



The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie / The Girls of Slender Means / The Driver's Seat / The Only Problem

Muriel Spark

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The brevity of Muriel Spark's novels is equaled only by their brilliance. These four novels, each a miniature masterpiece, illustrate her development over four decades. Despite the seriousness of their themes, all four are fantastic comedies of manners, bristling with wit.

Spark's most celebrated novel, *THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE*, tells the story of a charismatic schoolteacher's catastrophic effect on her pupils. *THE GIRLS OF SLENDER MEANS* is a beautifully drawn portrait of young women living in a hostel in London in the giddy postwar days of 1945. *THE DRIVER'S SEAT* follows the final haunted hours of a woman descending into madness. And *THE ONLY PROBLEM* is a witty fable about suffering that brings the Book of Job to bear on contemporary terrorism.

Characters are vividly etched in a few words; earth-shaking events are lightly touched on. Yet underneath the glittering surface there is an obsessive probing of metaphysical questions: the meaning of good and evil, the need for salvation, the search for significance.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie / The Girls of Slender Means / The Driver's Seat / The Only Problem Details

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From Reader Review The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie / The Girls of Slender Means / The Driver's Seat / The Only Problem for online ebook

Adelaide says

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie-- History Boys... except with girls. Are all charismatic English school teachers so creepy?

The Girls of Slender Means-- very pretty, not much in the way of a plot line

The Driver's Seat-- Woman seeks to be victim of nymphomaniac murderer. Succeeds. I'm not sure what to do with that.

The Only Problem-- [Harvey's (crazy terrorist) wife has just been killed. He has now married his friend's (Edward's) ex-wife who is also his now-dead wife's sister. Also, he's caring for his now-dead wife's child (Clara) by a lover.:]

Edward: What will you do now that you've finished Job?

Harvey: Live another hundred and forty years. I'll have three daughters, Clara, Jemima and Eye-Paint.

Ken Ryu says

Powerful stuff.

I read "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" a few years ago. It was just ok for me. I skipped that book this time and read the other 3 books/novellas recently. Getting a heavy dose of Spark in this 4 book format is a good way to appreciate her unique writing. The intro by Frank Kermode is insightful and helps appreciate her originality and style.

The books take 1-2 hours a piece to read. A short synopsis.

"The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie"

A captivating new teacher, Miss Jean Brodie, teaches her young teenage girls lessons on life, love/sexuality and studies. The action takes place at an elite finishing school. Miss Brodie is a mentor and almost goddess figure to many of the girls. One of the girls betrays her, and she loses her position as a result.

"The Girls of Slender Means"

Almost a continuation of "Miss Jean Brodie". Again, young women are studying and learning about sexuality and love. The action takes place as WWII is coming to a close. The strict rationing leads to the slenderness of the girls. At the conclusion of the book, the lack of slenderness of one girl will give further meaning to the aptly titled novella.

"The Driver's Seat"

The main character is an off-beat and perhaps insane young woman named Lise. She is traveling abroad for a fateful meeting with a young man. His identity and connection to Lise is shrouded in mystery till the climatic and brutal conclusion. Along the way, she meets absurd, violent, and ironic men and women. Are these events real or just in her head? Violence and anarchy follow her every step, throughout this surreal, Alice-like adventure.

"The Only Problem"

A wealthy and quirky man, Harvey Gotham is involved in a complex love entanglement. He is having an affair with Ruth, who is the sister of his wife Effie. Effie has run off with a younger man. Ruth is married to Edward, who has stepped aside to allow Harvey and Ruth to carry on their adulterous relationship. To complicate things further, Effie has a child Clara from one of her many extramarital affairs. Effie has left Clara in the care of Harvey and Ruth. Harvey is on a quixotic quest to study, write and analyze the Book of Job. This obsession leads him to France where he has taken a home where he can study in solitude. He is unconcerned about his wayward wife. He is wholly fixated on understanding the meaning of the poetic biblical story.

Effie is accused of terrorist acts as a member of a radical fringe group. Harvey is questioned by the police who believe he may be in contact and a financial source for the group. He shows little concern for Effie's whereabouts and actions, but finds the unwanted attention disruptive to his studies and home life. Although Effie is constantly discussed throughout the book, she never is truly introduced to the reader. She is a specter who seems everywhere and nowhere. Eerily Effie shares a striking resemblance to Ruth as well as a painting of the wife of Job. We finally find out where Effie is as the book closes. Even then, Sparks plays around with the possibility that the woman in question may not be Effie, but rather the incarnation of the wife of Job.

Muriel Spark's books are disorienting. She vividly paints scenes with her words. We can understand the micro scenes clearly. In "The Driver's Seat" we can see and feel the fabric as Lise interacts with a clerk at a dress shop. Lise's erratic actions and dialog throw the scenes into chaos. Though the individual elements of the painting are crisp and accurate, the entire scene is random and incohesive. Lise flips out when the storekeeper explains the dress is made of a stain-resistant material. She accuses the surprised clerk of insulting her as a slovenly misfit and storms out of the shop.

The stories lurch forward ominously to their fateful and dreadful climax. As soon as a level of normalcy is returned, Spark will wickedly scramble the action again. An example of this roller-coaster ride between sanity and madness is illustrated in "The Driver's Seat". After a seemingly innocent and harmless shopping spree with an older lady, Lise is thrown into a series of stressful events. She gets lost in a student protest only to be rescued by a man who attempts to sexual assault her. Lise calmly escapes only to later contend with another sexual advance from a different man. Again, Lise calmly extracts herself from that unwanted advance. Unrelenting, Spark rescues Lise from this violence only to send her to her ultimate and decisive end scene.

Lise acts crazy when with normal people. She is level-headed when facing weird or violent characters. This counter intuitive response is also used in "The Only Problem". Harvey and "The Only Problem" are less extreme examples of the same theme. Harvey is aloof at troubling crises in his real life, while obsessed and intensely curious about the Book of Job.

The characters of Spark's books are often outlandish and extreme. The action is unusually coincidental and intense. The disasters are horrific and seemingly inevitable. Sparks creates a fun-house mirrored reflection of life that delivers shocks, awe and incredulity. She handles this effect deftly. Her style is uniquely her own.

Perhaps one could consider J.D. Salinger a less menacing Muriel Spark.

"Miss Brody" is the only book that covers years of time. "Slender Means" events cover a few months before and after VJ day. "Driver's Seat" is action over 2-3 days. "The Only Problem" happens over a few weeks of time. She presents vivid descriptions of the physical appearance of her characters, but our time with them will be short. We do not get to know their detailed history or for that matter, follow them forward into the future. Despite only having little time with the character, radical events with a definitive climax are in store for the reader. A fatal car crash can strike without rhyme, reason or warning. Spark's stories are more sinister. She places her characters into danger, hits the gas, cuts the brakes, and sends them hurling inexorably towards tragedy.

lucke1984 says

It is difficult to write about a book that has been so thoroughly overshadowed by its cinematic counterpart. The movie rests so firmly in my mind that though I know the construction of the book is at times wildly different, I do not recall how.

Ginny says

I read this book because it takes place in Edinburgh, Scotland. Miss Jean Brodie is a teacher at a girls school. She has her favorites and they are different than the other students. Early on the reader knows that Miss Jean Brodie will have to retire because one of her students betrayed her.

Lynsey says

I picked this book for discussion as my choice this month, and I'm most embarrassed that I did! Based on the blurb on the back, I was expecting something more along the lines of a literary Dead Poet's Society.

But I found this book to be so dull and repetitive that I was loathe to pick it up, despite initially thinking I'd read it in one sitting. And I got thoroughly fed up of hearing about Miss Brodie being in her prime. Check out page 44. The word 'prime' is used 5 times in the first 9 lines. And it was grating on me before this. I'd love to know how often that word appears throughout the entire book (which, thankfully, isn't too long).

I think the author wants us to know that Miss Brodie is in her prime. Just incase you didn't get it from the title.

As one review I've read put it, it made her sound like she was on heat. And maybe she was! I'm sure that there was a literary point to this, but it went over my head.

The characters were not likeable, mainly because they are so one dimensional, nor could you make any connection with them. That said, I did fleetingly worry for their patchy education, which largely consisted of having Miss Brodie's opinions rammed down their impressionable throats.

Why this book is considered to be a classic is a mystery to me. There is no plot to speak of, the writing is nothing special, and it's certainly no page turner. To me, it's the kind of book you are made to read at school

because someone somewhere thinks it an important book.

It's book club tonight. I've still not been bored enough to finish it.....

Molly says

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie is a charming and unsettling book, and in that sense, it's pretty emblematic of the rest of Spark's deceptively simple oeuvre. Part of the novel's apparent simplicity stems from its form. It's a kind third-person retrospective that recounts the unconventional teaching methods of Miss Jean Brodie, her relationships with a particular group of her students, and their relationship with a married art teacher (with whom Miss Brodie is in love). But the story is also a kind of homage or elegy for Miss Brodie. She is an unmarried woman in the '30s (the timeframe to which the novel looks back), and although she only just barely realizes it, she is already headed towards spinster-dom. The subtext of this novel is a commentary on Miss Brodie's precarious position as a sometimes-beautiful woman who believes she is in her prime (perhaps because she teaches girls who are just on the cusp of entering their own primes) but who is actually already past it.

Katie says

I'm not sure WHY I love this book. Many who've read it think I'm crazy. Most of the characters are somewhat despicable and yet I'm drawn into the precocious world they have created.

Simmy says

Never read this book before or seen the film so I was pleasantly surprised by it.

The story is about a spinster teacher in the 30's in Edinburgh and about her attitude towards teaching (anti filling the pupils heads with dead knowledge) and how she creams off six of them to be 'her set'.

She was ahead of her time but I found her sad and lonely and seemingly living her life through her pupils. She also had an unhealthy hold on the girls and in the end is betrayed by one of them.

Would definitely recommend it.

christine. says

Read it because it's on the 1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die list.

There were some things that I enjoyed about it - I really liked the way the narrative tracked the way the girls were negatively influenced by the overbearing nature of Miss Brodie, and how everything eventually fell apart. I also liked how the book carefully laid out Miss Brodie's personality, her quirks, and her flaws. It was really easy to see her descent, her fall from grace, and her ultimate demise.

Yet there wasn't really anything that engaged me about the narrative. All of the characters were held at a distance, and I couldn't really get close to them or understand their psychology. A lot of the Brodie set, as they are called, are really secondary characters, and not much really fleshes them out. Descriptions are repetitious and overused, and I never really got the sense of tragedy that I wanted to out of the novel.

It was just okay.

Jen3n says

Well written (of course) and pretty damn dark given the time in which it was written and the subject matter.

Essentially, and not to give anything away, this book is about a teacher at a Scottish girl's school and her relationship with six of the girls specifically.

This book has a great deal to say about faith, trust, lust, jealousy, curiosity, and strength. It was presented to me as a work of feminist literature, but I've never really understood exactly what people mean when they say things like that. In my opinion, what happened in the book would have happened the same way if it was about a man teaching at a boy's school.

I could be wrong, though.

Not a bad story. A classic, so call it. And, while it probably doesn't need to be mentioned I'm going to say it anyway: read the book before you see the movie.

Helynnne says

I have somewhere some publishing company's list of the 100 best novels of the 20th century. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* was somewhere in the middle of the list, and since I also knew the novel was made into a film with an acclaimed performance by Maggie Smith (long before she was Professor McGonagall of Hogwarts), I gave the book a go. I hope I'm not just dense, but I really couldn't see why this book received such a superlative rating from that company. It's the story of a kind English teacher in a girls' school and her students with their various personalities, hopes, desires, etc., It follows Miss Brodie later into her career as these girls are going their separate ways. It's a pleasant enough little novel, but I found the whole thing rather dull and ordinary.

Jonathan says

I'm reading the novels in this anthology separately (and have read a couple before),so I will pop my thoughts down when each one is finished,which knowing me could take years.

The Driver's Seat.

A short and far from sweet tale of a quite peculiar woman who we find out pretty early on is due to come to a sticky end. The blurb talks of her descent into madness, but reading it 46 years after it was published we

might have a slightly different understanding. In fact all the characters in the book have unusual characteristics that could be labelled with one mental illness or another, and maybe that is what Muriel Spark was trying to say - if we are all different could we not be perceived as all being a bit strange and potentially unsettling to others? Admittedly some are more worrying than others in the story, but the moral is about making judgments, not only about people but also about plots, as there is a great twist at the end.

The Only Problem.

If the only problem for Harvey Gotham was his wife Effie's shoplifting habit then life would not be so complicated. Not that he finds it particularly so. Having abandoned her on holiday due to her wish to acquire things without paying for them he finds himself a year later answering questions from the French police about why Effie is a leading member of terrorist organisation the FLE, while at the same time giving over his solitary existence to a visit from Effie's sister Ruth and Effie's baby Clara who she has abandoned along with her lover Ernie.

Another enthralling story from Muriel Spark. With her short novels it is difficult to discuss the plot any further as everything moves along so quickly. The characters and setting are well drawn, the plot and chapters conducive to losing yourself for a good few hours at a time. The ending, as usual delivers a surprise or two, with many a wry smile along the way.

Joseph Fountain says

3 1/2 stars

Review of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* only

She thinks she is Providence, thought Sandy, she thinks she is the God of Calvin...Brodie acts as if she transcends morality. ~ Sandy Stranger from *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

This is the first time I've read *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* or Muriel Spark. The story is a modernist, existential novel, set in 1930s, Scotland. It is a novella by most standards, told mostly in third-person narrative, making use of numerous flash-forwards. It recounts the career of Jean Brodie, a progressive teacher at an all-girls school in Edinburgh, Scotland.

My full review: <http://100greatestnovelsofalltimeques...>

Laurie says

This book was really interesting. I choose that word, general as it is because it is really the best way to describe it: It creates and hold a great amount of interest.

This is the story of a set of five chosen girls to be apart of a very charming and unorthodox teacher in a junior school, who become entangled in each others lives one of which ends in her undoing.

The narration of this story is where it really shines, being that Spark is constantly telling you what will happen before it does, but still allowing you to patiently observe how this new turn will unfold. It has the effect of taking what would be more situational irony and making it dramatic. For example, the one "trusted"

member of the set is the one that leads to her undoing, but the reader is matter of fact made aware of this much before you discover the how and the why of it.

I liked this story for its rich characterization and well placed plot, but the end left me a little cold. I suppose it is because I, much as seemingly most of her set, was at a loss of what to really believe the significance of this story of a woman in her prime could really have been when I was faced with the end.

DeMisty D. says

This is now one of my new favorite short novels. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is an exquisitely written novel set pre-World War II. It constantly creeps in a little more information as to who betrayed Miss Brodie. This book, with calculated suspense, intrigue, and just plain good writing, would be perfect for a freshman or sophomore English course, or a semi-intellectual day at the beach.

It was somewhat reminiscent of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, although done well before it (what is reminiscent of what?), but a much better work.

Read it, tell me what you think of it.

Terence Manleigh says

A terrific omnibus. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Driver's Seat* are, as Miss Brodie would say, "the creme de la creme." The others - *The Girls of Slender Means* and *The Only Problem* -- are slighter but, as with all Sparks' work, eminently readable, sharply satiric, unsparing and naggingly enigmatic.

Kelly says

This was perhaps the most influential book on my life, even before I actually read it. When I was thirteen years old, the BBC series of the book starring Geraldine McEwan as Miss Brodie was shown on television. Miss Brodie efforts to instill gentility into her students had a great effect on me and along with them, I determined to make myself the "crème de la crème". I followed her instruction in all ways from walking with a book on my head to practicing proper skin care and credit what poise and attractiveness I may possess to my fictitious instructress, Miss Brodie. None of the dark subplots that I discovered when I read the novel years later were emphasized in the series and to me, it was merely a primer on how to live ones life as a cultivated and cultured lady.

Andrew Davis says

Four of Spark's novels published in one volume.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie: A story of a teacher in a grammar school in Scotland - Miss Jean Brodie, and her favourite group of students in the thirties and forties of the twentieth century. A typical of Spark's

style and humour, with Miss Brodie's predictions about her girls turning out complete opposite and her being dismissed for her support of Duce.

The Girls of Slender Means: A story revolves around the group of young women living at the May of Teck Club house in London, and their male companions, in summer of 1945. What made me persist with this novel was the author's specific sense of humour. The final part, when the club house is set on fire by the undetected exploding bomb, and collapses with one of the women, was quite dramatic in its description and worth waiting for.

The Driver's Seat: A short story about a woman – Lise, who winds up her own life by choosing, with the greatest care, her own murderer. It contemplates, in a comic spirit, the oddity of stories, and story-tellers, who, within sometimes unacknowledged limits, can control action and outcome.

The Only Problem: A twisted story of two sisters and their husbands and lovers, and superimposed on a biblical story of Job. Typical of Spark's style and reflected by her interest in Job's story.

Mariel says

The embarrassing admission first: I read Muriel Spark's books because her name is close to my own. (I really hate it when people call me Muriel, though. I dislike being called Ariel only slightly less.) Other people might have heard of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* because of the famous film starring Maggie Smith. All are good reasons to stumble onto a gem. It's really cool when you can find some cool thing by surprise. Like having a cool teacher to tell you about something great...

It's a great little horror story about knocking down your heroes, influences good and bad, trying to stop time, ego of the young, ego of the old. Spark packed a lot of one-two punches in this little book. The best part is that there's a third punch when it's over. I kinda longed for the dreamy days of Brodie's classroom, too. Not for Brodie herself, but for the chance to feel like you're in a conversation golden age. That sharing this stuff is really going to lead somewhere honest. When they lose that faith, they lose that too. The third punch is the feeling that you can't go back.

I don't know if I've ever agreed with the common sentiment that one needs to destroy one image to erect themselves into another. I feel that people need things. The more you have, the more you have to draw from when you need it. It's a mistake to cast off the old when the new shiny thing comes by. Like Morrissey said in 'Rubber Ring' by The Smiths: "They were the only things that ever stood by you."

I do love the movie. It came on tv one night when I was about thirteen or fourteen. I was immediately sucked in. The teacher's pet turned wrong, Sandy, was played by Pamela Franklin. Movie fans might recognize her from her part as Flora in the Truman Capote adaptation of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Innocents* (starring one of my favorite actresses ever, Deborah Kerr). I don't think Franklin did much else of note. Still, two classic films is not bad. Something to tell your grandkids. Then those grandkids will one-up you and star in a string of runaway hits!

The end scene of Brodie crying out "Murderer!" down the hallway was pretty awesome. She should have flown less on the wing power of others and more on her own steam.

Corinna says

I was obsessed with Maggie Smith's Miss Jean Brodie when I was a kid, and finally got around to reading it (along with the three other novellas in this tome). I loved the book just as much as I remember loving the movie.

The Girls of Slender Means had nothing by way of plot and I slogged through it because I don't like leaving books unfinished. I really should have skipped it once I realized I was not going to enjoy it. The characters seemed to be a cast of Sparks' unaffiliated extras wandering around a war time boarding house waiting to catch afire.

The Driver's Seat was a bit of a psychological thriller, and so unlike the previous novella that I was entranced and finished it in one sitting. Following Lise around an unnamed city (though sparks gives you just enough detail for you to guess time and time again), looking for her 'boyfriend' though she doesn't know what he looks like or his name, is nerve wracking. But in a good way. The end Sparks gives it is the only way it could end.

The Only Problem was intriguing to me because the Book of Job figures so prominently in it, and I spent a lot of my academic career studying it from all angles. That and it had a bit of psychological thriller feel to it as well. All ends uneasily, but well.
