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Hidden Possibilities: Essays in Honor of Muriel Spark.

Robert E. Hosmer Jr., ed.

Notre Dame University Press, 2014. vii + 295 pp. \$35 paper.

Robert Hosmer's introduction – gleeful, gossipy, gushing – sets the tone for this compelling collection of intimate encounters with the late Dame Muriel Spark by connoisseurs of her poetic art. The editor has assembled a veritable Brodie Set who can scarce contain their enthusiasm for their prime subject. Hosmer is clear about the book's aims, hoping "readers of this volume will gain a keen sense of Muriel Spark as a person, derived in good measure from reading her own words, unfiltered and uncensored, and a considerable critical appreciation of her work as articulated by some of her best readers". Of the sixteen essays gathered here, seven are previously published, so I will pass over the elegant insights of my colleague Gerry Carruthers, as well as those of Frank Kermode, John Lanchester, Doris Lessing, John Mortimer, and John Updike, and the fascinating interview Hosmer conducted with Spark in 2005.

The volume opens with a section entitled "The Work", in which Gabriel Josipovici's erudite exploration of Spark's critique of fiction within her fiction is the opening essay: "The villains in Muriel Spark's novels are those who cannot see the difference between fiction and reality. Or rather, they are those who seek to manipulate the lives of others for their own ends as the novelist manipulates his or her plot". This applies to all of Spark's work, and to her life and others' lives too. Josipovici uses this observation to ask a question shared by many of Spark's non-believing but much-admiring readers: "Is this the project of a religious, and specifically a Catholic, novelist? But in that case why does it make so much sense to a

non-Christian like myself?” Spark, he answers, Christianizes “what is essentially a modernist enterprise”. Having earthed Spark’s spirituality, Josipovici concludes by suggesting her novels “understand evil in a way a secular novelist like Angus Wilson, for all his concern with the *idea* of evil, never does”. Spark’s best readers, like the author herself, prefer to have it both ways.

Joseph Hynes’s contribution opens with Pontius Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” and Harold Pinter’s observation that a writer recognizes truth and falsehood are blurred but as a citizen must distinguish. This chimes with Josipovici – we could substitute Christian – or Catholic – for citizen. Hynes, focusing on *The Comforters*, takes a different tack, claiming that in her unending quest for truth through fiction “Spark clearly sets herself apart from the Pinters who simply stop when the creative oven dings ‘done’”. Where Josipovici ends with “evil”, Hynes closes with “mystery” – “mystery abides” – as the limit that Spark’s fiction frames for us.

The editor’s essay, “‘A Spirit of Vast Endurance’”, takes its title from a Spark poem. Hosmer’s purpose is to confirm Spark’s conviction, arising from her reading of Cardinal Newman’s essay on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, that she was a novelist gifted with “poetic insight”. Like Newman, Hosmer concludes, Spark’s finest poetry was in her prose. In her chapter, Regina Barreca investigates a different spirit, digging into Spark’s grave humor and use of the supernatural in “stories that practically rattle with deftly wrought versions and visions of the spectral, the weird, and the occult”. It is refreshing to see such subtle treatment given to the short fiction. Barreca shows that Spark’s playful pagan side, concentrated in the stories, aids a deeper understanding of her uncanny art as a whole.

Dan Gunn’s contribution picks up on a key theme of the collection, Spark’s “lightness”, and while his approach initially appears heavy-handed – two extended

passages, “ostensible *longueurs*”, from *Robinson* and *The Finishing School* lead into a weighty meditation on another two novels, *Not to Disturb* and *Territorial Rights* illuminated by the lectures of Italo Calvino – there is a lightness of touch here as delicate and sure as Spark’s own. Gunn’s is the most loaded discussion in this volume. Like the mosaics invoked at the end of *Territorial Rights*, he painstakingly pieces together a model critique of Spark’s fiction.

John Glavin’s essay is both light and delightful. He looks at Spark’s use of Peter Pan in *The Hothouse by the East River*, and reads this clammy novel alongside Iris Murdoch’s Peter Pan-inspired *A Word Child*, and both against Barrie’s original *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. Rather than peter out in a pall of Pans, Glavin’s argument gets more spring-heeled with every step so that his conclusion makes his subject look like Peter Pan in permanent prime, since while she “insisted fiercely on the liberty to invent that virtual figure, the international celebrity Muriel Spark [...] she preferred to live in other people’s houses”. Glavin cites Mrs Hawkins in *A Far Cry from Kensington*, but I was minded more of Nancy Hawkins’ little lost lover boy, William, who had never really had a childhood.

Where Glavin brought Iris Murdoch into the frame, David Malcolm draws on the work of Jane Bowles and Penelope Fitzgerald to support a formalist reading of strategies of ellipsis and inconsequence in Spark. Countering the view of Spark as a lone voice, he places her first within a European tradition and then “within a particularly quirky and challenging line of women’s writing that is difficult, contestatory, and provocative; this is a lineage that includes other writers but within which Spark herself has achieved most, and that most disturbingly and acutely”.

The last two essays I want to look at appear in the second section of the collection, “The Life”. Alan Taylor’s mischievous account of shared intimacies with

Spark takes its title, “Scottish by Formation”, from her own self-description. Taylor’s late but lasting friendship with Spark yields rich pickings. In a letter she wrote him in 1995 she declared: “I believe I have liberated the novel in many ways, showing how anything whatsoever can be narrated, any experience set down, including sheer damn cheek”. Those last three words would make a great title for another critical study.

Sheer damn cheek is an apt characterization of Barbara Epler’s witty and engaging essay on her own experience of Spark, whom she knew as publisher with New Directions. Epler’s anecdote of visiting Spark in Italy is priceless. Greeted by Penelope Jardine, who says Muriel is resting and hands her “a brand-new story” entitled “The Snobs”, Epler reads the story while away for a walk. Epler is “happy and sad at the same time: we had just published *Open to the Public*, billed as ALL the stories of Muriel Spark”. Her mixed emotions take a further turn: “The story concerns an author just finishing a novel at her best friend’s chateau, and it is all going well until the awful, really hideous ‘*guests from Hell*’ arrive one day on a tour bus. They then refuse to leave. *The snobs will not leave ... The hideous guests*”. Epler’s laughter echoes through the olive grove, “hearing the snap of the little trap, set happily by Muriel, ensconced in the castle, wearing a cat smile”. *Hidden Possibilities* will alert new readers to Spark’s magic and mischief.

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