

Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch, and the Development of Literary Voice

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I have spent the summer considering, from a writer's stance, what alchemy of tone, style, and subject occurs to create incisive and impressive modern social fiction. I have also worked to incorporate what I have learned into my own writing, which will continue in an Advanced Independent Study with Professor Clarke in the fall.

I set out with Muriel Spark and Iris Murdoch, giants of twentieth-century English satiric fiction, as guides. Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the text I revisited to begin my work, exemplifies the exaltation done by good realistic fiction. That is not to say that the writing sanctifies its subject. Rather, Spark disarms the reader with a caricaturist's concision—"she was the girl who was known for sex," to paraphrase one of several *Brodie* character taglines—and then weaves deft doses of sympathy and cruelty into the unfolding story. In the end, each character is cut to exactly the right, somehow near-mythical size. Spark's *Aiding and Abetting*, meanwhile, is a remarkably neat crime novel; *The Girls of Slender Means*, an unconventional period piece swept into an unconventional tragedy. Both books display Spark's lyricism, and both uphold her devotion to character-building, which, in some genre fiction, flickers. *A Far Cry from Kensington* is a successful and moving foray into the first person, useful to study from an author usually at home in the third. Murdoch, a philosophy professor, opens a window onto the dilemmas that preoccupy her. She also builds an airtight dreamscape, escapist in the sense that it is inescapable. *The Black Prince*, the story of an unhappy writer, airs several very specific visions of madness and despair. The dialogue is snappy and the description thick.

I have also read and studied novels by—listed in publication order over the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries—Elizabeth Gaskell, E.M. Forster, Agatha Christie, Jane Bowles, Daphne du Maurier, Dodie Smith, Chaim Potok, Rachel Ingalls, Michael Ondaatje, Jane Gardam, Ann Patchett, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ruth Ozeki, and Brock Clarke; as well as short fiction collections by Edith Pearlman, Lee Upton, and Carmen Maria Machado; and assorted short stories by a number of other writers, among whom favorites include Edith Wharton, James Baldwin, and Joyce Carol Oates.

These authors exhibit a diverse range of techniques and preoccupations. Forster is remarkable for dialogue pacing, Smith for workable whimsy, and Gardam for threading tenable and creative networks of characters. Ondaatje's prose is particularly rich. Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* tone-shifts even more powerfully than does Spark's *The Girls of Slender Means*—in fact, in his case, the story leaps genres—and I find myself trying to emulate the spare, devastating, and quiet style of his plotting. I plan to turn next to his other novels.

In my own writing, I've worked with several settings, subjects, and tones. Habitually wordy, I find it useful to run the imitative gamut from Murdoch's paragraph-long character introductions to Ishiguro's simplicity. I have settled on a longform story about three sisters living in Massachusetts, currently in progress, that I hope to carry forward with Ishiguro's attentiveness to young voices, Spark's care and cleverness, and the affection for landscape shared by so many.

It has been fascinating to visit du Maurier's seventeenth-century Cornwall, Baldwin's 1950s Harlem, and Ozeki's twenty-first-century Tokyo in an effort to understand and write good prose fiction. I extend my gratitude for the immersive experience offered by this fellowship, and I look forward to building upon what I have learned as I continue to write in the fall and beyond.

Faculty Mentor: Brock Clarke

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