



Walker Books Discussion Guide



Spark

Rachael Crow
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*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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Outline:

Evie doesn't have a choice. One day she's an ordinary seventeen year old, grieving for her mother. The next, she's a Shield, the result of a decades-old experiment gone wrong, bound by DNA to defend her best friend from an unknown killer. The threat could come at home, at school, anywhere. All Evie knows is that it will be a fight to the death. And then there's Jamie. Irresistible. Off-limits.

Author/Illustrator Information:

Rachael Crow studied Classical Studies and Drama at the University of Canterbury, but became an English teacher after graduation. Working with teenagers has given her a natural bent towards Young Adult fiction and a desire to present a feisty female protagonist in her writing. Her debut novel, *Spark*, is the first in a series released with Walker Books Australia from 2014. Rachael was born and raised in Christchurch, New Zealand, and currently lives in Nelson with her husband and three daughters. Visit her online at www.rachaelcrow.com

How to use these notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

These notes are for:

- Secondary years 9-10
- Ages 14+

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Novel
- Fiction

Themes/ Ideas:

- Responsibility
- Destiny/Fate
- Relationships
 - Science Fiction
 - Loyalty/Betrayal

National Curriculum Focus:*

English content descriptions include:

Year 9
ACELA1561
ACELT1633
ACELT1771
ACELT1634
ACELT1635
ACELT1636
ACELT1638
ACELY1739
ACELY1742

Year 10
ACELA1565
ACELT1640
ACELT1812
ACELT1642
ACELY1749
ACELY1752
ACELY1754

*Key content descriptions have been identified from the Australian National Curriculum. However, this is not an exhaustive list of National Curriculum content able to be addressed through studying this text.



Walker Books Discussion Guide

Rachael Crow on *Spark*

In the world of *Spark* I explore the idea of genetically engineered “predestination”. It is rather loosely inspired by my personal discoveries about the power of DNA after making contact with my birth mother. A scary and wonderful experience – it blew my mind to see my nose, my eyes, my smile on someone else. I loved it! It was even more remarkable to discover how similar my birth mother and I are in personality/temperament, interests/talents (Ma writes beautiful poetry!). Even my speech and mannerisms are like hers. It seemed astonishing to me that I could be so like someone I had never spent time with. Now, I’m a firm believer in personal responsibility, but it certainly stirred up some spooky questions about free will. How much of who we are and who we become is already written into our destinies at a cellular level? Are our choices truly acts of free will or pre-programmed responses?



Evie wrestles with these questions within a set of fairly extreme circumstances. She carries a synthetic gene in her DNA that binds her to a harrowing destiny as a Shield. She is compelled by the Fixation Effect to protect the life of her Spark at any cost. Evie struggles to come to terms with the injustice of her new reality, all the while juggling family, school, friendship and first love.

In terms of character development, it was a bit like putting universal adolescent themes into a Petri dish and setting fire to them with the magnifying glass of high-stakes science fiction. Evie struggles with isolation and belonging. Her grief feels like a “social handicap”. She worries about being a burden to her aunt. She doubts she can fit in with Kitty and Jamie’s rich, private-school friends. Her DNA secret elevates her sense of “difference” and she struggles to act normally around her classmates while “contemplating murder”. There is even a hint that she is unusual within the parameters of genetic engineering, displaying anomalies in her “gifts”. She is irresistibly drawn to Jamie despite the impossibility of any sort of future together and is forced to question the legitimacy of those feelings anyway. Is love still love if it was created in a lab? Poor Evie, all that tortured inner processing – I think I enjoyed it a bit much!

Overall, my favourite thing about *Spark* is the three love stories. Evie’s relationship with her aunt Miriam (one of my favourite characters), her friendship with Kitty, her romance with Jamie. Each of these relationships is complicated, fierce and integral to Evie’s journey, exploring the trust, sacrifice and risk that it takes to love someone.

Discussion Questions

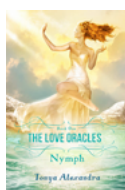
- “Let it go, kiddo. It’s too late. Cats eat birds. It’s nature.” Page 19
Discuss this line in the context of what Evie will discover about the Affinity Project and how it affects her later in the novel. Do you think Miriam was trying to prepare Evie for what is to come?
- “As your frequency sensitivity matures you get smarter, stronger and better looking.” Page 138
What parallels can be drawn between changes Evie goes through after she Sparks and teenagers going through puberty? How does Evie deal with suddenly feeling unfamiliar with her own body and emotions?
- “There’s no out, is there? ... This is my life.” Page 142
Evie is forced to potentially become a murderer to protect her friend. Discuss the effects of being unfairly forced into a dangerous situation.
- “The saviour they’d been hoping for is just useless, inexperienced me.” Page 174
Evie struggles with the pressure of being responsible for Kitty’s life when she feels unprepared. Do you think this anxiety pushes her to work harder or dampens her abilities?



Walker Books Discussion Guide

- Why do you think Barb tries to convince Evie to not get involved with Jamie? If you were in Evie's position, how would you respond to Barb's request?
- What were Evie's motivations for wanting to break Richard's nose during the volleyball game? Do you think she was thinking clearly? Were her actions justified? What responsibilities come with Evie's new-found strength and agility?
- Why did Miriam lie to Evie about not requiring close physical proximity for her frequency sensitivity with Kitty? Do you think it was the right thing to do?
- How do you think the Synergist coding influences Evie and Jamie's relationship? Do you believe their feelings for each other are legitimate? Do you believe it is true love or just another way the Affinity Project manipulates their lives?
- Evie struggles with loneliness early in the book. What are the dangers of loneliness, especially when going through a strong emotion such as grief? Why does Evie still feel alone throughout the novel even when she is surrounded by people?
- At the heart of *Spark* is a young woman's struggle to determine her own future and understand her past. What barriers stand in her way? Who helps her and why? Why do you think it is important to know the truth about your own past?
- There are a number of characters who keep secrets in *Spark*. Miriam keeps the truth about Evie's past from her; Jamie doesn't tell Evie about Helena, his Cooler; Evie can't tell anyone at school about being a Shield, etc. Do you think it's better to keep secrets from loved ones to protect them, or be honest with them even if it might hurt them or put them in danger?
- What expectations do you have for the rest of the series? *Stray* will be released in 2015 and *Shield* in 2016.
- The Affinity Project forces Strays to murder Sparks and Shields to murder Strays. Discuss the ethical implications of The Affinity Project manipulating genes for this result. If a Shield or Stray were caught by the police after murdering someone, do you think they should be treated the same as a civilian murderer?
- Read the short story *Kill Switch* available at www.rachaelcraw.com/i/kill-switch.pdf. Where does this fit in with *Spark*? How does this perspective on the story give the reader a richer view of the world of *Spark*?
- Rachael Crow compiled playlists of songs she listened to when writing the book and songs that the characters would be listening to when training. Check out the playlists at www.rachaelcraw.com/book. How do you think this music influenced the author when she was writing the book? Create your own playlist of what you think the characters would listen to when training.

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