



Muriel Spark

BY JESSICA TEISCH

“HERE IS THE RECIPE FOR A TYPICAL MURIEL SPARK NOVEL,” WRITES THE *NEW YORK TIMES*’S MICHIKO KAKUTANI. “[T]ake a self-enclosed community (of writers, schoolgirls, nuns, rich people, etc.) that is full of incestuous liaisons and fraternal intrigue; toss in a bombshell (like murder, suicide or betrayal) that will ricochet dangerously around this little world, and add some allusions to the supernatural to ground these melodramatics in an old-fashioned context of good and evil. Serve up with crisp, authoritative prose and present with ‘a light and heartless hand.’”

In slim masterpieces such *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) and *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), Spark (1918–2006)—an award-winning Scottish writer considered, along with Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, one of the finest British novelists of the mid-20th century—invented playful, disturbing worlds that challenged readers’ perceptions about life and its narration. In more than 20 novels (she also wrote short stories, poetry, plays, and criticism), Spark constructed subtle, complex stories. Although

outwardly comedic, they contain macabre forces—cruelty, evil, and certain death—lurking beneath the often humorous mysteries of everyday life.

The detached, “light and heartless hand” with which Spark handled her characters’ lives reflected her own demonic energy, charisma, savage ruthlessness, and unabashed ambition. Born in 1918 in Edinburgh, Spark rose from working-class beginnings to the literary crème de la crème of New York society after the triumph of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. But her success obscured some of her earlier, darker moments: a disastrous marriage to a manic-depressive man, their troubled life in Rhodesia, and her subsequent abandonment of their son; a period of terrible hallucinations and literary struggles; and a conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1954 (she was half-Jewish), which inspired the theological nature of some of her work. All of these combined, her biographer Martin Stannard suggests, led to Spark’s divided personality, sense of lifelong alienation, and insufferable tendencies, particularly in her later years.

But if Spark's charming, mercurial personality alienated people, it also inspired the creative genius that marked her darkly comic tone, sinister characters, and bleak situations that together expose, quite like no one else did during her time, the enigma of human behavior. "I have a comic strain," she told the *New York Times* in a 1993 interview, "but my novels are serious. Sometimes one makes one's own category, you know." Muriel Spark certainly did.

Memento Mori (1959)

Spark's childhood, where she learned about old age while caring for her ill grandmother, influenced her third novel. Though it deals with themes of death, human frailty, and deception, it has fine moments of black humor and a refreshing take on life. A psychological thriller with a twist, Spark's first masterpiece ("a touch of Agatha Christie [mixed] with some of the swift, slightly brutal comedy of Evelyn Waugh," noted the *New York Times* in its review) meditates on morality, ethics, and human decency.

THE STORY: In late 1950s London, a mysterious telephone caller infiltrates a group of elderly friends who constantly bicker, rewrite their wills, and wonder how they will pass, informing them each, "Remember you must die." While this news comes as no surprise, its anonymity nonetheless unsettles the octogenarians. In the ensuing flurry, in which each tells the baffled police a different story, long-held secrets—none of them good—come to light. Soon, memories of past sin and loves, successes, and failures force them to confront their physical and mental impairments and, as the anonymous caller reminds them, their own final demises.

"Formally the novel seems as fresh and original today as it did when it was first published, and thematically more relevant to the preoccupations and anxieties of the present century's first decade than to those of the 50s. ... Though its subject matter is the inevitability of death and the various afflictions, physical and mental, of old age, the novel is far from being morbid or depressing. On the contrary it is wonderfully funny throughout." DAVID LODGE, GUARDIAN (UK), 5/5/10

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1961)

◆ TIME MAGAZINE BEST 100 NOVELS
 ◆ MODERN LIBRARY 100 BEST NOVELS, #76
 When she was five, Spark began attending a school for girls, where she became one of a select group of students chosen for an unorthodox curriculum by Christina Kay, the teacher who inspired this novel's



protagonist. Published first in entirety in the *New Yorker*, where Spark had an office during her New York years, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*—which became a Broadway play and an Oscar-winning film—is Spark's most famous novel. Told partly in flash-forwards, the novel explores complex, morally ambiguous lives.

THE STORY: "Give me a girl at an impressionable age and she will be mine for life," says the elegant Miss Brodie, the 1930s Edinburgh schoolmistress who is devoting her "prime" to six hand-picked, 10-year-old students. Her devotion is quite unorthodox; whether her pupils know their history is irrelevant as long as they can appreciate art, Mussolini, and her personal love life and travels. Though Miss Brodie enriches the girls' lives, she exerts extraordinary control over them—from soliciting one in the bed of one of her lovers to engaging another as her personal spy. Though she opens up her girls' lives with her unconventional ways, at the end of their school years, one of her students will betray her, and Miss Brodie learns that "it's only possible to betray where loyalty is due."

"Using a marvellously flexible device of flashing-forward, Spark breaks into the novel as an author to tell us, in brief paragraph-long omniscient interruptions, what will become of the girls. ... It is one of the lingering sadnesses of Spark's novel, surely one of the greatest books about growing up, that most of these girls seem to have had their primes at school." JAMES WOOD, GUARDIAN (UK), 4/22/06

The Girls of Slender Means (1963)

In this slim, witty novel, based, in part, on her own experiences as a young, struggling writer in London, Spark explores a group of girls navigating their way through postwar London. Critics felt that the novel was more ambiguous than previous ones with its abrupt shifts in time and its religious view of fate.

THE STORY: In the summer of 1945, a group of genteel but hard up young women live in London's decaying May of Teck Club, a home for "Ladies of Slender Means." "Few people alive at the time," Spark writes, "were more delightful, more ingenious, more movingly lovely, and, as it might happen, more savage, than the girls of slender means." They trade chocolate for face cream, take turns wearing a taffeta Schiaparelli dress to social events, and discover love and illicit sex. Their "slenderness" refers not only to their waistlines and financial situations but also to their vague notions of whom each will become in a war-torn world—especially after a terrible event transforms the wry comedy of their lives into tragedy.

"This was an innovative book in 1963—not that I knew that then—and it still, today, flashes its own disgusting



Schiaparelli dress, with the beauty of youth pressed close against youth's bewilderment. Innocence is abruptly overturned in these pages, but Spark has structured her novel so that we realise we are about to be blown into tragedy. ... Reading the novel as a young woman was a random gift; rereading it today is to encounter the rarest of fiction and to appreciate the early and enduring genius of Muriel Spark."

CAROL SHIELDS, GUARDIAN (UK), 7/25/03

The Driver's Seat (1970)

♦ LOST MAN BOOKER PRIZE SHORT LIST

While living in Rome and then in Tuscany with her artist-friend Penelope Jardine, who became her secretary and lifelong companion (it was an "old-fashioned friendship," Spark claimed, denying rumors of a romantic relationship), Spark wrote seven novels—dark, satirical, and full of crime and corruption—that altered the direction of her writing. This novella, a psychological thriller and a self-proclaimed "whydunnit," tells of alienation and isolation in modern life, where a God-ordered world has given way to the 1960s break with tradition and an antiheroine seeks a most unfairytales-like courtship.

THE STORY: Early in the story, Spark writes: "She will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man's necktie, in the grounds of an empty villa, in a park of the foreign city to which she is travelling on the flight now boarding at Gate 14." So begins (or ends) the story of Lise's search for "the right one"—the man who will murder her. A bored, 30-something spinster with a history of mental illness, Lise leaves her northern European home to vacation in southern Europe, where she transforms herself into a garishly dressed temptress. As she becomes entangled with various men, Lise plots her journey to self-destruction.

"The interest in *The Driver's Seat* lies elsewhere than in wondering what will happen next. The interest lies largely in the method, which is a kind of concise compendium of the techniques developed by the great modernist writers in the first half of this century." GEORGE STADE, NEW YORK TIMES, 9/27/70

Loitering with Intent (1981)

♦ BOOKER PRIZE SHORTLIST

Loitering with Intent contains many autobiographical references to Spark's early career on the literary fringes of post-World War II London. About how we live and narrate our lives, the novel is considered one of Spark's greatest achievements, though some critics felt it was aimed at too commercial an audience.

THE STORY: As Fleur Talbot strives to finish her first novel in 1949 London, she takes a job as secretary to the forlorn



Autobiographical Association, whose egotistical and very important (yet oh-so-ordinary) members are writing their memoirs ahead of their own deaths. She hopes that the strange association will provide colorful fodder for her own novel, and she's not disappointed. But her boss, Sir Quentin Oliver, a pompous, pretentious man who may be blackmailing the association's members, suspects the truth about Fleur's novel. Strangely, the work seems to prefigure the activities of the association—and art starts to imitate life. Or perhaps it's the other way around. Then bad things start to happen.

"It is lyrical, joyous, formally close to perfect. ... Instead of speculating, in the traditional fashion, about life becoming art and the writer having to have a splinter of ice in her heart, the novel briskly reverses the standard hypothesis, making art the cause of life." JENNY TURNER, GUARDIAN (UK), 4/21/07

A Far Cry from Kensington

(1988)

Spark's 18th novel—whimsical, witty, realistic, largely autobiographical, and unusually humane—explores the banality of evil. But it works on many levels: as instruction in the art of deduction, as the protagonist pieces together the threats she faces; as a convoluted joke; and as a reflection on the importance of truth.

THE STORY: Nancy Hawkins, a young, full-figured war widow, has embarked upon a promising career in publishing in postwar London. But when she insults the vain, ambitious sycophant Hector Barnett, a pushy would-be writer, he vows revenge. Despite the mysterious threats of enemies, known and unknown, Mrs. Hawkins refuses to recant her insult and remains strong—which changes the course of her life as she fends off mysterious phone calls, dodgy lodgers, and suicide. (There is also, of course, her diet plan, given freely to interested readers). In this fictional memoir, written 30 years later, Nancy—thin, successful, and living in Italy—recalls her early career.

"At the risk of being drummed out of the Book Reviewers Union, I feel the best way to convey the pleasure this novel gives is to compare it to a wonderful old Alec Guinness movie, something along the lines of *The Lavender Hill Mob*. True, it follows the rules of art right down the line and illuminates the human condition, etc. But it also meets a trickier challenge, that of being superb entertainment." ROBERT PLUNKET, NEW YORK TIMES,

7/31/88 ■

