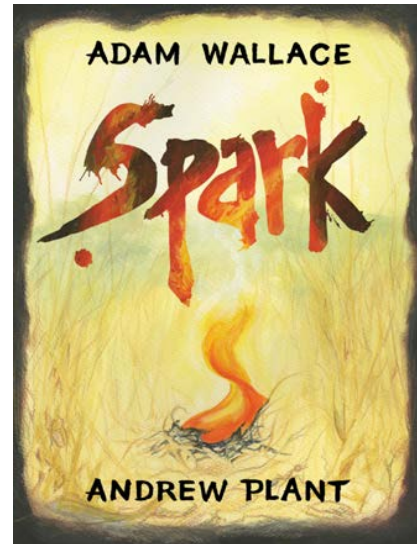




Teachers' Notes

Spark

by Adam Wallace and Andrew Plant



Spark Author Notes and Questions



The idea for Spark came like a bolt out of the blue. I normally write funny stories, or stories with action, and sometimes really gross stories. But I always wanted to write a story that was a little more realistic ... with a twist, of course!

I was at an exhibition by Bruce Whatley, who has illustrated heaps of books, including the *Diary of a Wombat* books, and more recently one called *Fire*. Bruce was talking about how he had illustrated *Fire* with his left hand, which is pretty cool because he's right-handed! As he was talking, I suddenly had a thought ... What if I wrote a story about a bushfire but from the point of view of the fire? What if a fire could feel things, and have fun, get scared, and go faster than it

wanted to? What if a fire felt bad about burning things?

So I madly started writing down notes as Bruce continued talking (sorry, Bruce, but this was important!). This is sometimes how stories start. An idea pops into your head because of something you see or hear or do, and then BAM! You're away and writing!

I wanted the story of Spark to start small and calm, and then build to be huge, and then finish calm as well, so there was a nice shape to the story. This is important too. A story can't just run along at the same pace the whole way. It has to have ups and downs and big moments and small moments. The AMAZING Andrew Plant does this in the illustrations as well. He does it in the sizes of the pictures, and also in the colours. His notes talk about this in more detail.

While I'm talking about Andrew, one of the best things about this project was working closely with the illustrator. Sometimes I will write a story, send it off, and the next time I see it is when

it's on the shelf, finished. With Andrew, we met numerous times, he showed me all the roughs, and we sat and went through the text together as he wrote it beautifully in his own handwriting, with a fountain pen and ink, I might add! Very old school! Like old OLD school! We really wanted the text to have a feeling in it, both in the way it looked and the way it would be read.

In the end, Spark is a story that is really important to me. In 1983, I had to escape the Ash Wednesday bushfires with my grandmother! We didn't have a car, and we ran away with me carrying my budgie!

So that's Spark. I hope you enjoy it.

Questions for Students (Based on the Australian Curriculum)

1. Whose point of view is this story written from? (**Texts and the contexts in which they are used** Identify the point of view in a text and suggest alternative points of view (ACELY1675))
2. Using the wordless layout, write your version of Spark. Try writing it from a different point of view. Maybe it could be from the point of view of the wind, or some of the animals, or the firefighters, or something else. (**Texts and the contexts in which they are used** Identify the point of view in a text and suggest alternative points of view (ACELY1675))
3. The wind makes the fire go faster, even when it doesn't want to. Could the fire have done anything differently to make the wind stop doing what it was doing? What should the wind have done differently? (**Being healthy, safe and active sub-strand** Describe and apply strategies that can be used in situations that make them feel uncomfortable or unsafe (ACPPS035))
4. Do you think the fire's life is similar to the life of a human? Why? (**Personal responses to the ideas, characters and viewpoints in texts** Draw connections between personal experiences and the worlds of texts, and share responses with others (ACELT1596))
5. Is the wind a bully? Why? (**Personal responses to the ideas, characters and viewpoints in texts** Draw connections between personal experiences and the worlds of texts, and share responses with others (ACELT1596))
6. Australia has a lot of bushfires. How does Australia's climate contribute to this? What are some other places in the world that have bushfires? (**Geography** The main climate types of the world and the similarities and differences between the climates of different places (ACHASSK068))

7. How do you think the fire in SPARK started? (**Interpreting, Analysing, Evaluating** Use comprehension strategies to build literal and inferred meaning and begin to analyse texts by drawing on growing knowledge of context, language and visual features and print and multimodal text structures (ACELY1670))
8. How else can bushfires start?
9. The wind and the fire work together to turn around, but others are doing little things to help them stop as well. Who/What are they? Can you see them in the pictures?

Spark Illustrator Notes and Questions

The process of illustrating *Spark* began very slowly. I could not get any ideas that did not seem predictable or clichéd, and struggled with designs for several days. The main issue was that if I showed Spark as very small at the start, to give it room to grow through the story, then several of the early pictures would just be landscapes with growing amounts of smoke. Alternatively, if I zoomed in on Spark, and followed its growth, with the viewpoint pulling back and back as Spark grew, I'd end up with a lot of very similar pictures of flames, no matter how much I changed the background. The background shouldn't change much anyway, as it was all set in the same place.



The idea for the design came, as they often do, walking my dog. By having little vignettes at the start that literally grow in size as the fire does seemed to me to solve the problem. By the 'inferno' spreads, the pictures fill the entire pages, then as the fire dies, the vignettes become smaller and smaller again. Having the vignettes with 'burnt' edges just seemed like a nice idea. I did experiment with actually setting fire to my paper, but it was far too unpredictable. I'd end up with huge scalloped gouges that were unworkable. So I just soaked the edges in water and smeared black paint over them, followed by black watercolour pencil while it was still wet. I did this after the painting itself had been finished. The actual edges were done by simply tearing the paper sheets, ripping out smaller sections if the edges were too straight, then rubbing on rough concrete to fray it all.

The backgrounds took nearly as much time as the vignettes. I really don't like big blank white pages with text on them that much. Right from the start, from the walking-the-dog inspiration, I knew I wanted to put texture behind the vignettes, just keeping it faint enough for the text to be clear. There's all sorts of animals and bits and pieces hidden in the backgrounds. The spattering was the most fun part. Plastic sheets on the floor of my studio kept most of it clean, although my shoes and jeans didn't fare so well. I spatter by fanning the bristles with my

fingers. It's messy, but you can get a surprising amount of control with it. Striking the brush handle over a finger to spatter the paint leads to blobs that are much too big, I found.

The background colours reflect the story, of course. Bright and sun-bleached at the start, increasingly smoky and sprayed with embers, and ending with ashy greys. The greys are actually not just black and white mixed together. There's usually about five different colours mixed in to get the various effects. The final 'sprouting cycad' background has quite a lot of green and burnt sienna mixed through it. The only image in the whole book that is plain black and white is the rainfall and distant hills vignette on the second last page – my 'Japanese' picture. I wanted the bleakest colour just before the picture of rebirth – the cycad. The most complicated spatter pages are the endpapers – nine colours, mixed and pure, were used.

The little animal sketches throughout the book are done mostly as single lines – I placed the pencil on the paper, and just started drawing a long, continuous line, curving, jiggling, folding back on itself, then changing to another colour, and retracing the first line, or heading off in another direction. I'm usually very precise and do lots of preparatory outlines. Drawing like this is great fun. Along with the spattering, this is easily the loosest, sloppiest artwork I've ever done!

The text is handwritten. You can get 'handwritten' fonts, but of course, every 'a' or 'b' or 'z' is the same as every other one, so it defeats the whole purpose of having a handwritten look. I used an old-fashioned nib and inkpot on very rough paper to get the scratchy effect. I wanted the letters to look a bit like burnt twigs, and then to look like ash fading away in the last few pages. I sat down with Adam, the author, and, with much arm-waving, he described the feelings in each line, how it could be read, how the shape could reflect the words, and I scratched away. I've never worked with an author like that before, and it was awesome. The line between writing and illustrating became completely blurred, and the words themselves – their emotion, their actual length, even their volume – pushed the shapes.

Students often ask which is my favourite picture in a book I have illustrated. I have three in *Spark*, and none of them have flames! The raindrop splash, the sprouting cycad, and, perhaps a bit bizarrely, the endpapers! Usually, I like those pictures which match most closely the original idea I had in my head. I don't think any of the flames look really *hot* enough, but the burning-cars-inferno comes very close! Mind you, I don't think I've ever seen a painting that really captures that intensity, simply because paint can't glow from within.

Questions for Students (Based on the Australian Curriculum)

1. The illustrations start off being quite small, and change through the book. What effect does this have on the story? (**Visual language** Identify the effect on audiences of

techniques, for example shot size, vertical camera angle and layout in picture books, advertisements and film segments (ACELA1483)

2. How does the look of the backgrounds reflect the text? (**Visual language** *Identify the effect on audiences of techniques, for example shot size, vertical camera angle and layout in picture books, advertisements and film segments (ACELA1483)*)
3. What is the effect of the silent pages, those pages with illustrations but no text? (**Visual language** *Identify the effect on audiences of techniques, for example shot size, vertical camera angle and layout in picture books, advertisements and film segments (ACELA1483)*)
4. In the text, the fire 'speaks' in the first person. Are there any illustrations where you think the fire has a personality? (**Visual language** *Identify the effect on audiences of techniques, for example shot size, vertical camera angle and layout in picture books, advertisements and film segments (ACELA1483)*)
5. The text is handwritten, and is rarely just in straight lines. It waves and billows, and even starts fading out. How does this change how you read the book, if at all? Does it add to the text for you? Does it distract? (**Visual language** *Identify the effect on audiences of techniques, for example shot size, vertical camera angle and layout in picture books, advertisements and film segments (ACELA1483)*)
6. Why do you think the illustrator added the small insects throughout the book, as there is no mention of them in the text? (**Visual language** *Identify the effect on audiences of techniques, for example shot size, vertical camera angle and layout in picture books, advertisements and film segments (ACELA1483)*)
7. Does the text suggest different pictures to you? How would you have illustrated it?
8. During a bushfire, volunteer and professional firefighters in Australia do extraordinary work to try and contain it, to save property, and especially lives. In the illustrations, firefighters are barely visible. Why do you think the illustrator did this?