

That Promethian Spark

By The Unreliable Narrator

In some ways the most real and rooted people whom Sandy knew were Miss Gaunt and the Kerr sisters who made no evasions about their belief that God had planned for practically everybody before they were born a nasty surprise when they died. Later, when Sandy read John Calvin, she found that although popular conceptions of Calvinism were sometimes mistaken, in this particular there was no mistake, indeed it was but a mild understanding of the case, he having made it God's pleasure to implant in certain people an erroneous sense of joy and salvation, so that their surprise at the end might be the nastier.

—The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie

With a writing career that included biography, criticism, drama and short fiction as well as novels, Muriel Spark was never one to do things by halves. Those unfamiliar with her work might think otherwise, considering the now-unfashionable slimness of her numerous books. The contemporary publishing industry favours the blockbuster, the trilogy, and the continuing series - or at the very least books with a spine-width broad enough to catch a punter's jaded eye across a crowded marketplace. (Contemporary readers, though, may be rather more in tune: many people appreciate the merits of a fast and flashing story, executed stylishly, and well.) Spark's novels in particular are brief, quick, and very final, with no loose ends left dangling; when she writes characters, they stay written.

For anyone writing about Spark, certain words come thronging: 'brisk'; 'swift'; 'sharp'; and other such monosyllabic adjectives, all short and to the point. Then comes 'razor' and 'needle', and - if you're not careful - the precise, Italianate 'stiletto', and siclike sleek and steely terms. And her name, her name ... so easy to rattle 'Spark' onto the page, and so seldom do we feel the need to add a 'Muriel' to soften it. Such a good name, Spark: a hot bright firework name, a little cracker: a bit much for a character, maybe, but perfect for the author. Despite the unhappy circumstances of her marriage you can see why she stuck with it; one can't quite picture the same novels popping out under a Camberg banner.

What strikes the Spark reader is the level of authorial control on display – often reaching far beyond the boundaries of the story to stamp a seal upon the fates of her creations. It's hard to believe that these creatures are capable of doing anything which their author did not anticipate or intend. Are Spark's novels, then, predestinarian? Does Calvin's creed lurk therein, despite their author's committed Catholicism?

Well – no. There is a difference between destiny and predestination. Calvin's God is, to all intents and purposes, blindly arbitrary, who 'Sends ane to Heaven and ten to Hell' for no humanly discernible reason: but while Spark's little puppets might indeed be heading somewhere nasty, they are invariably led there by their own actions, foibles, and failings – saving always the fickle winds of fortune. Muriel Spark is often cruel, but she is not uncaring: and, after all, this is only theatre. Like Stevenson, she is a teller of tales, and she makes her figures dance for our entertainment – and we, her readers, must become her secret companions and accomplices.

Here in cahoots with us in this, our celebration of the art of Spark, Zoë Strachan listens for the intimations of mortality in '***Memento Mori***'; Marilyn Reizbaum gets wired in to '**A Fruitless Fable: Spark's Ghost in the Machine**'; and Alistair Braidwood buckles up with '**From Page to Screen: the Strange Case of The Driver's Seat**'. Then Gerard Carruthers goes after shifting shadows in '**Ghost-Writing: the Work of Muriel Spark**'; Michael Gardiner puts his nose to the grindstone with '**Spark's Balladisation of Work**'; Eleanor Byrne braves the African heat in '**The Go-Away Bird: Muriel Spark in Southern Rhodesia**'; and Willy Maley watches the sparks fly upward with '**The Right Woman for the Job?: Muriel Spark's *The Only Problem***'.

In our regular columns, Maggie Scott unpicks **Fankle**, our Scots Word of the Season; Alison Grant lays siege to the Gaelic place-names **dùn** and **caisteal**; and some fifteen **new book reviews** await your attention. And there is more, too – Upon Another Point we have **interviews with A. L. Kennedy** and **Anne Donovan**; **In Praise o the Common Man: a mindin o Joe Corrie**; an introduction to **new online resources for the study of early Scots**; and a look at the **Kilmarnock Burns and book history**. And to aid digestion, Lari Don takes us **Walking the landscape**, questioning the old tales, creating new stories, with her Spellchasers trilogy for younger readers.

Topping it off, we have our guide to the **Best Scottish Books of 2017** ... all this is here for you, in our new-look (but still old-school) *Bottle Imp*. The price can't get any lower, so you may as well enjoy it while it lasts ...

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