

anthology must be recommended to all those with a special interest in current trends in Northern Irish poetry writing.

Muriel Spark

The Finishing School

London: Viking, 2004. Pp. 156. £12.99

Reviewed by Nora Foster Stovel

The latest offering by distinguished British writer Muriel Spark—author of such renowned novels as *Memento Mori*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Mandelbaum Gate*, *The Driver's Seat*, *Loitering with Intent*, *Reality and Dreams*, and *Aiding and Abetting*—is her most metafictional novel to date. *The Finishing School*, fatuously named *Campus Sunrise*, is a movable feast. Directed by Rowland Mahler and his wife, Nina Parker, the school has eight pupils in all—a truly motley crew consisting of Princess Tilly, Joan Archer, Lionel Haas, Mary Foot, Lisa Orlando, Pansy Leghorn, Opal Gross, and Pallas Kapelas, daughter of a rich Greek criminal—currently ensconced in the French town of Ouchy.

Rowland, while still an Oxford undergraduate, wrote a play for the National Theatre which was a “young-person success” (54), but, unfortunately, “you couldn’t give away” (54) his subsequent efforts. Now he runs *College Sunrise*, where he teaches creative writing classes and attempts, with increasing difficulty, to write his novel. Nina does organizational work and teaches her popular *Etiquette*, or “*Comme il faut*” (5) classes, as she calls them. For example, her advice to any students taking employment with the United Nations is this: “First, if you, as a UN employee, are chased by an elephant stand still and wave a white handkerchief. This confuses the elephant’s legs. Second, if chased by a large python, run away in a zigzag movement, as a python can’t coordinate its head with its tail. If you have no time to run away, sit down with your back to a tree and spread your legs. The python will hesitate, not knowing which leg to begin with. Get out your knife and cut its head off” (60). Rowland’s creative writing course lends the narrative an exceptional opportunity for metafictionality, as the novel opens with his words, “You begin by setting your scene” (1).

One student, named simply Chris, is at the school to write a novel about Mary Queen of Scots. (Spark, a Scot, lives in Edinburgh, site of the murder of both Rizzio and Darnley.) After a visit to Chateau de Chillon, where Bonivard was imprisoned in 1530, the subject of Byron’s poem *The Prisoner of Chillon*, Chris decides to focus his novel on the murder of David Rizzio, Mary’s musician and advisor. He has “a new theory of the murder of Mary Queen of Scots’ husband” (83), theorizing that his brother, inspired by Bonivard, avenged Rizzio’s death by

plotting the murder of Mary's husband, Lord Darnley, whose obsessive jealousy is believed to be the origin of the plot to murder Rizzio. While Chris toys with alternate endings, he is courted by publishers and filmmakers. Rowland is stabbed by a jealous envy that obsesses him increasingly, preventing him from pursuing his novel. Instead, he writes a novel about a boy writing a novel about Darnley's murder. Chris plays a cat-and-mouse game with Rowland, tormenting him with his jealousy. The two men engage in a symbiotic relationship in which each needs the other's obsession. Meanwhile, Nina pursues her affair with the nephew of a red-haired violinist. The quiriness of Spark's narrative is signed by the fact that this "uncle" is many years older than his violinist "aunt."

Campus Sunrise may be a Finishing School in more ways than one, as readers wonder who will finish off whom: Rowland Chris or Chris Rowland. Rowland's sin, according to Spark, is the sin of spiritual envy, or "Envy of Another's Spiritual Good" (80), according to the Roman Catholic Church, to which Spark, born a Jew, converted. Spark ends her novel with a classic denouement, itemizing the future occupation of each student, upon finishing.

Brief, like all of Spark's novels, *The Finishing School* is an elegant book with large print on small pages nicely bound by Viking Penguin with a dust cover showing a red-haired young man reading a book with a castle depicted on its dust cover, while balancing a pile of books on his head, symbolizing the metafictional quality of the novel. For those who like that kind of thing, that is the kind of thing that they like, as Jean Brodie would say.

Mao Dun

The Shop of the Lin Family & Spring Silkworms

Trans. Sidney Shapiro

Chinese-English Bilingual Edition. Bilingual Series on Modern Chinese Literature
Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004. Pp. Xxxix+168. US \$14.00

Reviewed by Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg

This book presents two of the most well-known stories by Mao Dun (1896–1981), one of the major figures in twentieth-century Chinese literature. It includes an informative and thoughtful introduction to the narrative universe of the author by renowned scholar of Chinese literature David Der-wei Wang.

Mao Dun (other name: Shen Yanbing) belonged to the so-called May Fourth generation of Chinese writers, that is, writers whose creative energy was fueled by the nationalist cultural movement in 1919, and whose literary activities culminated in the 1920s and 1930s. Like many of his contemporaries Mao Dun joined the communist party, and by the time the People's Republic was