

# The Early Fiction of Muriel Spark

By James Bailey

**Steven Harvie**

James Bailey's new monograph, *The Early Fiction of Muriel Spark*, is a welcome and refreshing contribution to the well-trodden ground of Spark criticism. Spark produced twenty-two novels from 1957 to 2004. Bailey chooses to foreground the period between the 50s to the early 70s, claiming that the condensed timeframe 'affords an opportunity to trace formative instances in Spark's development' into a deceptively subversive, anti-realist writer, as well as allowing more space 'to consider how her fiction came to intersect with newly emerging ideas concerning postmodernism, metafiction, metatheatre and the *nouveau roman*' (26).<sup>1</sup> As such, it breathes new life into a field of discourse that, according to Bailey,

tends to pigeonhole Spark and her writing within narrow critical confines. Indeed, a sense of irony emerges as Bailey's analysis of the way women in Spark's fiction are trapped or 'ensnared' by patriarchal structures of power mirrors the ways in which Spark's own authorial identity has been distorted or exaggerated by a critical consensus, casting Spark and her work in terms both reactionary and restrictive. That sense is particularly pronounced during Bailey's re-evaluation of Spark's much lauded and beguiling 1970 novella, *The Driver's Seat*. Bailey's study, then, offers an intervention and a corrective to the popular or mainstream interpretive frameworks that have dominated prior Spark criticism. Some of the ideas and

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<sup>1</sup> While it may seem questionable to characterise work over a decade into Spark's career as 'early', we must remember this covers only the first half of Spark's oeuvre. In any case, it is clear Bailey understands this period as the most experimental, with Spark testing out different formal and stylistic strategies – a writer finding her voice(s), as it were, in the early stages of a long and prolific career.

arguments here were first put forward in Bailey's 2014 paper, 'Salutary Scars: The "Disorienting" Fictions of Muriel Spark', and Bailey has since expanded the scope to produce this compelling, original and important monograph.

At the outset, Bailey reviews the history and trajectory of Spark criticism over five decades in order to then make a case for 'desegregating' Spark from the overriding arguments attached to them (4).<sup>2</sup> He explains that

Spark has been (and indeed continues to be) discussed in limited terms as a rather cruel Catholic comic novelist, whose literary experiments – however complex, outlandish or confrontational – are nevertheless reducible to a narrowly didactic God-game played out between an all-powerful author, 'indifferent to creation', and an ensemble of thinly drawn caricatures (5).

While Catholicism constitutes an important part of Spark's identity, and appears throughout her fiction as a thematic concern, Bailey is nonetheless right to acknowledge the way in which theological readings of Spark's work have for decades set the terms within which Spark and her work can be discussed. The problem is not the critical framework itself, for which much fruitful and significant work has been done (see Ruth Whittaker's *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark*), but the tendency of this single strain of Spark criticism to exert

undue influence on interpretation at the expense of other, alternative approaches to Spark's work. 'By returning continuously to the familiar analogy between the author and God as the ultimate hinterland of interpretation', argues Bailey, 'such criticism precludes considerations of how Spark's literary innovations might facilitate more nuanced instances of gendered social critique' or 'interrogate the functioning of power and personal identity in the increasingly postmodern consumer culture in which they were written' (66). For Bailey, then, moving away from (or beyond) the critical parameters of theology allows Spark's work to be appreciated from a variety of angles, one of which reclaims or foregrounds the extent to which Spark is a *woman* writer 'whose literary innovations have arguably energised the interrogations of female agency (or the lack thereof) that figure so prominently within her work' (28).

The main point of departure for Bailey is the focus for many critics on Spark's apparent use (and abuse) of narrative omniscience, in which Spark, through the use of metalepsis and prolepsis, demonstrates narratively the folly of human will against the pre-ordained divine script of God; this explains, for example, the 'thinly drawn caricatures' that populate Spark's fiction, and the cruelty with which their futures are foretold.<sup>3</sup> Instead, 'as a valuable alternative to the familiar model of Sparkian omniscience', Bailey draws attention to Sparkian motifs such as 'the ghostly (or perhaps haunted) narrator',

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2 'Desegregation' here is a reference to Spark's own controversially titled address (later turned into an essay) first given to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City, 1970.

3 The argument outlined here is not the only way critics have approached Spark's fiction through a religious lens, but it is certainly the most crude and influential.

‘the detached observer’, ‘the frustrated voyeur’, and ‘the postmodernist attention to surfaces over depths’ (20). In doing so, Bailey offers fresh and exciting readings of Spark’s early work, including her only play, *Doctors of Philosophy* (1963), alongside short stories and the novels.

Bailey’s analysis of Spark’s first novel, *The Comforters* (1957) – in which the protagonist, Caroline Rose, slowly realises she is a character in a novel – complicates the otherwise simple readings of its metafictional playfulness as a kind of ‘God-game’ between Caroline and her creator. Indeed, the synopsis just given belies the depth of a novel ‘rather too simply’ described as ‘a story of a heroine “trapped within a novel”’ (44). Bailey adds nuance to longstanding readings of *The Comforters* by drawing our attention to how the ontological levels within the text shift in different directions. The narrative represents not a static script around which Caroline navigates and eventually ascends, but rather the *process* of fictionalising. ‘In place of any clear distinction between reality/fiction, life/role or person/character’, Bailey argues, *The Comforters* depicts ‘ontological diminishment (or ‘flattening’) by degrees’ (ibid.). While ‘the respective behaviours of the Baron, Laurence and Eleanor indicate a gradual descent into fiction’, ‘Caroline’s critical awareness of both the conventions of storytelling and the voice of the Typing Ghost suggest a steady *ascent* towards ontological richness’ (ibid.). Bailey encourages us to see in the text a far more dynamic and profound engagement with fictionality, representation and

realism than has so far been considered.

*The Driver’s Seat* is subject to a similar kind of re-evaluation, alongside a deeper consideration of the relationship between Spark and the *nouveau roman*.<sup>4</sup> Bailey rightly complains that ‘critical commentary on the author’s relationship to the *nouveau roman* has tended – perhaps ironically – to stop short at the surface, resting upon the aesthetic similarities’ between Spark’s novels from the early to mid-1970s and the fictions of Allain Robbe-Grillet, the most prominent pioneer of the French new novel/anti-novel (106). Bailey’s study pays closer attention to Robbe-Grillet’s influence, questioning whether ‘[Spark’s] work might offer a deeper commentary, be it direct or implicit, on the theories and practices of the ‘new novelists’ (106). Indeed, Bailey shows how *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) and *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965) contain reservations about the representational implications of the *nouveau roman* aesthetic: ‘in both [novels], the *nouveau roman* is invoked, only to be rejected, as if in disgust, by both the narrator and the central character’ (131). There is a sinister resemblance, for example, between the hollow, listless and bureaucratic speech from Adolf Eichmann in the famous televised trial as depicted in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, and the stylistic tendencies of *nouveau roman* narrators. Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s seminal studies on the ‘banality of evil’, Bailey suggests that Spark implies a dangerous closeness between the aesthetics of the *nouveau roman* and the

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4 The *nouveau roman* is a type of fiction that emerged in the 1950s in France, characterised by a lack of emotion, character psychology or recognisable plot, with a narrative focus instead on ‘objective’ description.

‘fascism of representation’ which underpinned the Third Reich.

According to Bailey, *The Driver’s Seat* ‘constitutes an attempt to engage with, and ultimately confront, the anti-novel’s aura of objectification and dehumanisation from the inside out’ (131). By refocussing his interpretation of Spark’s most beguiling text in relation to the *nouveau roman*, he critiques typical readings of *The Driver’s Seat* in which ‘critics have clung faithfully to the received and revered image of the author as a Catholic novelist’, understanding the gruesome denouement of Lise’s rape as a kind of divine punishment for daring to take control of her narrative. For Bailey, the narrator of *The Driver’s Seat* assumes no such position of authority and in fact behaves ‘more like a stalker than a deity’ and as such ‘is necessarily situated within the diegesis, *loitering with intent within* the same storyworld inhabited by Lise, rather than surveying her actions from a lofty diegetic remove’ (145). Through an impressive and precise close reading, aided by manuscript materials of the text, Bailey makes a convincing case for understanding *The Driver’s Seat* as ‘not simply the story of a woman determined to assert control over her life by plotting its end’, but as a text engaged with ‘narrative mediation, epistemological impotence and [...] a specifically *masculine* anxiety to penetrate the mystery of the female Other’ (147-8).

There is much more to be said about Bailey’s strong contribution to Spark criticism, not least of which is his original use of archival material from the McFarlin Library. Bailey selects a variety of manuscript materials to support his arguments, including unpublished

short stories, scrapped sections from novels, and the research materials and other ephemera related to Spark’s compositional *process*. *The Early Fiction of Muriel Spark* is a highly valuable addition to Spark studies, recommended for students as well as seasoned scholars, and anyone interested in post-war woman’s writing.

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