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Muriel Spark

The 50 greatest postwar writers: 8

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Miss Jean Brodie, the acerbic and unorthodox Edinburgh teacher (“You girls are the crème de la crème”), is one of the giant characters of 20th-century fiction. She was the creation of Muriel Spark, mistress of the highest high comedy and a maker of immaculate prose.

Spark was born Muriel Camberg in 1918, the child of a Jewish father and English mother, and educated at James Gillespie’s High School for Girls in Edinburgh. Look no farther for the source of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Young Muriel (like Sandy in the novel) had a habit of observation. In 1937 she married Sidney Spark, and the couple moved to Rhodesia. A son was born, but Spark left him behind when she went to London in 1944. Their later relationship was dreadful, particularly after Spark converted to Catholicism, while her son chose to explore his Jewish roots.



(Gavin Smith)

Spark’s experiences in wartime London inspired two of her most celebrated novels, *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) and *A Far Cry From Kensington* (1988). She later helped to edit a poetry magazine, and some of her best and bitchiest fun-poking is directed at poets. Her humour can be disconcertingly snobbish, as in her cruelly funny short story *You Should Have Seen the Mess* (1958). In later life she chummed up with a sculptor named Penelope Jardine. The two lived happily in Italy until Spark’s death in 2006.

One to read: *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961)

More about Muriel Spark

[Read her obituary, printed in The Times on April 17, 2006](#)

[News: Spark continued feud to her death](#)

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