

ON HER WAY REJOICING

by Michael Giffin

Muriel Spark: The Biography,
by Martin Stannard;
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009, \$66.95.

FOR THOSE who believe a great author should be remembered more for her work than her life, any biography will fall short, since it isn't literary criticism. Biography serves a different purpose and has different readers. While some readers do want a biography to shed more light on her work, some are obsessed with a psychological dissection of her life, some crave gossip and other forms of debunking, and some are simply celebrity voyeurs. Given such tabloid tendencies—of looking for the bad and wanting to know whether the great author was an ungrateful daughter, a difficult sister, a poor wife, an uncaring mother, a petulant celebrity, an intellectual snob, a disloyal friend, and finally, when all the men in her life failed her, whether she became a lesbian—it must be hard for the serious biographer to strike the right balance between two extremes: being a Frank Kermode at one end; being a Kitty Kelley at the other. Martin Stannard is in a unique position to achieve a perfect balance, since he's a professor of modern literature, but there's a story behind this long-awaited biography of Muriel Spark, one of the twentieth century's most gifted and original authors.

In the early 1990s, soon after completing her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*, which covers her early life, Spark wrote a flattering review of Stannard's biography of Evelyn Waugh. He wrote a brief letter of thanks. She replied, saying she hoped to have as good a biographer as him when her time came round. He offered his services. She accepted, giving him unlimited access to her archives and herself. All went well for several years, but, according to A.S. Byatt, she was upset by the resulting manuscript and "had to spend a lot of time going through it line by line to try to make it a little bit fairer".

Spark refused to allow publication in her lifetime, and posthumous approval was left in the hands of her close friend and literary executor, the artist Penelope Jardine. The biography has been published, finally. It's a triumph and tells us everything we need to know. Spark was wise to choose Stannard as her biographer. Stannard was lucky to have input from Spark. The idea that the great author isn't aware of the truth of her life is nonsense, and the inevitable celebrity gossip around her needs to be shown for what it is.

Spark was born in 1918 in Edinburgh, to a Jewish

father and Gentile mother, and grew up in a small flat that must have been cramped. Although her parents were working-class and poor they sent her to a private school. She trained as a secretary, met Sydney (Ossie), followed him to Rhodesia, married him in 1937, and had a son (Robin) in 1938. She was in labour for nearly forty-eight hours, nearly died of septicaemia, couldn't breastfeed, and suffered from post-natal depression for months. Africa was an eye-opener. So was Ossie, who became abusive and unstable as his psychiatric illness became more clearly evident. Under Roman Dutch Law, though, cruelty and mental instability in either partner were grounds for separation but not divorce. In order to dissolve her marriage, Spark could choose between infidelity and desertion. Since he wouldn't desert her, she deserted him. When her divorce was finalised in 1943, she returned to England, where she became an intelligence officer. She couldn't take her son with her; there was an embargo on transporting children to the United Kingdom:

Her only hope, she thought, was to return to England, explain her case from there, and pray that after the war the British authorities would see sense and return Robin to her. The dangers were obvious—that he might feel abandoned (he was only four years old), left in the care of strangers and his curious father; that she might be killed on the passage home; that England might lose the war and the separation become permanent—but she faced those dangers bravely. She had not the slightest concern about appearing the guilty party if, in the long term, there was a future for her and Robin.

After the war, Ossie and Robin were repatriated to Edinburgh, where Ossie was eventually committed and Robin went to live with Spark's parents, in that small flat, which he later purchased and where he still lives. Over the following decades, Spark worked her guts out, as a secretary and editorial assistant by day, following her literary vocation by night. She sent monthly cheques to her family and visited Edinburgh as often as she could. Her loyalty as a daughter and a mother are without question, and she was more sympathetic towards her ex-husband than many ex-wives would have been. She was always proud to be half-Jewish and often referred to herself as The Wandering Jew.

The first three chapters of the biography add little to what Spark tells us herself in *Curriculum Vitae*, and Stannard doesn't really come into his own until he picks up where the autobiography leaves off. In chapter four, "Finding a Voice", we learn the postwar Spark was a witty, irreverent and beautiful young woman who soon made many friends. She was sexy, and understood her

powers of attraction, but her interests were intellectual rather than carnal. Marriage had damaged her trust; in her mind, men and sex were associated with violence and threat. She enjoyed the company of men but she was, and would remain, unwilling to abandon herself to anyone.

There was also a problem with her lack of tertiary education. In the predominantly male literary circle in which she moved, most were university graduates. This left her without confidence and for several years she played down her acuity among the intellectual competition: "She was ambitious, biding her time, learning by osmosis. She listened, read voraciously, took notes, took advice, became an utterly charming autodidact not uncritically intoxicated by these thin spirits." The slow journey from misplaced deference began in 1947 with her appointment as General Secretary of the moribund Poetry Society and editor of its mediocre magazine, the *Poetry Review*. She tried to turn the Society and *Review* around but floundered among nasty and petty politics. During this time we hear a lot about two influential B-grade men in her life, Howard Sergeant and Derek Stanford; the latter a *bête noire* and *pisseur de copie* who's given much more space in this story than he deserves.

THINGS BEGAN to fall into place for Spark during the 1950s but not without an incredible amount of work and physical and emotional stress: editing (with Stanford) a tribute to Wordsworth and selected letters of Mary Shelley; editing (by herself) the Bronte letters; writing (by herself) biographies of Mary Shelley and John Masefield; trying to find her voice as a poet. While she had no ambition to be a writer of prose fiction, in the autumn of 1951 she saw an advertisement for a Christmas story competition in the *Observer* and decided to have a go. She scrounged some typing paper from a local shop, wrote "The Seraph and the Zambesi" quickly, posted it, forgot about it, and was shocked to hear, two months later, she'd won first prize out of nearly 7000 entries. The prize was £250; she spent £50 on Robin's bar mitzvah. Readers were puzzled, some were outraged, and here we see British echoes of the William Dobell–Joshua Smith what-is-art controversy transposed to prose fiction. But the judges were certain they had discovered a unique voice: and they were right.

In 1952, while Robin was aligning himself with Judaism, Spark was moving towards Christianity, and decades later an ultimate estrangement between mother and son occurred when Robin unsuccessfully tried to prove his mother, and therefore he, was fully Jewish. First she became an Anglican, then a Roman Catholic, and Cardinal Newman was a lifelong influence on her intellectual and spiritual development. With religious

conversion came a mature literary vision, beginning with a perceptive review of Eliot's play *The Confidential Clerk*, from its premiere at the Edinburgh Festival. Her analysis was acute, so good Eliot himself was astonished. It struck him "as one of the two or three most intelligent reviews I had read. It seemed to me remarkable that anyone who could only have seen the play once, and certainly not have read it, should have grasped so much of its intention."

But Spark was also depressed, as her mother and her son began complaining of neglect. Inevitably, her new life as an emerging poet-author-critic in London was beginning to alienate those from her old life in Edinburgh. She would continue to manage these tensions creatively, sensitively, as best she could, but that became harder after the death of her father, and the loss of his steady influence, in 1962.

Spark was nearly forty when her first novel, *The Comforters*, was published in 1957 and was well into her eighties when her last novel, *The Finishing School*, was published in 2004. Her output of poetry and fiction and criticism was prodigious and distinguished, but Stannard never stoops to hagiography. Instead, he skilfully weaves together the three essential struggles of her life story: managing her professional career, defending her public image, and protecting her private life.

The theme of Job and the problem of evil keep recurring in her work and this biography helps us understand why. So many individuals among her family and friends and acquaintances and colleagues appear as comforters who, in their various and often banal ways, violated or betrayed or tried to colonise her. The overall impression is that she managed these persistent threats to her identity in the same way most of us would—and with more magnanimity that many of us would—and went on her way rejoicing. Readers could usefully read this biography with an eye towards their own lives and see if it teaches them anything about themselves.

It's easy to forget what it was like for a talented young working-class woman, with no university education, to pursue a literary vocation in the 1950s. My favourite vignette is Spark's account of a meeting she had with her agent, Paul Scott, to discuss the manuscript of her second novel:

When he read *Robinson* (if, in fact, he did read it) he wasn't at all impressed. He asked me to come and see him about it. My clothes were old fashioned but my best. He sat there pontifically with my manuscript in front of him ... and wondered, after all, what was this novel about. A man and a girl on an island? It was, in fact, about a lot more than that. As he spoke, Paul flicked the typescript of my novel across the desk towards me with a contemptuous gesture of his third finger

and thumb. I fairly loathed him for that. I said: “Don’t represent me if you don’t want to.” “Oh,” he condescended, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Robinson was published in 1958, the same year Iris Murdoch published *The Bell*, and the two novels are strikingly similar in the way they interrogate classical metaphysics but from different perspectives; Spark as a religious theologian, Murdoch as a secular philosopher. Was Spark expecting too much from her agent? Not really, especially since Scott was an author himself and

had come from a similar working-class background, with poor parents who sent him to a private school. Later that day, Spark met Edith Sitwell for the first time. When told the story of Spark’s treatment at Scott’s hands, Dame Edith had the answer:

“My dear,” she said, “you must acquire a pair of lorgnettes, make an occasion to see that man again, focus the glasses on him and sit looking at him through them as if he were an insect. Just look and look.”

TOLKIEN’S DARKEST WORK

by Hal Colebatch

The Children of Hurin,
by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher
Tolkien;
HarperCollins, 2009, \$18.95.

LOVERS OF J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-Earth, of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, may return to that realm with *The Children of Hurin*, published posthumously and with some fairly light-handed editing and explanation by his son.

Some who have dipped into *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien’s uncompleted and posthumously-published account of the Elder Days, have been put off by its high, epic style, without the alleviating homeliness to be found in *The Lord of the Rings*, or the frequent humour of *The Hobbit*, as well as by the fact that it is a set of long fragments, not quite seamlessly joined. In the complex, interwoven tales it is also sometimes difficult to tell who is who.

The Children of Hurin is a completed narrative and far easier to read than *The Silmarillion*. There is no trouble following the characters, who are distinct and memorable, even if there is not a Frodo, Gandalf or Sam among them. It tells much of the Elder Days, and the wonderfully-named lands like Beleriand which, as Treebeard sang in *The Lord of the Rings*, came to “lie under the waves”.

However, it is also much grimmer than any of Tolkien’s other work. This is a dark and pessimistic tale. Unlike the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, good does not triumph over evil. It ends apparently unlev-

ened by hope.

The children of Hurin, striving valiantly for good, only succeed in working evil. The Elves of Middle-Earth, being in rebellion themselves, cannot prevail against the supernatural, Satanic power of Morgoth, and the brave and well-intentioned men who help them are dragged down to their doom. Indeed the extreme darkness of the ending at first sight seems excessive and at odds with the Christian, and indeed specifically Catholic, values that underlay Tolkien’s life and thought and his great literary and mythological project.

However, given the whole plan of Tolkien’s stories, this is in fact not the last word. Although *The Children of Hurin* is complete in itself, Tolkien intended this to be only one of the connected stories of the Elder Days of Middle-Earth, and the diabolic Morgoth (for whom, at this time, Sauron, the later Dark Lord, was only a servant), though triumphant here, was later overthrown by unforeseen means. Possibly one of the things that Tolkien is saying in the whole connected body of his work is that while man cannot prevail against supernatural evil without the help of supernatural good, such help does eventually come.

The Children of Hurin is for several reasons not a book I would recommend for children as I would recommend *The Hobbit*. Adults who read it should, I think, follow it up with a re-reading of both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. This will both lighten the darkness of *The Children of Hurin* somewhat by putting it in perspective, and perhaps give new weight and depth to the other already well-beloved works by showing what lay behind them.

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