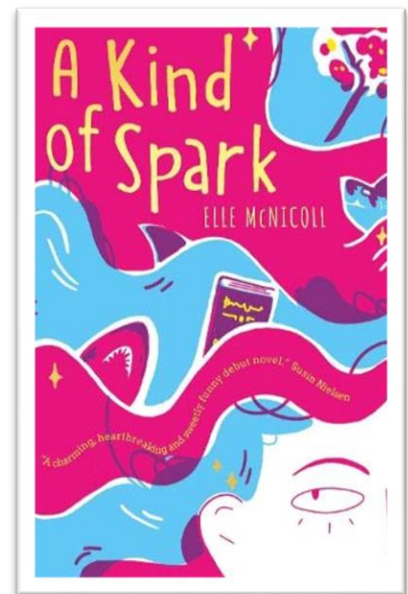
Elle explained that as she got older, she learnt that 1 in 5 people has some kind of disability, and that many people are neurodivergent, like her. She wondered why this lived reality isn't included in books.

*"I liked the author event with Elle McNicoll because she explained how she wrote her books and how she overcame her dyspraxia."*  
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Elle began to work in book publishing, where she suggested to others that publishing books with neurodivergent characters would be a great idea. But she was told that no one would read books with autistic or dyspraxic characters. She explained that she had been told that no one wanted to read about 'imperfect' people, that people in Asia and North America wouldn't want to read such a book, that publishers felt they already had *Wonder* by R J Palacio (a book featuring a character with a facial difference) and therefore didn't need any other books featuring characters with disabilities of any kind, and that the huge and influential bookseller Waterstones wouldn't want to sell it.

*"It was surprising the way publishers reacted negatively to her suggestion of neurodivergent characters, as I think the ideas behind the stories are really inspiring."*

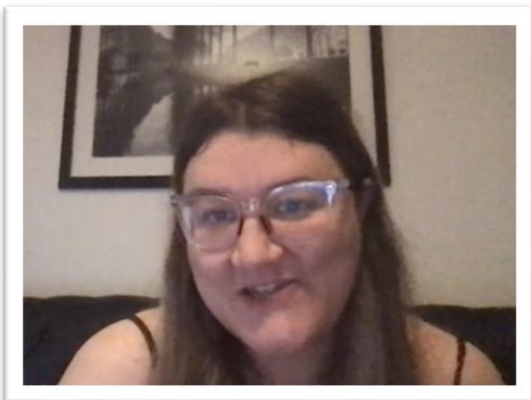
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Elle explained that the final straw for her was hearing that 'people like that don't read books, let alone write them'. She quit her job and felt that she was finished with publishing. But, luckily for her future readers like us, she had a meeting with Knights Of, an independent publisher who listened and understood and wanted to publish her first book, *A Kind of Spark*.

The children were so pleased when Elle reeled off her subsequent achievements, proving all those people wrong! Her book has become an international bestseller, including in Asia, has won awards in

North America, and has won the Waterstones Children's Book Prize. Not only is Elle now a full-time writer, but *A Kind of Spark* is being made into a television series by the BBC! Elle is busily involved in writing the scripts and choosing the actors.



*"I thought it was cool because she raises awareness about neurodivergent people through her books."*

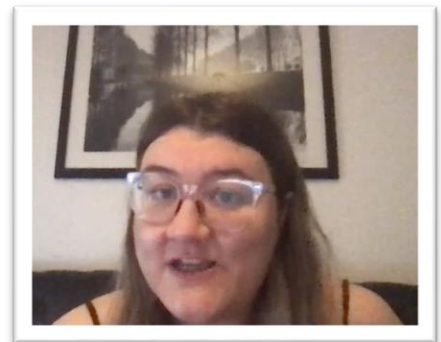
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*“It was good as she was sharing her experience about her learning difficulties. It’s good to hear about other people’s experiences.”*  
P6

Elle finished by impressing upon the children that they are creative and that they could be anything they wanted to be, and do anything that they put their minds to. She told them, ‘You will be told you can’t, and negative things, but the important thing is that no one else’s opinion but yours matters. You have to decide what’s right. Don’t listen to people who tell you not to do something just because you don’t fit the mould.’

*“It was very inspirational, the author being neurodiverse and her story inspired us that we can do anything we want to, no matter what differences we have.”*  
P6



Elle then answered all our questions in a wonderful and lengthy Q&A. She offered insights into her work in casting the upcoming TV series, including the difference between writing scripts and novels, how they want to cast the *right* actors rather than famous ones, and how important it is to cast an autistic actor in the main role.

*“I really enjoyed the characters and the fact they are neurodivergent as it shows that everyone has a superpower.”*  
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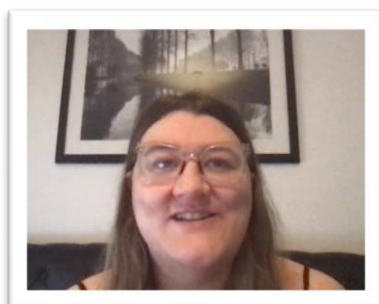
She also answered questions about what else she’s currently writing, including the follow-up to *Like A Charm*, and her determination to write fun, exciting and commercial books – they shouldn’t be the book equivalent of vegetables where children are told ‘read this, it’s good for you!’ She also talked about black cats, the problems of having too many cows in a script and her future retirement plans!



**Thank you so much for visiting us, Elle, especially when you were ill. We hope to welcome you back for an in-person visit before too long!**

Thanks to the school and the Parent Council, copies of *Like A Charm*, *A Kind of Spark* and *Show Us Who You Are* have been gifted to P6 and P7 class libraries.

*“It made me want to read it, and once I had read it I did not regret it.”*  
P6







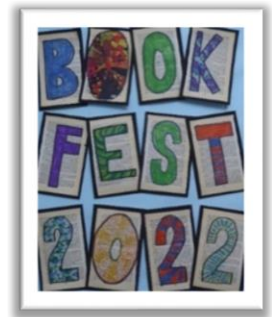
## Stockbridge Primary School BookFest

Stockbridge Primary School's annual BookFest is packed with diverse and innovative ways to celebrate reading – whatever the circumstances!



After two years of the covid pandemic, and against a distressing global backdrop, BookFest brought brightness in dark times. It added excitement and sparkle, lifted spirits and celebrated our international community. BookFest encouraged children to share experiences, to learn and understand more about other countries and other children's heritage, and to revel in our school's diversity as a source of strength. We aimed once again to bring some literary magic to children living through unprecedented times.

BookFest 2022 was a hybrid festival, but we seized the chance to turn the limitations of pandemic restrictions into opportunities. BookFest reached out to authors and illustrators across the UK, with virtual events enabling connections we could never hope to make in person. And just as this year's BookFest drew to a close came a glimmer of hope for the future, as we were able to invite our first illustrators and authors to the school in person.



This year's BookFest was underpinned by our longstanding aim of ensuring that every child can see themselves in a book. We drew upon the school's theme for the year of Diversity and Inclusion, with events championing neurodiversity and dyslexia, celebrations of our multitude of languages, and, as always, a focus not just on the written word but on telling stories through images. We're committed to making sure that not only can every child recognise themselves in book characters and in book illustrations, but that they also see themselves in the authors and illustrators we bring to BookFest.



## Thank You...

... to Elle McNicoll

... to Annabelle Wright at Ed Public Relations

... to Mrs Ashbrook, Ms Gordon, Miss McMillen, Miss Shortall and Ms Turek

... to Julie Richardson of our local independent children's bookshop, Ginger and Pickles

... to our BookFest volunteer organising team: Meredith, Hazel and Jenny

### Stockbridge Primary School

Stockbridge Primary School is a City of Edinburgh non-denominational local authority school and nursery, with approximately 270 pupils aged 3 to 12 years. Stockbridge Primary's Parent Council works in partnership with staff both to fundraise for the school and to deliver events and resources that enrich pupils' experience and the school environment. BookFest is organised by members of the Stockbridge Primary teaching staff, parent volunteers and members of the Parent Council.