

# Necessarily Looking Backward



New poems commissioned by StAnza,  
Scotland's International Poetry Festival,  
for the 2018 Muriel Spark centenary

poems by

Andrew Blair, Lyn Coffin,  
Patrick James Errington,  
Sally Evans, Lindsay Macgregor,  
and Catherine Wilson

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Images of novel book covers from Polygon's Muriel Spark Centenary Editions collection

<https://www.birlinn.co.uk/Muriel-Spark/>

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StAnza, Scotland's International Poetry Festival

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# Memento Mori.

*The telephone rang. She lifted the receiver. As she had feared, the man spoke before she could say a word. When he had spoken the familiar sentence she said, 'Who is that speaking, who is it?'*

## Muriel Spark

INTRODUCED BY *Zoë Strachan*



Protein High

Uber to the climbing wall

Uber to the practice fall

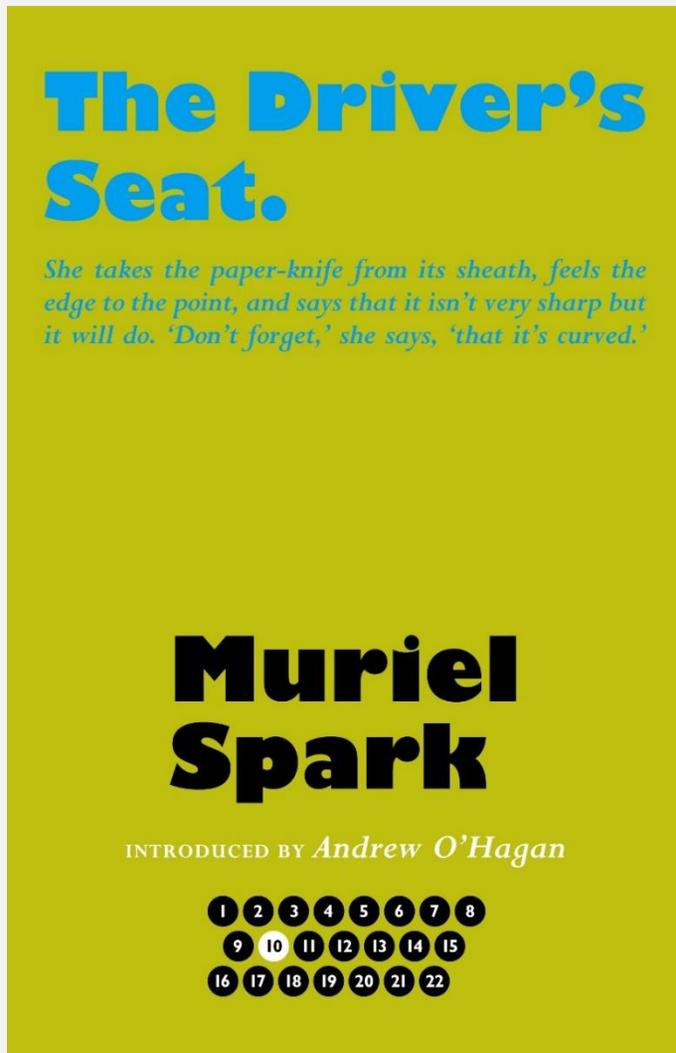
The tiny

arsenic sips

that build me

*'Without an ever-present sense of death life is insipid.  
You might as well live on the whites of eggs.'*

Andrew Blair



## Paeon for a Novel Poet

She brings pens and paper to the café. She's a polite person and pays promptly, so she's the proprietor's favourite patron. She's permitted to stay past closing until she's safely able to pedal home. But when she's perched on The Chair of Painstaking Language, she wields irony like a parson's cane. Though she notes stray chairs piled like sorrow on sadness, she has a real penchant for the peculiar — she can make unsavoury people seem pleasant. She mocks the purse-lipped and stock positions; she persistently prefigures futures... Plus she knows numbers' black and white habits, so I'm sure interest in her shall persist, and stay prime.

Lyn Coffin

*'The inconceivable sorrow of it, those chairs piled up at night when you're sitting in a café. The last one left.'*

# Robinson.

*Owing to the strangeness of our predicament, the touchiness of our minds, the qualities of the island and perhaps the shock of our plane accident, we did not for a moment suspect what had really happened. The blood was lying about everywhere. Our minds were on the blood.*

## Muriel Spark

INTRODUCED BY *Candia McWilliam*

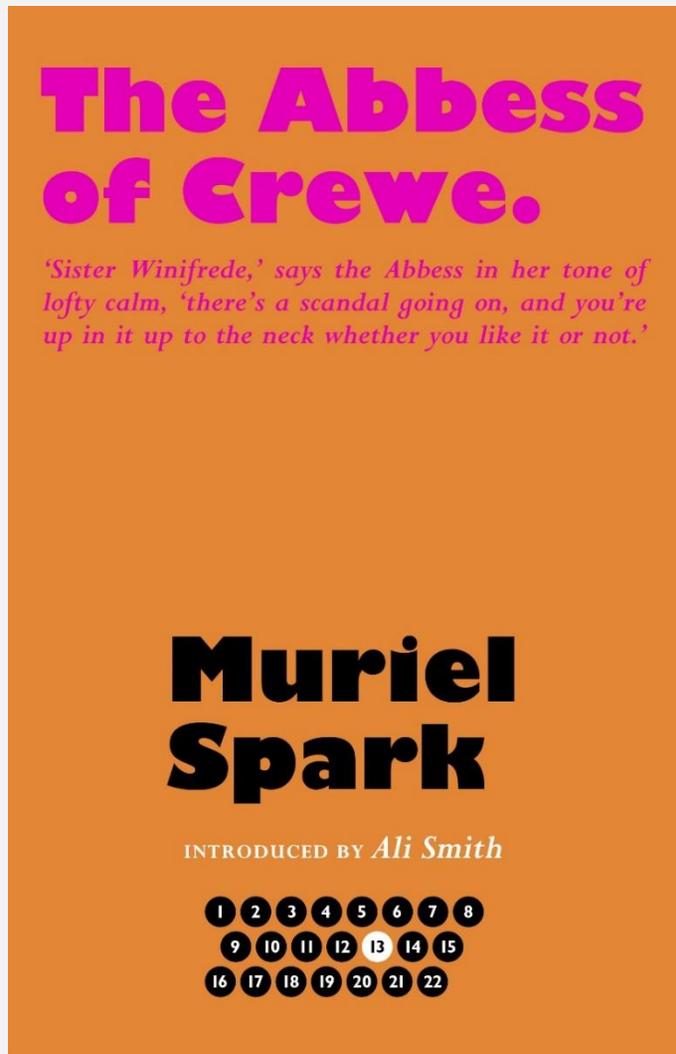


### Looking Back On It

who's to say the past has to be behind?  
Why not ahead? I wander now only roads  
beyond an ancestor I'll never meet, wearing  
my stray ways through the grass, through  
her language. I wish so often this was one  
of those where the past is above. In Canada,  
all winter, the prairies would be heaped  
white with it. Here in Scotland, each wet  
stone collects its fallen mythologies. I watch  
a shoal of gulls across the Meadows rising,  
like an old story I've never read but somehow  
know. Rain runs through feathers to the skin.

*'Looking forward to going home, I was  
necessarily looking backward.'*

Patrick James Errington



## The Abbess of Crewe

Are you Hildegarde? Will you die?  
Or are you Felicity –  
to steal a priest you would persuade  
beyond his vow of abstinence made,  
or are you Alexandra, winner,  
the Machiavellian at dinner,  
dictator we could not foresee,  
prescribing poems for liturgy?  
Oh choose your favourite of these three –  
Let not anxiety deter you –  
while you create or soundly sleep  
your nuns will vote for you, prefer you.  
Is your art great? – are nuns bourgeois?  
Will you, dare you, claim they are?

Sally Evans

*'Anxiety is for the bourgeoisie or for great artists  
in those hours when they are neither asleep  
nor practising their art.'*

# The Girls of Slender Means.

*All the nice people were poor, and few were nicer, as nice people come, than these girls at Kensington who glanced out of the windows in the early mornings to see what the day looked like, or gazed out on the green summer evenings, as if reflecting on the months ahead, on love and the relations of love.*

## Muriel Spark

INTRODUCED BY *Rosemary Goring*



Nevertheless

we're all as nice as nice  
can be until we slip  
in the eye of the wind

for want of salvation,  
a suitor, or something  
in emerald green.

With precious exceptions,  
this is the way things are  
in Morningside and Kensington

as it is where you come from,  
letting the ones who won't  
budge go to blazes.

Nevertheless

*'All the nice people were poor; at least, that was a general axiom, the best of the rich being poor in spirit.'*

Lindsay Macgregor

# The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie.

*'Who was Miss Brodie?'*

*'A teacher of mine, she was full of culture. She was an Edinburgh Festival all on her own. She used to give us teas at her flat and tell us about her prime.'*

## Muriel Spark

INTRODUCED BY *Alan Taylor*



### The Quarter Hours

We've forgotten when we lost time to the witches  
We set the fires, forgetting sparks illuminate

St. Giles' woke up faceless  
so our clocks sung from different sheets  
only harmonising with each year extinguished

Hidden in the missteps and closes' sets  
trying to catch smoke after the fire has gone  
we harnessed time's face  
dedicated to his portrait  
tried to read his voice without just

listening

not realising what was done  
not realising that the quarter hours  
were crucial after all

*'4:15. Not 4 not 4:30 but 4:15. She thought to intimidate me with the use of quarter hours.'*

Catherine Wilson

## Featured poets:

**Andrew Blair** is a poet and performer living in Musselburgh. He co-produces the Saboteur Award-nominated *Poetry as F\*ck* podcast with Ross McCleary, which also puts on events such as Poets Against Humanity, The R-Pattz Facttz and The Ambassador's Reception – a spoken word murder mystery night set in the extended Ferrero Rocher universe. His work has been featured in *Gutter*, *Valve* and *404 Ink*. His debut collection, *An Intense Young Man at an Open Mic Night*, was published in 2017 by House of Three press.

**Lyn Coffin** has published 34 books: poetry, fiction, drama, translation, as well as a children's book. She has a novel due out in 2018 by Transcendent Zero Press. Lyn has published over 150 individual poems in many prestigious print and online magazines and won several grants and awards. Her fiction, *Falling Off The Scaffold*, was chosen by Joyce Carol Oates for Best American Short Stories. Her translation of Shota Rustaveli's twelfth-century epic, *The Knight in the Panther Skin*, won a 2016 SABA prize. Her plays have been performed internationally, and in several US cities. She was Seattle's Wordsworth poet. [lyncoffin.com](http://lyncoffin.com)

Poems by **Patrick James Errington** have won the Wigtown Poetry Prize, *The London Magazine* poetry competition, the Flambard International Poetry Prize, and the National Poetry Competition, among others, and appear in magazines and anthologies such as *The Cincinnati Review*, *Boston Review*, *Oxford Poetry*, *The Iowa Review*, *Copper Nickel*, and *Best New Poets*. His French translation of P.J. Harvey's poetry collection, *The Hollow of the Hand*, was released by Éditions l'Âge d'Homme in 2017 and his own debut chapbook, *Glean*, appeared in 2018 with ignitionpress. A native of Alberta, Canada, and a graduate of Columbia University's MFA programme, Patrick currently lives in Edinburgh and is a doctoral candidate at the University of St Andrews. [pjerrington.com](http://pjerrington.com)

**Sally Evans** has published several books of poetry including *The Bees* (2008) and *A Burrell Tapestry* (2017), as well as two e-books *Tormaukin* and *Drip Road* (both 2017) and has poetry widely published in

magazines, anthologies and websites. She edits the *Poetry Scotland* broadsheet and the webzine *Keep Poems Alive*. She runs a bookshop in Callander, Scotland, with her husband. As of January 2018, she is working towards a PhD in Creative Writing at Lancaster University.

**Lindsay Macgregor** lives near Cupar, Fife, and co-hosts Platform, a regular poetry and music night at Ladybank Station. She has an MLitt in Writing Practice and Study from the University of Dundee. In 2015, she received a Scottish Book Trust New Writer's Award and in 2017, a Hawthornden Fellowship. She reviews poetry collections for *Dundee University Review of the Arts* (DURA) and her own poems have been published in *Poetry Scotland*, *Poetry Review* and *Poetry Salzburg Review*. Her pamphlet, *The Weepers*, was published in 2015 by Calder Wood Press.

**Muriel Spark** was born in Edinburgh in 1918 and educated at James Gillespie's School for Girls and Heriot-Watt. She later lived in Southern Rhodesia, New York, London and Rome. She began her writing career as a poet and writer of literary criticism. From 1947 she was for a time General Secretary of The Poetry Society and editor of *Poetry Review*. Her first novel was published in 1957 and she became one of the most highly regarded British novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her 22 highly acclaimed novels have been reprinted by Polygon to mark the centenary of her birth.

**Catherine Wilson** is a poet, performer, writer, public speaker and event host. Her writing has been commissioned by institutions including the British National Gallery, BBC Radio Scotland, BBC Radio 4 and the Experimental Words project. She has spoken at two of University of Edinburgh's TEDx conferences and organised the first non-American team to compete in CUPSI in Austin in 2016. She was one of the organisers and producers of the award-winning Loud Poets: a collective of musicians, poets and filmmakers committed to making poetry accessible to everyone. With them she has performed at the Edinburgh, Prague and Brighton Fringe Festivals. [www.catherinewilsonwriter.co.uk](http://www.catherinewilsonwriter.co.uk)



*StAnza 2018, the Byre Theatre, St Andrews, 9 March, 2018*

The poems in this e-book were commissioned by StAnza for an installation at the StAnza Poetry Festival in March 2018 as part of the Muriel Spark 100 project to mark the celebrated writer's centenary.

Six poets were each given a quotation from a Muriel Spark novel and asked to write a poem responding to it. Patrick James Errington's poem was commissioned by the Poetry Society. The British Council put out an open call inviting overseas poets to respond to a quote and Lyn Coffin's poem was chosen as winner out of all the poems submitted.

The six poems were displayed around St Andrews during the festival and the six poets took part in an event at which they read and discussed their poems.

This project has been supported by Muriel Spark 100, Creative Scotland, the Poetry Society and the British Council, and is in association with Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd.



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