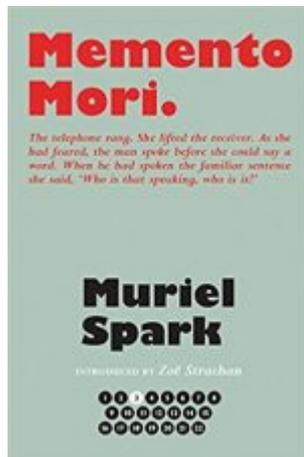


'Memento Mori' by Muriel Spark

By Zoë Strachan



One of the many delights of a Muriel Spark novel is the way in which the ground shifts so delicately under the reader's feet. *Memento Mori* begins as a mystery: who is victimising elderly people by making anonymous phone calls suggesting that they remember they must die? A detective is consulted, and duly tries to identify the culprit; or culprits, as there is little consensus on precisely what kind of voice is at the end of the line. In a sense the novel fulfils the criteria of a whodunit, but the answer to the mystery of the phone calls turns out to be the most obvious, if least expected one. As another of Spark's characters, the Abbess of Crewe, states, scenarios, 'need not be plausible, only hypnotic, like all good art'. Reading the novel, we might think of the memento mori gravestones of the seventeenth century, and their elegantly carved reminders that death does not care how rich, celebrated or healthy we are. He - or she - will come for us all one day, and so we ought to recognise that the wormy clay awaits. In an interview to mark the publication of the book in 1959, Spark said: 'The prospect of death is what gives life the whole of its piquancy. Life would be so much more pointless if there were no feeling that it must end.'

Her first lesson in mortality came early. When Spark was around nine years old, her grandmother Adelaide came to live in Edinburgh and was installed in Spark's own bedroom. Adelaide's past was somewhat mysterious, but she was feisty and fun. A former suffragette and an excellent storyteller, she styled herself as a 'Gentile Jewess', an identity Spark would later claim, as well as using it in the title of one of her most famous short stories. After a couple of years, two strokes, and a cerebral haemorrhage, Adelaide required care. The young Muriel helped provide it, realising in the process how vulnerable old people can be, as well as how fascinating she found both Adelaide's aphasic peregrinations of memory and language and the implication that the Grim Reaper might be just around the corner. In her memoir, *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark notes that 'my experiences in minding and watching my grandmother formed a starting-point for my future novel, *Memento Mori*, in which the characters are all elderly people'. John

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Few members of the coterie of characters centring on Jean and eighty-five-year-old Charmian are so clear-sighted. The ability to acknowledge one's own mortality without dismay is reserved for those who are Catholic; both women are, like Spark herself, converts. When, at the beginning of the novel, Charmian's eighty-seven-year-old husband Godfrey hears that his sister Lettie has once more been victimised by the anonymous caller exhorting her to '*Remember you must die*', he surmises: 'He must be a maniac.' Dame Lettie herself considers it 'a great pity that flogging has been abolished'. Godfrey is much concerned with 'faculties' and their retention, and scornful of his wife's erratically failing memory. Always 'perfectly sensible' when discussing her books, Charmian retains her novelist's insight. She realises that her dementia has been the excuse Godfrey needed to take his revenge: 'It was an instinctive reaction to the years of being a talented, celebrated woman's husband, knowing himself to be reaping continually in her a harvest which he had not sown.' As interest in her novels revives, Charmian's brain sharpens and her physical health improves. 'Godfrey, after all, was not a clever man,' she muses, while plotting her escape from her husband and his bullying new housekeeper, Mrs Pettigrew, who wish to exert upon her 'a firm hand'. Trust and betrayal are key themes here, as they remain in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, published just two years later.

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Whereas we're told that many of Charmian's novels consisted of people saying 'touché' to each other, Spark is known for the sharpness of her style. The narrator of *Memento Mori* is rovingly omniscient, and wonderfully tough, a voice capable of observing Godfrey Colston standing there 'arms dangling and legs apart, like a stage rustic' as well as noting the way a visitor to Jean Taylor looks carefully at her eyes to determine 'a continuing intelligence amongst the ruins'. Old age is full of indignities, and Spark's characters are spared none of them. Jean Taylor, a woman 'practised in restraint', embraces the 'desolate humiliation' of the microcosm that is the Maud Long Ward as God's will. She 'did not hesitate, on one occasion when the nurse was dilatory, to wet the bed as the other grannies did so frequently'. The true horror to be feared is loss of control, and the loss of one's identity that accompanies it. For the poet Guy Leet, this lies in the prospect of the physical incapacity to write. Looking 'reproachfully' at his hands, he decides they might be 'good for perhaps another year' in spite of the twisted fingers. 'How primitive, Guy thought, life becomes in old age, when one may be surrounded by familiar comforts and yet more vulnerable to the action of nature than any young explorer at the Pole.' The triumph of the writing is that Spark creates just enough space (and no more) for the dawning of empathy. The physical jeopardy of old age creates palpable tension, the young's lack of comprehension or active contempt for the old is lacerating, and when actual violence comes, it shocks us to our core.

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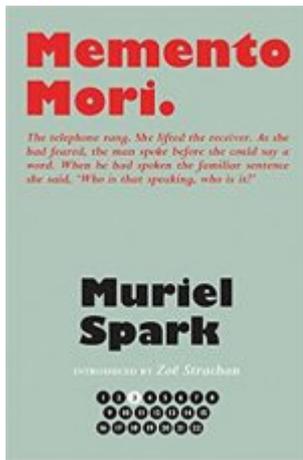
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