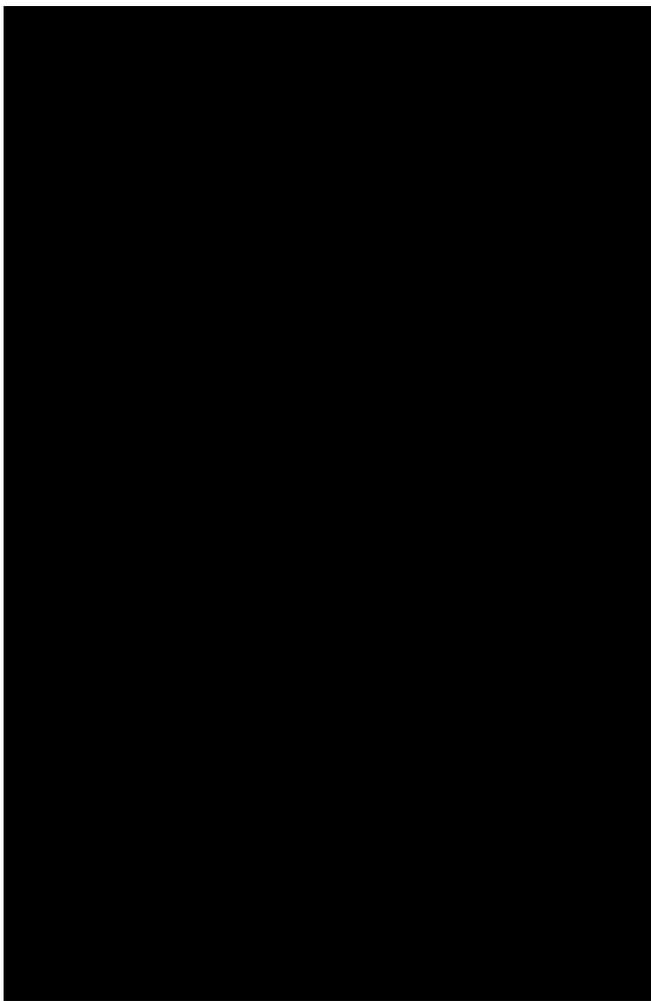


# 'Spark: Poetry and Art Inspired by the Novels of Muriel Spark' edited by Rob A. Mackenzie & Louise Peterkin

Review by Colin McIlroy



The 2018 centenary year of Muriel Spark's birth brought her considerable attention. In addition to a number of other new works inspired by Spark's writing is this welcome collection from Blue Diode Press. The arrangement of the book into a chronological two-poets-per-novel scheme is particularly effective, enabling the reader to easily compare the varying approaches to the inspiration of Spark's twenty-two novels. The range and depth of the collection means there are too many excellent poems to go into here rather, those cited are representative of particular approaches, and are discussed as illustrative of such.

The first two poets take contrasting approaches to the source material. W. N. Herbert's *The Muriels* mines *The Comforters* to construct a comic but regretful narrative where all the female characters are named Muriel. Herbert relies on Spark's novel as a point of departure to deftly outline the aftermath of a love affair (or *The Aberration in Aberfeldy*), as not a passion but the furor of its passing, a delightfully Sparkian phrase. In creating a story that expands beyond

that of the book, Herbert nevertheless succeeds in capturing the novel's anarchic narrative spirit.

In contrast to Herbert, Polly Atkin's wonderful *Paper Pellets on a Saucer* remains mostly within the novel's narrative scope, only departing it to illustrate the questions of authorship and structure at the very core (and paradoxically at the very limits) of the novel, in the familiar-sounding lines:

*The Typing Ghost has not recorded any lively details about this poem.*

*The reason is The Typing Ghost doesn't know how to describe this poem.*

*I have an independent life.*

Atkins takes the source text and successfully recomposes the way in which the novel questions its own construction, in a poem that also self-referentially questions the location of its own narrative position; it is skilfully managed.

Such narratorial positioning is intriguing to follow throughout the collection. For many this takes the form of inhabiting a Spark character or position within the novel of choice, and then writing outwardly from there. Others instead opt to position their narrators in the common space shared by the reader – on the outside, looking in to these novels – and write from there.

The cover of the book talks of an extraordinary cacophony of voices, and this verbal dissonance is captured by a number of the poets giving voice to secondary characters. In *Loitering With Intent*, Fleur Talbot states 'I don't go in for motives', and in many cases neither does Spark, often presenting only the external speech of her characters. This leaves fertile ground for these poets to create inner lives for characters who reveal little or no such interiority in the original works.

Lisa Kelly's *Pisseur de Copie* is a case in point, joyously revealing the internal machinations of Hector Bartlett in a wonderfully designed inversion of narrative power. The pisseur is afforded the main portion of the poem's text, in which he reveals himself over and over as deaf to the words of Mrs Hawkins. Her replies take the form of footnotes, a brilliantly conceived and delivered structural ploy, denying Bartlett that which he most wants: the opportunity of engaging Mrs Hawkins in direct dialogue. By thus removing her from the main body of the

poem, Kelly paradoxically (re)establishes Mrs Hawkins position of dominance over Bartlett by making her absence a presence, and through her repeated assertion of the title in answer to Bartlett's questions.

Via Bartlett's ironic self-revelation the poem exposes his oblivious motivations; despite his seeming not to have heard the *pisseur* insult, he is deluded to the point of referring to it as the term of endearment you insisted upon. When he asks: Do you think calling someone a bad name / can be a curse Nancy? Curse their career? , it presents him as without self-reflection, and capable of greater folly and arrogance than even the novel suggests. It also challenges the idea that he did not hear the insult in the first place. Mrs Hawkins refrain-like repetition in the footnotes displays her frustration, but is by contrast restrained and to the point, precisely what Hector in his prose, and his speech, is not.

Amongst a number of contenders (particularly *Not To Disturb*), *The Public Image* is perhaps Spark's most trenchant satire of fame, media, celebrity, and the effects felt by those in the centre and on the periphery of its spotlight. As with many Spark novels, it is also a searing depiction of the brittleness of the male ego when confronted with female success, which is the underpinning for Rishi Dastidar's incisive *A Man of Theory on the Via Publica*. Brief couplets such as Annabel & Frederick / it never sounded right , and All drama is sharp. You got / stuck on the pointy end of hers , ridicule Frederick with excoriating comic effect.

Where Dastidar's narrator addresses Frederick, Andy Jackson's *Lady Tiger* speaks directly to Annabel, encapsulating the many dualities and seeming contradictions of Spark's work:

*You cultivate the tiger in your eyes,  
encourage the paradox of abandon  
and fidelity, often in a single glance,  
recognising that in art there are no lies,  
only misinterpretations.*

But Jackson then moves outside of the novel's action to cite a superinjunction on this poem, with Annabel's lawyers attempting to keep secret the untruths you would see preserved. The implication is that these untruths Annabel's public image may well be the source of her paradox of abandon and fidelity, and the poem's closing lines bring this contradictory, cyclical effect into sharp focus, with

Annabel now conspicuous in an age /where only the famous can truly disappear.

The side-by-side placing of these two poems – one focusing on Annabel, the other Frederick – creates a chiaroscuro effect, illuminating and satirising our contemporary culture's fascination and desire for fame by placing it alongside our shadowy appetite for gossip, and our complicity in the ensuing squalid spectacle. As Rishi Dastidar's narrator asks: Who needs a doctor or a best friend /when you can have a press officer? Addressed to Frederick, one cannot help but read these lines as directed also at our contemporary culture, and our role within it.

Dzifa Benson's *Comme il Faut* is full of wonderfully Sparkian phrases, with the students at College Sunrise categorised as inmates of one state or another /and a blank set of careless intentions. The poem remains close to the tone and events of the novel, acknowledging the fragile mental condition of the protagonists through a repeated prison metaphor. And while it hints at aspects of the book's comic elements, the overwhelming sense of the poem is one of pitch-perfect jaded isolation.

The closing poem of the collection, Matthew Caley's *The Fern*, breaks free of the boundaries of the novel, taking the book's opening line *You begin, by setting your scene* – as a refrain on which to construct a shadowy meditation on lost innocence. It captures the novel's ominous, voyeuristic sense of claustrophobia, of layers of looking, watching, spying and obsession, but untethers this from the comic tones of Nina's *comme il faut* lessons, leaving a malevolent presence in danger of discovery, but for the noise of a twig-crack /that might make him turn. It is a bold finishing poem – reminding us of the malign undertones beneath the comic surfaces of Spark's novels, re-emphasising *The Finishing School*'s concerns with jealousy and voyeurism, and magnifying them into the threat of something much worse.

Caley's poem goes beyond the novel into another narrative space, in contrast to Benson's *Comme il Faut* which remains within the parameters of Spark's original narrative. Yet both poems are intensely effective – illustrating that adherence to Spark's original is neither a guarantee nor a requirement for success. As a result, the poems can be read with no knowledge of the novels, and the collection is all the better for it. Indeed, the other works here offer a coherent yet expansive take on the novels of Spark, full of the humour and jarringly effective imagery at which Spark herself specialised, where the absurd and

surreal elements found in the Sparkian everyday are placed in close proximity with the numinous, and its often implied evocation of spiritual otherworldliness.

Blue Diode's collection is an overwhelming success. In some cases the poems stay closer to the spirit of Spark's firework intelligence the further behind they leave literal allusions to her novels. As a result, this is both a collection one can dip into, but also one which wonderfully complements the trajectory of Spark's career. One imagines this is just as Spark would have liked it.

[\*Spark: Poetry and Art Inspired by the Novels of Muriel Spark\*](#) edited by Rob A. Mackenzie and Louise Peterkin is published by Blue Diode Publishing, 2018.

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