

GOODBYE VERY MUCH

The many lives of Muriel Spark

By Benjamin Taylor

Discussed in this essay:

Muriel Spark: The Biography, by Martin Stannard. W. W. Norton. 608 pages. \$35.

“To make a character ring true it needs must be in some way contradictory, somewhere a paradox,” says Muriel Spark’s writer-heroine Fleur Talbot in *Loitering with Intent*. Contemplator of God, party-going sybarite; unpretentious working girl, resplendent queen bee; generous friend, vengeful harpy; hard-nosed businesswoman, self-blinding paranoiac; lofty visionary, litigious terror—Dame Muriel Sarah Camberg Spark was all of these. Whether in Heaven, Hell, or (what seems likeliest after reading this sympathetic portrait) Purgatory, she has reason to be grateful to Martin Stannard for a continuously dramatic biography encompassing all sides of her contradictory nature. It is more likely, however, that Spark’s immortal soul is in high dudgeon and talking to lawyers.

When the second volume of Stannard’s life of Evelyn Waugh appeared in 1992, Spark enthusiastically reviewed it for the *Daily Mail* and said she hoped one day to have as good a biographer. In due course, she and Stannard agreed that he would undertake the project. She granted him access to all her papers, sat for interviews, answered queries. But after reading his completed

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manuscript, Spark denied him right to quote from any of her writings, effectively precluding publication. Stannard’s life of Spark remained under embargo for a decade. So what he says in his acknowledgments about the “consent” and “encouragement” Dame Muriel gave must be taken for the politesse it is. Their deadlock was broken only after she died four years ago, at the age of eighty-eight. We can thank sculptor and painter Penelope Jardine, Spark’s companion and executrix, for reconsidering his finished product and allowing it to appear in reasonably unbowdlerized form.

Stannard tells how a lower-middle-class Edinburgh girl became an international *femme de luxe* and, in the

process, how a half-Jewish agnostic made her way to Roman Catholicism. Most rewarding, however, he narrates the growth of a great poet-novelist from “misfitted” childhood and catastrophic early marriage to productive old age in the hills near Arezzo, where she spent more than thirty years with Jardine, by far her most successful attachment (“We look around and we don’t see such happy marriages, you know? . . . We’re not lesbians, but we’re very fond of each other”). In Jardine’s house, a converted medieval rectory, Spark wrote the numerous books of her old age, among them *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988), *Symposium* (1990), *Aiding and Abetting* (2000), and *The Finishing School* (2004).

Where men were concerned, she cheerfully confessed to having been “a had picker.” The price of nineteen-year-old Muriel Camberg’s ticket out of hidebound Edinburgh—a place where even the Jews seemed Calvinistic, gloomy with predestination—was marriage to a schoolteacher named Sydney Oswald Spark. Ignoring the distress signal implicit in his initials, she allowed Solly, as he was called, to take her off to Southern Rhodesia, where he married, beat, and impregnated her. Although these were the war years, with almost no way of returning to Britain, in 1944 Spark managed to book passage—for one—on a rare civilian transport, leaving their son, Robin, in Solly’s erratic care. The decision was characteristic of a ruthless pattern in her life. She would not be ensnared by other people’s needs or claims or purposes or schemes: “My husband would not desert me, so I deserted him.” Spark was by temperament a bachelor. Notwithstanding several more attempts at romantic love, hers was plainly a life based on cornerstones other than sex. The older Muriel got, the more Minerva-like she seemed. “God and Scotland,” Stannard writes, “might somehow have omitted sentimentality and the agonies of sexual desire when they created Muriel Camberg but she had received something much more valuable in return: immense willpower, distance, wit and vision, without which she could not have become the great comic artist of the macabre that

she did. . . . She enjoyed appearing attractive to men: it was their problem if they fell for it.”

In the early spring of 1944, Spark came to blitzed and blacked-out London, where she knew no one. A series of secretarial jobs and Grub Street assignments followed, along with perhaps the first real happiness of her life; at twenty-six, she was canny, scrappy, fiercely autodidactic, and preternaturally energetic. Establishing residence at the Helena Club (later immortalized as the May of Teck Club in *The Girls of Slender Means*), a respectable Kensington boarding house for unattached young ladies, Spark breathed at last the metropolitan air. “She had discovered a point of reference,” Stannard writes, “her stamping ground. Much of her fiction returns to these streets and to the women who, like her, inhabited the borderland between the smart set and bohemia.” As to her little boy, he and his father had made their way from Rhodesia to Edinburgh—and in Edinburgh the child remained. Not one to get waylaid by the stroller in the hallway, Spark had arranged for Robin to live with her parents. “Her ‘pram,’” says Stannard, “her domestic responsibilities, were to remain in someone else’s hall.” Not at all mysteriously, this maternal distance became for Robin, particularly as he grew older, a festering grievance. Relations between son and mother, never easy over the decades, degenerated near the end of Spark’s life into a ridiculous public dispute about whether she was five-eighths or three-quarters Jewish. Having become Orthodox, Robin thought this important, and he alleged that his mother was denying the additional 12.5 percent in their family tree. (Spark’s 1965 novel *The Mandelbaum Gate* deals exhaustively with her double heritage. It really makes no sense to claim she was hiding anything.)

Her first book was *Child of Light* (1951), a biography of Mary Godwin Shelley that received scant attention. Prior to it, she’d collaborated on various literary undertakings with a lover, Derek Stanford, then progressively distanced herself from him. Again, the

pattern of stepping free, this time from a milieu of fly-by-night publishing outfits and second-rate literary aspirants she’d quickly outgrown. Young Spark considered herself a poet first, critic second, and biographer third. But hungry and unheralded in her chosen callings, mired at the bedsit margins of literary London, she responded in the autumn of 1951 to an announcement in the *Observer* of a Christmas-story contest. The prize, £250, a formidable sum in postwar England, galvanized her. Out of seven thousand entries, her story won. “The Seraph and the Zambesi,” a fantastical tale drawing promiscuously on her African recollections, her passion for Baudelaire, and her recent research into angelology, was the first fiction she’d ever written. With a biography of poet John Masefield, completed the following year, belletristic gestures came to an end. The half poet, half critic was poised to become Muriel Spark the major novelist. Her 1957 debut, *The Comforters*, won plaudits from Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, both of whom sensed a fellow spirit at work.

In the spring of 1954, Spark had been received into the Roman Catholic Church. Cardinal Newman’s meditations on original sin seemed to her a truer account of ourselves than anything post-Enlightenment humanism had to offer. In the ghastly shadow of the preceding decades—75 million murdered in two world wars—the Church’s sophistication about depravity (“those centuries of expertise in human failing”) drew her into the fold, along with a more generally religious conviction that “everything is absurd without eternal life.”

The Comforters is the story of Caroline Rose, a literary critic about to turn novelist who is suddenly afflicted by aural hallucinations: first the rat-a-tat-tat of a typewriter, then voices repeating verbatim the things she has just thought. The novel she’s on the point of writing seems already to be under way in some invisible realm, and she herself is the embattled heroine. Spark, too, had suffered hallucinations; in 1954, as the result of popping too much Dexedrine, she suddenly believed every-

thing she read and heard to be ridiculing and threatening her. T. S. Eliot's play *The Confidential Clerk*, running that year in the West End, contained coded threats on her life, threats elaborated in the playbill. Crossword puzzles were villainous; innocent combinations of letters would suddenly jump about and spell "dirty Yid" or worse. Until the amphetamines left her bloodstream, Muriel Spark was mad.

Religious conversion and temporary madness seem together to have catalyzed new ironies, new energies, new vision. The books came tumbling out. Her publishers could scarcely keep up. With her sixth novel, in 1961, she rewarded their trust. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* was an international sensation, producing that rarity in twentieth-century fiction: a character everybody knows, whether they've read the book or not. Like *Oliver Twist* and *Emma Bovary*, like Holden Caulfield and Alexander Portnoy, Jean Brodie exists outside the book that gave birth to her. Spark's novel (afterward a hit stage play and movie) made her rather rich and very famous. She called the book her "milch cow," Hardy's term of endearment for *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, his own great moneymaker.

As an author, Spark wished to be on the closest terms with nihilism—know the look and feel and glamour of it—while always maintaining a theological safeguard against meaninglessness. This intimacy with the abyss became clearest in her harsh middle phase, when she wrote *The Public Image* (1968), *The Driver's Seat* (1970), *Not to Disturb* (1971), *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), *The Takeover* (1976), and *Territorial Rights* (1979)—disquieting, *nouveau roman*-influenced books in which her signature mingling of the gruesome and the elegant reached new extremes. (But her best work of that period was the least typical: a satirical depiction of the Nixon Administration as Benedictine sisters, *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974), one of the funniest books to have come out of the opera buffa of Watergate.)

Actual churchgoing was another

matter: "It's full of germs, people sneezing. I don't want to catch cold, you know." When very occasionally she did attend Mass, it was to pray for other people's sins. But Spark's idiosyncratic Catholicism—her faith, not the Church's dogma—was as real, I think, as Mauriac's, Waugh's, J. F. Powers's, Flannery O'Connor's, Walker Percy's, or Greene's (when he did believe), and as productive of a sacramental kind of storytelling in which eternity is immanent in time. "We should know ourselves better by now than to be under the illusion that we are essentially aspiring, affectionate, and loving creatures," she said. Because of original sin, because we lost our true nature, anything can become our nature. "My aim is to present the supernatural as part of a natural history": human nature deformed and blighted. "I think Hell is empty and all the devils are here." And upon this earthly cavalcade, in all of Spark's books, dwells the unblinking eye of God.

Stannard says, in an admirable phrase, that the Church "released her from babel"—gave her a transcendent frame of reference. Yet he continually characterizes Spark's work as postmodernist, which seems a misjudgment. Looking back on her career, she said, "The essentials of literature were, to me, outside of literature; they were elsewhere, out in the world." For all their breaching of traditional plausibility, Spark's works go on referring us to real life; they make no claim for the inherent value of self-reflexive gamesmanship. Yes, she devises mock worlds, known as such. But both realists and postmodernists devise mock worlds—postmodernists to show what words can do; realists to show what life can do. The impression I take from her books is of real persons undergoing real torments—and hedged about, whether they know it or not, by real divinity. Gifted fantasist though Spark was, her fundamentally mimetic art seeks nothing less than "the sign of a covenant," to borrow words long sanctified for her, "the seal of a purchase, the figure of a body, the witness of our faith, the earnest of our hope, the presence of things distant, the sight of things ab-

sent, the taste of things inconceivable, and the knowledge of things that are past knowledge." This from the seventeenth-century Anglican divine Edward Reynolds, whom she liked to quote.

"Lots of people can't take it when I leave things out," she told the critic Stephen Schiff when he interviewed her in 1993. "But lots of people can, of course. I think I've chosen that way because of something in my nature. I don't like to spell things out. I'm very much on the idea of leaving a lot unsaid, so that a great deal can be gathered." Indeed, she was at her best in stories like "The Portobello Road" and "The Go-Away Bird" and in the incomparable brief novels for which she will always be remembered: *The Comforters*, *Memento Mori* (1959), *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), *Loitering with Intent* (1981). These works abound in coolly rendered moral discriminations, though always against the presence of the unknowable: what God is thinking, how God has judged. "You have to live with the mystery," she told Schiff. "That's the answer in my books." John Updike said that Spark built her characters with "an aloof, factual rigor that anticipates the Last Judgment." Handsomely put, but this makes her sound more self-satisfied, more certain of God's mind, than she was. Spark leaves things out—motivations, transitions, connections—because the whole truth is God's, not ours.

In the aftermath of World War II, far fewer books were published in Great Britain. Like other things, paper continued to be rationed. But when the publishing industry did revive it produced, in the 1950s, a flowering of fiction unmatched in any subsequent decade: Henry Green's *Nothing*, Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* trilogy, William Golding's *The Inheritors* and *Pincher Martin*, Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*, Angus Wilson's *Hemlock and After* and *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* and *The Quiet American*, Rose

Macaulay's *The Towers of Trebizond*, Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net* and *The Bell*. What a decade that was! And equal to any of these books is what seems to me Spark's greatest achievement, *Memento Mori*. Her best critic, Frank Kermode, has said that Spark's theme is "the complex relationship between human plotting . . . which is dependent on lies and evasions, and the larger plot, true though virtually incredible, which is imposed on the world by its creator." In *Memento Mori*, a comedy of manners astride of a grave, somebody is telephoning elderly people all over Great Britain to say something unpleasant:

"Just those words?"

"Just the same words—Remember you must die—nothing more."

"He must be a maniac," said Godfrey.

All naturalistic hypotheses fail. Readers of this ostensible mystery story, like the characters in it, are ushered into the presence of Mystery itself. Death is calling. The novel's last lines are among the most memorable in modern British fiction:

What were they sick, what did they die of?

Lettie Colston, he recited to himself, comminuted fractures of the skull; Godfrey Colston, hypostatic pneumonia; Charmian Colston, uraemia; Jean Taylor, carcinoma of the cervix; Ronald Sidebottom, carcinoma of the bronchus; Guy Leet, arteriosclerosis. Henry Mortimer, coronary thrombosis . . .

Each character dying of his particular disease. As each of us will:

Miss Valvona went to her rest. Many of the grannies followed her. Jean Taylor lingered for a time, employing her pain to magnify the Lord, and meditating sometimes confidently upon Death, the first of the Four Last Things to be ever remembered.

Although her next biographer may have more data and a freer hand, I doubt he or she will command greater wit or eloquence or wisdom than does Martin Stannard. He renders the sweep of the decades in a sentence: "She be-

came an odd sort of dandy, disguised by turns as bohemian, gentlewoman, media star, recluse." He strikes off a whole series of minor characters: Blanche Knopf, for instance, "nourishing herself daily on one martini, three shrimps and a stick of asparagus, weighed scarcely seven stone. Yet this small fastidious person, seemingly held together by jewelry, was pure granite." Blanche's marriage to Alfred Knopf is "a ruin of such magnificent proportions that preserving it became a work of art." Stannard can be affectionate toward his subject, as when he reports an episode at Fortnum & Mason's, where Spark had been publicizing *Memento Mori*: mistaken by shoppers for a sales assistant, she happily slipped behind the counter to wrap their Easter cards. And he can be acute, as when he describes a racehorse Spark purchased from the Queen of England as "the public seal on her Cinderella story, like Elizabeth Taylor's diamond."

Stannard thought of calling his book *The Nine Lives of Muriel Spark*, on account of its nine locales—Edinburgh, Southern Rhodesia, Milton Bryan, Kensington, Aylesford, Camberwell, New York, Rome, Tuscany—but gave that up as reductive since in each of these settings she was several Muriels: "a scholar, a mother, a daughter, a businesswoman, streetwise and strict, the gentle and affectionate supporter of those who did not threaten... the mistress of constant surprise."

With an individual by the name of Bluebell she may be said to have enjoyed perfect concord throughout the 1950s. "My perfect cat was a Persian of small dimensions; she had no rival for wit and understanding... I have never seen her equal for catness, charm and radiance." With members of her own species, love was of course more demanding, less durable. At each stage along the way, she established a substantially new set of friends and suitors. Those closest to Spark during, say, her New York period—among them Australian-born novelist Shirley Hazzard and her husband, the biographer Francis Steegmuller—were exasperated by the airs and graces Spark

gave herself after moving to Rome. That she became a highfalutin pain in the ass is beyond question. Entering a social realm known in those days as the Beautiful People—do-nothings with noble pedigrees, sexual adventurers, art criminals, grandees and hangers-on of the Italian movie industry, the whole Via Veneto pageant—Spark found material for her novels, yes, but also a sense of fashionable belonging she clearly craved at the time. Among her intimates were Count Lanfranco Rasponi, aristocrat for hire, awaiting settlement of his father's vast estate; "Baron" Brian de Breffny, no more a baron than you or I; Dario Ambrosiani, omnisexual lounge lizard; and, like a stalk of wheat among the tares, one bona fide queen, the deposed Frederica of Greece. Hazzard vividly recollects the following phone call: "Shirlers? Muriel. Canceling our dinner plan, I'm afraid. A great bore, but I must accompany Queen Fred to Isola del Giglio at the weekend. Her Majesty will otherwise be without one single lady-in-waiting." Hazzard's uncharacteristic silence at the other end must have registered, for suddenly it was the old Muriel, very Scottish, chirping down the line, "And Shirlers, you and I know what *that's* like!"

If her Roman adventure was not in the best of taste, the snobbery of it seems venial in retrospect. She said goodbye as firmly to the Beautiful People as she had to nearly everyone else. ("Goodbye very much" was a favorite phrase.) What mattered most was flying by the nets, undermining expectations, staying unaccountable. She was, at heart, more imp or anarch than snob. However clear about who she was and where she'd come from, Spark could in gleeful moods fancy herself not Scotland's but wild nature's own. In 1956 Alan Maclean, her editor at Macmillan, asked his unknown and supremely confident author for a biographical note to accompany *The Comforters*. He got this: "Born in ice cave of southern Tyrol year 609 B.C. of centaur stock, mother descended Venus. Muriel Spark rose from the waves as is well known. Demands fabulous fees." ■