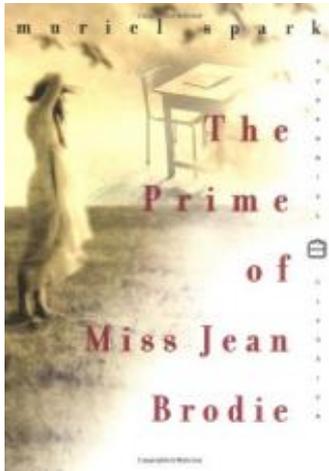


# The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie

by Muriel Spark

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## About the Book

At the staid Marcia Blaine School for Girls, in Edinburgh, Scotland, Miss Jean Brodie--teacher extraordinaire--is unmistakably, and outspokenly, in her prime. She is passionate in the application of her unorthodox teaching methods, in her attraction to the married art master, Teddy Lloyd, in her affair with the bachelor music master, Gordon Lowther, and--most importantly--in her dedication to her girls. And her girls--the students she selects to be her *creme de la creme*--are devoted to Miss Brodie. Each member of the "Brodie set"--Eunice, Jenny, Mary, Monica, Rose, and Sandy--is "famous for something", and Miss Brodie strives to bring out the best in each, and to instill in each an independence, passion, and ambition surpassing her own. "Safety does not come first," Miss Brodie advises her girls. "Goodness, Truth and Beauty come first. Follow me." And they do. But one of her girls will betray her.

Miss Brodie has opponents: the "thrilling" senior science teacher, Miss Lockhart; Miss Gaunt, sister of a strict Calvinist minister; other members of the Marcia Blaine faculty; and the persevering headmistress, Miss Mackay. Miss Mackay, orthodox and traditionalist in her educational principles, is determined to rid her school of Miss Brodie, but is repeatedly stymied. The time is the 1930s. And Miss Brodie, apparently unaware that many might find unacceptable her outspoken admiration for Mussolini and Hitler, revels in, exploits, and shares her prime, only to become a victim of her own irrepressible exuberance. In this "perfect book" (Chicago Tribune), Muriel Spark probes with consummate, compressed artistry the halcyon years of a remarkable woman, whose intelligence, wit, imagination, charm, and elegance--however misguided at times, however fatal--match those of her creator.

## Discussion Guide

1. What does Miss Jean Brodie herself mean by the phrases "one's prime" and "the *creme de la creme*"? What additional meanings do these phrases take on in relation to Miss Brodie, her girls, and other characters?
2. What are Miss Brodie's "principles of education" and the practices she derives from those principles? How do her

principles and practices differ from those of Miss Mackay? What are the pros and cons of each approach to education?

3. How do Miss Lockhart and her science room contrast with Miss Brodie and her lessons? Why are the girls "enthralled" by Miss Lockhart's science room? What ironies are involved in Miss Lockhart's marriage to Gordon Lowther?

4. Why does Miss Brodie admire Mussolini and, later, Hitler--"a prophet-figure like Thomas Carlyle, and more reliable than Mussolini"? What parallels emerge between Miss Brodie's "vision" and methods and those of the fascist dictators she admires? How do Miss Brodie's "politics" affect her life and her pupils' lives?

5. To what extent is Sandy's betrayal of Miss Brodie a multiple betrayal? Why does Sandy betray her former teacher? What connections exist between Sandy's relationship with Miss Brodie, her discovery of Calvinism, and her becoming a Catholic nun and the author of an influential book on moral perception? To what extent might Sandy's betrayal of Miss Brodie be justified?

6. How does Miss Brodie's attitude toward "team spirit"--it is "always employed to cut across individualism, love and personal loyalties," she announces--both agree with her educational principles and undermine her relationship with her students? What dangers arise from allegiance to a tightly organized group?

7. How does Miss Brodie's story of her ancestor, Willie Brodie, and his cheerful death "on a gibbet of his own devising"--"it is the stuff I am made of"--reflect on her own life and personality? Does Miss Brodie die "cheerfully on a gibbet of [her] own devising"?

8. When the seventeen-year-old Sandy realizes Miss Brodie's plans for Rose and Teddy Lloyd, she decides of Miss Brodie: "She thinks she is Providence . . . she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end." To what extent is Sandy's assessment accurate? Has Miss Brodie assumed godlike prerogatives?

9. Shortly after her forced retirement, Miss Brodie writes to Sandy, questioning who might have betrayed her. Sandy replies, "If you did not betray us it is impossible that you could have been betrayed by us." In what ways does Miss Brodie betray her girls?

10. What is the role of religion in the novel, in Miss Brodie's behavior, and in Sandy's and the other girls' lives? What correspondences are established among Scottish Calvinism, Roman Catholicism, and fascism?

## Author Bio

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1918, Muriel Spark is considered one of the giants of twentieth-century fiction. John Updike described her in *The New Yorker* as "one of the few writers on either side of the Atlantic with enough resources, daring, and stamina to be altering, as well as feeding, the fiction machine." With her numerous works, which include **Memento Mori**, **The Ballad of Peckham Rye**, and **Symposium**, she joins two great traditions of the English novel: that of the comedy of manners ("the Jane Austen of the surrealists," David Pryce-Jones has called Spark); and that of romantic-gothic fiction, from the Brontes and Mary Shelley onward. After writing more than twenty books and receiving

various literary awards, Spark was created a Dame in the Order of the British Empire in 1993. She currently makes her home in Italy.

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