

A TEACHER'S GUIDE AND ACTIVITY KIT FOR

SPARK

ABOUT THE BOOK

From award-winning author Chris Baron, the story of a community recovering from a devastating wildfire, as two friends find their way back to each other and their homes.

Perfect for fans of Alan Gratz and Lauren Tarshis.

Finn and his friend, whose nickname is Rabbit, live in a rural area that's been hit hard by wildfires. Families were displaced and school was interrupted. Moreover, their beloved forest is suffering—animals and plants haven't been able to come back, and the two friends wonder if there's anything they can do to help. Rabbit's uncle, a science teacher, is part of a study that may help bring the forest back to life, but Finn and Rabbit wonder if the forest can wait. And what if another fire comes in the meantime? They believe a small part of the forest—the forest heart—that survived the wildfire may hold the key to regrowth, but first, they have to find it and then convince the adults around them to listen.

For any young person who's ever felt powerless against the world, *Spark* is a story about two kids doing all they can to understand their natural world and preserve it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Baron is a professor of English at San Diego City College. He is the author of *All of Me*, a Southern California Independent Booksellers Association bestseller; *The Magical Imperfect*, a Sydney Taylor Notable Book; *The Gray*, and *Spark*, as well as other books. He lives in San Diego with his family. chris-baron.com



PRE-READING

START YOUR SPARK JOURNAL

Finn keeps a field journal for his thoughts and observations. While reading *Spark*, keep a journal (a small notebook, sketchbook, or half sheets of copy paper stapled together). As you read, record reflections on the story, pieces of text or images that resonate, questions for discussion, and observations of your own environment. This guide also has some journal prompts to help you think more deeply about the book.

Clues from the Cover: Look carefully at the cover of *Spark* with Tom Cole’s beautiful artwork. Write down a few predictions and whatever questions that you have about the book.

Wildfires: What do you already know about wildfires? Make a quick list.

“How do you keep hope alive?”: Reflect on the book’s epigraph. Set a timer for one minute and write down any words that come to mind when you think of the word “hope.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Finn and Rabbit live near a national park and enjoy spending time in nature. What are some ways you connect with nature?
2. In *Spark*, the environment seems to be changing—it’s warmer and drier, and there are fires popping up all over the region. Are there any changes you’ve noticed in the environment where you live?
3. Have you and your family ever had to be evacuated? Or maybe your day-to-day life was interrupted by something beyond your control. How did it affect you? Your friends? Your family?

DURING READING

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Part I — (Not Quite) Normal Life (pages 1–81)

1. Early on, Finn learns that the portrait of his great-grandfather is important to his family—and that if the fire ever comes they should save it. Is there a family object that is important to you?
2. Rabbit isn’t her real name. How does Mirasol get this nickname? How and why does she come to accept it? Do you or any of your friends have a nickname? Have you ever had a nickname you didn’t like? What did you do about it?
3. At the start of the book, Finn and Rabbit are excited about their school project using trail cameras

and maybe catching a glimpse of the wolves that might be returning to their area. In what ways is it important that wolves are returning to the area? In what ways might people be concerned? What do you think?

3. Finn thinks of himself as “the mind” and Rabbit as “the heart” (page 20). What do you think this means? What passages in the book help to describe what Finn means by this?
4. Before the fire comes, Finn, Rabbit, and others notice many things changing in their town and the wildlands around them because of the changing climate. What are some of the things they notice and have concerns about?
5. Uncle Charlie teaches the class about the Wildland-Urban Interface (page 46) and how it can be a problem for the environment. What does that mean and how is this the case? What are some other things that can threaten the environment?
6. Rabbit’s best friend besides Finn is her dog, Thorn. Why do you think Rabbit took Thorn in as her pet? When Thorn goes missing, how does it affect Rabbit? What do you think humans gain from sharing their lives with cats, dogs, and other animals? Do you have a pet that helps you when times get tough? If you don’t have a pet, what pet would you choose if you did have one? Why?

Part II — Evacuation (pages 83–110)

7. When the fire comes, Finn only has a few minutes to decide what to take with him. Reread the poem “Get Your Stuff” (pages 89–90). What does he decide to take? If you had only a few minutes to evacuate, what three things would you be sure to grab and why?

Part III — Uprooted (pages 111–72)

8. Finn, Rabbit, and Mia disperse to different cities after the fire. What do you think was the hardest part about them having to live in another place? Do you notice any ways that their behaviors change?
9. One of the ways Mr. Finkel helps Finn handle his feelings is by making a yelling box (pages 160–63). What sort of things do you do when you are feeling big emotions?

Part IV — Coming Home (pages 173–280)

10. When Finn and his family return to Redwood Hollows, a lot has changed. What seems different? What has stayed the same?
11. Reread the chapter “Coming Home” (beginning on page 185). Why do you think the firefighters Redwood Hollows Hotshots leave a note for Finn’s family?
12. For the adults, the fire brings opportunities for work—especially for Finn’s dad. Why does this make Finn uneasy?

13. If you were at the city council meeting (page 203), would you be comfortable speaking up? Why or why not?
14. The firefighters speak at the school assembly (pages 232–36). They give some advice on how to feel. What do they say to do? Do you think what they said helped the kids? How so? What might you add to their list?
15. Finn and Rabbit work hard to use their channel to share what happened during the fire, and they use it to share the wonder of what’s happening in Forest Heart. Social media can often be negative. Do you think Finn and Rabbit used it well?
16. Rabbit decides to take a stand and stop the development. What does she do? Would you join her? Would you do something else?
17. How is Finn’s decision to follow Rabbit a turning point for him?
18. What makes acorns important to the story? In many ways they are symbolic. What does it mean for something to be symbolic? How are the acorns symbolic?

Part V — Regrowth (pages 281–99)

19. In what ways were the kids successful? How did they come together to achieve a common goal?
20. How have Finn and Rabbit changed and grown by the end of the story? What are a few things they’ve learned about themselves?

SPARK JOURNAL PROMPTS

“Can Hope Spark Healing?”: Use key words in the subtitle of the book to guide your reflections as you read.

- Hope: When do the characters feel hopeful? What events challenge that feeling?
- Spark: Notice the different ways this word is used. What feelings do they evoke?
- Healing: How do the characters find their own paths to healing? What obstacles do they face?

Five Parts: The novel is divided into five sections:

- Part I — (Not Quite) Normal Life
- Part II — Evacuation
- Part III — Uprooted
- Part IV — Coming Home
- Part V — Regrowth

As you finish each of the five parts, reflect on its themes. In your journal, draw an illustration or write an epigraph that could go on each section's introductory page.

A Handful of Strategies: Reread “Let It Out” (pages 160–61), “How to Make a Yelling Box” (page 162), and “Box” (page 163). In these poems, Mr. Finkel advises Finn to make a yelling box as a way to help release emotional tension. In your journal, brainstorm activities that help you when you need a release (for example, drawing, taking a walk, shooting baskets, dancing, listening to music, etc.). Then, together as a class, make a big list with everyone's ideas. Someone else might have a strategy that could help you! Trace your hand in your journal. In each of the fingers, write a strategy you can try when you are feeling big, challenging emotions.

Instructions for making your own yelling box are at [this website](#).

“Home”: Finn grapples with leaving his home and then returning to a changed place (page 180). Try writing your own version of this poem reflecting your feelings about home.

“Save the Forest”: In “Speaking Up” (pages 214–15), Rabbit starts the effort to save the forest. Make a list of causes you feel strongly enough about to speak up like Rabbit.

“Three Things”: In the poem “Three Things,” one suggestion from firefighter Matt is to “help each other in ways you never have before” (page 236). In your journal, create a list of new ways to help others, focusing on concrete actions to support your family, your school, and the larger community.

Forest Heart: Review the poems that talk about Forest Heart: “Everywhere” (page 40), “Forest Heart” (pages 42–43), “A Different Planet” (pages 175–76), “Maybe a Wolf Pack” (pages 208–9), and “Change” (pages 293–94). Draw a heart shape across two facing pages in your journal. On one side, draw images and/or write words that describe Forest Heart in Redwood Hollows. On the other half, draw images and/or write words about a place that is important to you.

AFTER READING

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the author chose to tell this story in verse? What differences do you notice when reading poetry vs. prose? What did you like most about reading a story in this format? Were there things that were challenging?
2. The author gives clues to the big themes that Finn and Rabbit care about through the use of figurative language—especially metaphors. For example, in the poem, “Hope” (pages 192–93) Finn reflects on what hope is. In “Home” (page 180) Finn uses imagery to describe what home means to him. What does hope mean to you? What does home mean? Can you find other poems in the book that explore big concepts like this using figurative language and imagery? (Hint: The titles help.)

3. *Spark* is a story of nature, friendship, resilience, and many other things. Define “resilience” and discuss how this is an important theme in the story.
4. Uncle Charlie and the other forest ranger talk often about new growth that comes after a fire, and even how fire is a natural part of the environment. Discuss how this is true. Does this make you think differently about fire?
5. Reflect on the title *Spark*. Throughout the book there are many expected and unexpected meanings (like on pages 10, 242, and 243). What are some of its meanings in the story? Did your thoughts about the title and its meaning change at all from when you started the book? How so?

CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

Mindful Breathing: Throughout the novel, the characters face stressful situations. One strategy for calming the brain and body is mindful deep breathing, and the only tool you need is your hands. Hold up your left hand with the fingers splayed out wide. Use the index finger of the right hand to trace along the fingers as you breathe slowly in and out. Inhale as your right index finger goes up the outside of the left thumb, and exhale as you go down the thumb. Inhale as you trace up the left index finger, and exhale as you go down. Continue, ending on the outside of your left pinkie. The combination of the deep, slow breaths with the tactile sensation is soothing and helps settle the brain. Try this as a class and see if you can sync up your breathing and all become calm together.

Change the Point of View: *Spark* is told from Finn’s point of view, revealing his thoughts and feelings. What would change if some of the poems were written from a different character’s perspective? Try it! Choose a poem and rewrite it through the eyes of another character. Some poems to try: “The (Un)Usual Place” (pages 80–81) from Thorn, “Hurt” (pages 137–38) from Mom, “First Virtual Day” (pages 143–45) from Mr. Finkel, “Speaking Up” (pages 214–15) from Jonah, “The Trailer” (page 216) from Mia, “One More Try” (page 238) from Rabbit, and “Sheriffs” (pages 276–78) from Dad.

Hope, Revisited: Baron’s novel is a creative exploration of the theme of hope. Look back at your “How do you keep hope alive?” journal entry and reflect on the novel. Then create your own piece of hope-related art (poetry, essay, short story, visual art, dance, music, drama).

Tree Collaborative Art: Make a large trunk out of brown paper and hang it on a wall in your classroom or hallway. Cut drawing paper into leaf shapes and fill those leaves with color and hope-filled words. Hang them on the trunk to create an inspiring tree.

Emergency Preparedness: *Spark* shows the importance of families preparing in advance for emergencies. Take this opportunity to make an emergency plan with your family. For Finn and his family, wildfires are the biggest threat. If you live in a fire-prone area, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection has [resources](#) to help families prepare.

Your community might face different potential disasters that require advance preparation. The American Red Cross provides helpful [information](#) for families, available in several languages.

Your school should also have emergency preparations in place. Discuss, as a class, what those plans are and ask any questions before those plans need to be put to use.

Plant a Tree: Rabbit celebrates the return to Redwood Hollows by planting acorns. You can celebrate your time with *Spark* by planting something also. Perhaps your class could plant a tree at your school or in a local park. If a tree is too much to take on, get a package of seeds, a bag of potting soil, and some recycled containers and grow plants from seed. Some seeds that can be easily grown in containers include parsley (which looks like little trees), peas, nasturtiums, and radishes. Start them on a sunny windowsill and track their growth.

Get to Work: Start with the journal ideas from the *Three Things* activity above and create a class list of ways you and your friends can help create a stronger community. Narrow the list to one or two actionable items to pursue. You can focus on environmental concerns like the ones in *Spark* or broaden the scope. Develop an implementation plan: create a catchy name and a logo, make a list of tasks, assign responsibilities, set a timetable, and find partners within your school and community. Then it's time to get busy!

VOCABULARY

Wildland-Urban Interface

Serotinous Pine Cone

Uprooted

Evacuated

Diablo/Santa Ana Winds

Wildfire

Wildland Wildfire

Legacy

Ecologist

Resilience

Tu BiShvat

Shabbat

Advocate

Activism

Environmentalism

RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL LEARNING

Resources and Activities for Educators to Learn More About Wildfires

<https://www.plt.org/educator-tips/wildfires-causes-effects-educational-activities>

Powerful Resources for Kids from the National Parks Service

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/fire-websites-for-kids.htm>

Help Your Family and Community to Be Ready, Set, Go!

<https://readyforwildfire.org/prepare-for-wildfire>

Make Your Own Yelling Box

<https://hope4hurtingkids.com/emotions/coping-skills/scream-box>

Visit the Author's Website for Lots of Additional Resources and Activities

www.chris-baron.com

Podcast: Rekindling Our Relationship with Wildfire with Frank Kanawha Lake, Research Ecologist, and the Tribal Liaison/Climate Change contact for the Pacific Southwest Research Station, USDA Forest Service

<https://www.climateone.org/people/frank-kanawha-lake>

Coloring Book

[Prescribed Fire: Helping Make Forests Healthy by Frank Kanawha Lake US Forest Service](#)