

Muriel Spark

(1918-2006)

Muriel Spark was born Muriel Sarah Camberg in Edinburgh in 1918 to a Jewish Lithuanian father and an English Protestant mother. She was educated at the Edinburgh James Gillespie's School for Girls – an experience which undoubtedly inspired the representation of Edinburgh public school life in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. She was a talented student and at age 12 received the Walter Scott prize for a poem entitled 'Out of a Book'.



In 1937 Muriel Camberg married Sydney Oswald Spark and they had a son, Samuel. For several years of her marriage Spark lived in Central Africa, but her short fiction dealing with the subject of middle-class marriage and of expatriate life on the continent suggest a claustrophobic existence. Spark's marriage later ended in divorce.

During the Second World War, Spark was conscripted to the Political Intelligence Department of the British Foreign Office where she worked as a propagandist for the war effort. After the war she lived in London, where she began her literary career. She edited *The Poetry Review* 1947-9 and wrote studies of Mary Shelley, John Masfield and the Brontë sisters. In 1952 she published her first book, a collection of poetry entitled *The Fanfarlo and Other Verse* but it was her winning of the Observer prize for short fiction that finally inspired her to write fiction full-time. Her first published novel, *The Comforters* (1957), was written three years after Spark converted to Roman Catholicism and the novel was inspired by her studies on the Book of Job. Several critics agree that her religious conversion was the central event of her life. Francis Hart has written that 'it in some ways occasioned her appearance as a novelist'. Indeed, much of Spark's own life can be seen to inform her fiction. *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965) for which she won the James Tait Memorial Prize, has a half-Jewish heroine, Sandy Stranger in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) converts to Catholicism and *The Hothouse By The East River* (1973) deals with war-time propaganda.

With the success of her early novels and in particular *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* Spark was able to leave London and in 1967 took up residence in Italy where she now resides, moving between Rome and New York. After a long period of relative silence, Spark's most recent novel *Aiding and Abetting* was published by Penguin in 2001.

Over her long career Muriel Spark has received countless literary tributes and honours. In 1971 she was awarded an honorary degree in literature from Strathclyde University and has been similarly honoured by the Universities of Aberdeen, St Andrews, Edinburgh and Oxford. Heriot Watt, where she attended as a student, has also attributed her as a Doctor of the University. In 1993 Spark was made a Dame of the British Empire and in 1997 she received the David Cohen British Literature Prize for Lifetime Achievement.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/arts/writingscotland/writers/muriel_spark/> (30 August 2006)