



# The Hothouse by the East River

*Muriel Spark*

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## **The Hothouse by the East River** Muriel Spark

He is standing in the middle of the room. She is sitting by the window, staring out over the East River. The late sunlight from the opposite window touches her shoulders and hair, it casts the shadow of palm leaves across the carpet, over her arm. The chair she sits in casts a shadow before her.

There is another shadow, hers. It falls behind her.

Behind her, and cast by what light? She is casting a shadow in the wrong direction. There's no light shining upon her from the east window, it comes from the west window. What is she looking at?

A round trip from present-day life in New York to war-time Intelligence work in England in 1944 and back again.

## **The Hothouse by the East River Details**

Date : Published 1973 by Penguin

ISBN :

Author : Muriel Spark

Format : Mass Market Paperback 139 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literary Fiction, Womens, European Literature, British Literature

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## From Reader Review The Hothouse by the East River for online ebook

### Charles Dee Mitchell says

Paul and Elsa form a middle-aged married couple who live unhappily together in Manhattan. This is the 1970's, and their aging apartment overlooks the East River but is in an older building a little too far south to be fashionable. The air conditioners no longer keep up with the summer heat, and the radiators, whatever their setting, run full blast for the winter. Paul and Elsa are always uncomfortable. Their grown children need nothing from them but money, but this is not a burden. They are rich. When Elsa travels to Europe with a lover she grows bored and charts a plane home from Paris. Paul is not sure of the origins of his wife's money.

They have to some degree a glamorous past, having met in England during World War II when both were doing intelligence work with German POW's who had decided to cooperate with the Allies. In the first chapter of this very short novel, Elsa spots a shoe salesman who she is convinced was the prisoner Helmut Kiel. She had had an affair with Kiel, as did possibly Paul. Kiel's pose as a defector was false. He disappeared and was later reported dead. Paul points out to Elsa that the shoe salesman cannot be Kiel, because the man she has found resembles Kiel as he was thirty years before.

By the time their Puerto Rican maid quits in an hysterical fit and Elsa's psychiatrist takes over as the live-in butler, Sparks seems to be writing a version of screwball comedy with the zaniness replaced by pathology. There are underlying problems that go beyond the faulty heating and air conditioning or the increasingly ominous behavior of their friends from the war years. Sparks tips future, disturbing developments early on when she reveals that Elsa's shadow always falls toward rather than away from the sun.

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### Paul says

I've never read *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, but the novels I have read by Muriel Spark have been distinctly odd and this is no exception. It is quite a curiosity.

Paul and Elsa are married and living in a New York apartment facing the East River; it is the early 1970s. Elsa has some form of mental illness and spends much of her time looking out of the window at the river. Her shadow falls the opposite way to everyone else's. She has an analyst (of course) and the couple have two grown up children and are in their 50s. They met during the war when they worked for some secret military intelligence organisation in England. A salesman in a local shoeshop appears to be the image of a German prisoner they had contact with in the war; only he hasn't aged; but he also died in prison.

Other characters begin to turn up who were also with the couple during the war. The evidence builds towards an obvious conclusion with some not unexpected twists. It reminded me a little of *No Exit* by Sartre and there are clues along the way. Princess Xavier breeds silkworms and keeps the mulberry leaves and silkworm eggs under her bosoms to keep them warm. They hatch during a meal and terrify Elsa's analyst as the worms crawl out of her bosom.

There may be links to Spark's own life as she also worked for the sort of organisation portrayed in the book and she also had mental health problems of her own.

The plot is quite claustrophobic (apart from a bizarre foray to Switzerland) and it could easily be a satire on modern urban life, a ghost story, an analysis of the effects of war in later life or a touch of the absurdist. Possibly something of them all. Nevertheless it was an odd and enjoyable novella.

## Eleri says

I AM SO CONFUSED. Are Elsa and Paul both just mad? Are they dead and trapped in some kind of purgatory? Are the other characters real? Is any of it real? What on earth is the point Muriel Spark is trying to make here?!?

Despite having no idea what was really going on in this book, I actually enjoyed it. I felt bizarrely gripped the surreal mystery of it all. It was a very well-written enigma of a book and I would recommend it if you like that sort of thing.

(And if anyone thinks they actually know what was happening, please tell me - I'm all ears)

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## Doreen says

my favorite quote from this book:

'Haven't we got enough serious problems in this city? We already have the youth problem, the racist problem, the distribution problem, the political problem, the economic problem, the crime problem, the matrimonial problem, the ecological problem, the divorce problem, the domiciliary problem, the consumer problem, the birth-rate problem, the middle-age problem, the health problem, the sex problem, the incarceration problem, the educational problem, the fiscal problem, the unemployment problem, the physiopsychodynamics problem, the homosexual problem, the traffic problem, the heterosexual problem, the obesity problem, the garbage problem, the gyno-emancipation problem, the rent-controls problem, the identity problem, the bi-sexual problem, the uxoricidal problem, the superannuation problem, the alcoholics problem, the capital gains problem, the anthro-egalitarian problem, the trisexual problem, the drug problem, the civic culture and entertainments problem which is something else again, the—'

this is yet another baffling book that i have read in my muriel spark marathon. i was hooked from the beginning till the end. so, are all of them (view spoiler)

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## Holly says

Elsa's shadow falls in the wrong direction...into the light. Her family (husband Paul, daughter Katerina, and son Pierre) and her therapist are perplexed, and they start to have suspicions that things...are not quite right.

Paul and Elsa worked for the British government in a secret department which specialized in propaganda during WWII. They now live in an apartment by the East River in New York, an apartment w/ minimal-to-no heat control.

\*\*Spoiler\*\*

The reader finds 95% through the novella that Paul, Elsa, and all their co-spies were killed in 1944 in a bomb

that hit their train. This life in America is therefore all "unreal" so to speak; Paul and Elsa people a life that could have been if not for the war. Muriel Spark does an amazing job convincing the reader to suspend disbelief just enough - we're aware that she's using a device and that this is not science fiction; this device allows her to make a point about life and war and dreams and coming to terms w/ death...while being very funny. This is the kind of book you want to read w/ friends...so you can lean over and say, "What!?"

Potential symbolism:

--hothouse as hell/hades - but what was their sin?

--Peter Pan w/ old people - as a foil to the main story

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## **Janean says**

Packed into the pages of this short novella are two worlds: One in present day New York City and one many years earlier during the second world war. The first clue that something isn't right is a certain shadow that falls the wrong way regardless of the light. As the tale deepens, more questions arise: Who is mad and who is imaginary? Did Luis Bunuel conspire with Alfred Hitchcock to write this infernal little tale?

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## **Chrystyna says**

The Hothouse by the East River by Muriel Spark - Good

Ordered from Midlothian Library, this turned up much faster than I expected, good job my previous book was a light hearted page turner!

This is a very strange little book. Elsa sits by the window of their New York apartment staring at the East River. Her husband Paul is aggravated at the way she sits and stares but never seems to focus on anything or pay attention.... and her shadow is in the wrong place.

Both of them have mental health issues, both have analysts (well this is New York after all). One day Elsa thinks she has seen a man from their past...from when they were working with POWs broadcasting disinformation to Germany. From here the book alternates between Elsa's increasingly bizarre behaviour and the life they led during the war. When the ending comes, it isn't a surprise, but equally you wouldn't have suspected it at the beginning.

When I was reading this, I wasn't sure I was enjoying it. Now that I'm thinking back to write this, I'm actually thinking I need to read it again with the hindsight gained. Maybe I will. It only took me a day to read and I don't have to return it for three weeks.

One thing about my biography reading - the wartime work described is actually Muriel Spark's although expanded upon for dramatic effect. The more I read of her life and the more novels I read, the more I realise how much of her work is semi-autobiographical. She certainly knew how to take elements of her life and embroider them into something exceptional.

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## Jim says

Perhaps the correct place to start this review is 75% into the text. This is where I gave up on the book. My eye had started skipping to the end of paragraphs and I realised that it was no longer holding my interest; it had defeated me. So I went off and read a few reviews to see what other people thought and was genuinely surprised by the enthusiasm of some of the reviewers. Were we reading the same book? Nonsense is often a matter of perspective. Say to a caveman that one day man would travel to the moon and he'd say, "Nonsense," or at least grunt to indicate his innate scepticism in your assertion. Provided with sufficient information he would, however, have to admit that he'd been a tad premature in his judgement. I had 75% of the available facts before me and I still couldn't see where this book was going but once a kind reviewer pointed out that at the 95% mark all would become clear—a single sentence does the job—I went back to the text and, indeed, much, if not all, does indeed become clear and, of course, all the clues were there.

The first clue is Elsa's shadow:

There is another shadow, hers. It falls behind her. Behind her, and cast by what light? She is casting a shadow in the wrong direction. There's no light shining upon her from the east window, it comes from the west window.

Physical laws dictate the placement, length and intensity of shadows. As soon as you learn that Elsa's shadow does not behave normally you have to ask yourself: What kind of book am I reading?

What kind of book indeed? I knew little about it when I started it. I knew that Elsa had encountered a man working in a shoe shop who she believed was Helmut Kiel, a German prisoner of war she'd met in England:

She remembers Kiel very well. She remembers what happened when we were engaged during the war. She knows that Kiel was a double agent and went to prison after the war. She heard that he died in prison and now she's seen him in New York. But if one makes any appeal to her sense of its significance she's not interested. She's away and out of reach.

I therefore assumed that this book was going to be like *The Night Porter*, *The Man in the Glass Booth* or *Death and the Maiden*, an encounter with someone disagreeable from her past. That Elsa is being treated for some kind of mental illness I expected this to figure in when it came to identifying who the man calling himself Mueller. Her friend, Poppy (who she met at the same time), goes to the store and seems similarly convinced:

'I went back to the shoe store today, Poppy,' Elsa says to the Princess. 'I bought some boots,' Elsa says, 'fur-lined, that I don't need, Poppy, because I wanted to have another look. The other day I bought these shoes I'm wearing—do you like them? He looks like Kiel, too young. Could he be Kiel's son, do you think?'

'He's Kiel,' says Poppy. 'Kiel with a face-lift. When I went to the store I looked close, my dear, and I saw it was truly Kiel. After all, he was very young when we knew him during the war; very young. He must have had his face lifted, it looks quite stretched at the eyes. You go again and look close, Elsa. You look close. He's stiff at the waist. I bought a pair of evening shoes to be sent C.O.D. but naturally I gave a false name and address. I've got five pairs of evening shoes already. What do I want with more? I rarely wear them. Did you notice how he bends, stiff at the knees, thick at the waist, like a prisoner of long years. *As he has been.*'

Of course logic dictates that the shoe seller couldn't possibly be the man; his son is a possibility but not the same man as Poppy and Elsa are convinced he is.

And then there's the odd exchange at the beginning of the sixth chapter between Elsa and her husband, Paul:

'Go back, go back to the grave,' says Paul, 'from where I called you.'  
'It's too late,' Elsa says. 'It was you with your terrible and jealous dreams who set the whole edifice soaring.'  
'You're not real. Pierre and Katerina don't exist.'  
'Don't we?' she says. 'Well then that settles the argument. Just carry on as if nothing has happened all these years.'

Surely they're talking metaphorically. It's like when someone says, "You're dead to me," isn't it? As the book progresses one has to wonder if there's anyone who *isn't* mad. Of course the one thing I've forgotten to mention is that Elsa is filthy rich and normal rules of convention don't apply to the super-rich. I can still see Peter Sellers cutting the nose from out of a painting he's just paid £30,000 (in 1969) in front of an aghast art director played by John Cleese in *The Magic Christian*. Indeed there's a lot of plain silliness in the book, a book that I really didn't expect to be describing as silly in the slightest. Elsa, for example, returns from a trip abroad talking about a diet involving over-ripe tomatoes which her therapist (who's been doing double-duty as her butler) acquires for her; the next time we see of the tomatoes she's hurling them at the actors in a stage production of *Peter Pan* featuring only actors over sixty and produced by her son (who she insists on referring to as "the writer"). That the lead is also known to her from her war days should also have raised my suspicions.

Have I said too much? To be honest once I knew what was happening I was relieved. Perhaps I'm thick—and considering the amount of source material I have available to me and am dying to tell you about—I should be embarrassed for not cottoning-on sooner but there you go. I blame my expectations. That said I'm not a big fan of silliness and there's a fine line which anyone who's watched all four series of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* will agree with me on. Silly can be many things but at times all it manages to be is silly. I will say no more.

Most people will only know Spark as the author of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. I haven't read the book but I've seen adaptations. If, like me, that's all you know of her then this is another way you're likely to be disappointed. Again, not the author's fault.

What she does she does she does well enough. Interestingly the book was begun in begun in the late sixties during the brief period of her life that she lived in New York but not finished and published until after she moved to Rome and clearly one she struggled with. What you have to ask is: If we got to see the Statue of Liberty at the *start* of *Planet of the Apes* would it ruin the film or enhance it? Tom Stoppard lays his cards on the table when he entitles his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; no room for doubt there. I'm not sure that the reveal is worth wading through 95% of the book. If she'd done something radically different then perhaps.

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## Jen says

My thanks to NetGalley and Open Road for an eARC copy of this book to read and review.

The blurb hooked me.

"In 1970s New York, Paul and Elsa are like many other well-off middle-aged couples, worrying over their apartment and psychoanalyst bills by day, and meeting friends at restaurants by night. But this is not an ordinary couple with ordinary neuroses, as becomes clear when Paul convinces himself that Elsa's shadow always points in the wrong direction. As Paul and Elsa's involvement in World War II espionage begins to

surface, the glitz and glamor of their lives is revealed to be nothing more than illusion."

The "shadow pointing in the wrong direction" SHOULD have tipped me off that this is both surreal and has an unreliable narrator, however I missed that part of the blurb. I do not care for surreal or unreliable narration and this book has book.

NOT the book, it is completely me, as I know others enjoy those things. If you are one of those people, you will like this book. I do not, so did not enjoy it. I got to page 21, then decided to skip to the back to see if it cleared things up or not. It did not. I read the reviews of others and got some spoilers.

Not a spoiler, but things don't tie together until about 85-95% of the way into the book. That is too long for me and the twist wasn't worth it for me to read the entire thing.

Again, not my kind of book, but if this is your thing, then I recommend it. If it's not your type of book, I recommend avoiding it.

One star, because I didn't like it at all. This book has the dubious honor of being my first DNF of 2017.

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### **Karen says**

THE HOTHOUSE BY THE EAST RIVER BY MURIEL SPARK

I enjoyed this novel. Haunting

Thank you to Net Galley, Muriel Spark and the publisher for providing me with my digital copy for a fair and honest review.

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### **Nadyne says**

First sentence: "If it were only true that all's well that ends well, if it were only true."

Last sentence: "She turns to the car, he following her, watching as she moves how she trails her faithful and lithe cloud of unknowing across the pavement."

From Schultreff.de: In 1944 Paul Hazlett is working in the Compound, a secret government department in Britain, which specialized in propaganda broadcasts over Europe. There he falls in love with Elsa Janovic who is also engaged with black propaganda and psychological warfare in this particular Compound. Other members of the Compound are Miles Bunting, Princes Xavier, Colonel Tylden and several prisoners of war. Among those POWs is Helmut Kiel, a German who has chosen to work for the enemy and is now broadcasting for the Compound. Elsa and Kiel happen to have a love affair and after a few months Kiel is sent back to the prison camp. From there he goes on the air in a prisoners of war exchange-of-greetings programme betraying the identity of the Compound, which was supposed to be an authentic underground German station. Six or seven years after war Kiel dies in prison.

In late spring of 1944 Paul, Elsa and the other members of their intelligence unit gather in a hotel in London having just returned from a mission to the United States. Paul tells his colleagues that he has got a good job waiting for him in America and a place to stay for Elsa and him. The next day they get ready to go back to the country when a V-2 bomb hits them direct just as their train starts pulling out and Paul, Elsa, Princess Xavier, Miles Bunting and Colonel Tylden die.

Paul believes to be the only survivor of the bomb attack although he is dead and after some time he imagines to live together with Elsa in an antiquated apartment by the East River in New York. He is convinced that he has dreamt up Elsa, who now is his wife, their children Pierre and Katerina and Princess Xavier. From a certain point on he is sure that those „imagined“ people have become real due to his imagination. In fact neither of them is real. They have risen from the dead or as in the case of Pierre and Katerina they never really existed. Nevertheless they live among people who are real and alive. They are even considered to be real persons by everyone else. Though there seems to be something wrong with Elsa. Paul realises that she is casting a shadow in the wrong direction; her shadow falls in a different angle to evryone else's shadow no matter from where the light shines upon her. In addition to that Elsa needs to meet he analyst quite often as she is departing from reason from time to time.

She spends her day mainly by sitting by window and looking at the East River.

Approximately 30 years after their death Elsa tells Paul that she has recognised a salesman in a shoe store to be Helmut Kiel. Paul does not believe her as he is certainly put out that Kiel died in prison and knowing that his wife is mad. But after proving her statement and having seen the man himself he believes that this certain person is Helmut Kiel although he ought to look much older. Paul now feels in danger from Kiel because he thinks that Kiel has returned to haunt him in order to take revenge for his imprisonment. Kiel calls himself Mueller and when Elsa goes back to the shoe store to talk to him he denies to be Kiel and claims that he was not yet born in 1944. Paul tells his son Pierre about Kiel but Pierre does not show any interest whereas Katerina is curious about Kiel.

In the end Paul is sitting in a bar watching a group of people consisting of Elsa, Princess Xavier, Kiel and Miles Bunting. When another man heads towards the group he knows that it is Colonel Tylden, another person from the Compound. Then Paul gets up, grasps Elsa's arm and pulls her out of the bar heading towards a night-club. This is when Elsa tells Paul that he also died in the bomb attack in 1944. When they realise that the group are following them they continue their escape through several discos and clubs. In a hotel they happen to arrive at the golden wedding of two old friends and afterwards they visit Pierre and Katerina telling them that they (Pierre and Katerina) do not exist. Finally Paul goes to see his oldest friend once more and at the very end Paul and Elsa stand in front of their apartment block at the East River seeing that the old building is pulled down in order to be replaced by a modern one. Just at that moment Princess Xavier, Kiel, Miles Bunting and Colonel Tylden pass by in a car and take Paul and Elsa back with them so that they can have peace.

I had never read anything written by Muriel Spark, although I knew her by name, so I really didn't know what to expect. But this novella totally came as a surprise. It took me a while to realise that everything was not what it seemed and that there was more to it than remembering a love-story from long ago. I thought this was so intriguing that I couldn't put the book down and read it in one sitting.

I will definitely read more books by Spark, because I like stories with a little unexpected twist, and I am curious to see if her other books are like that also.

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## Adam says

[*light spoilers*] Drawing associations with both Ambrose Bierce and J.M. Barrie, Spark takes an uncharacteristic turn into magical realism territory and drags her readers through a haunted madhouse of a novel, a purgatory-like transitional world. Here shadows do not always fall *away* from light, and if the dead stay dead, then they do so with a tremendous amount of fuss and ruckus. *The Hothouse by the East River* delivers just as you want a Spark novel to. It may be my favorite of the half dozen books I've read by her, and like *Loitering with Intent* it immediately begs for a second reading.

## **Dhanaraj Rajan says**

May be three and half stars.

### **First Observation:**

I finished reading this book this morning and till now I am not sure what to make of this novel. I am not a person to look for hidden meaning in every novel. But then, the case here is different.

### **Why?**

### **Warning: This contains spoilers.**

The novel certainly has a story to tell. And in fact, it is fast paced. The moment one sits to read, one is caught up in the plot. It races to the finish. But in the end you realize that you had been tricked. You begin to wonder whether the characters that you had read till then were real. In fact, they are not real. What are they? They are ghosts of the characters.

Are you confused? Listen to this now: the characters (ghosts) have a family and grown up kids. They also frequent a psycho therapist. The action seems to be taking place in the real world. But apparently they are not. It is a surreal world, a surreal world not to the quality of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

### **Final Word:**

This novel reminded me of another novel - Pedro Páramo.

I am still wondering what to make of it.

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## **Toby says**

Muriel Spark, she's famous right? My only reference comes from Colin Firth referring to Ruth Gemmell as Miss Jean Brodie in the movie adaptation of Nicky Hornby's Fever Pitch. A tenuous connection indeed to somebody made a Dame of the British Empire for her services to literature. I had a vague perception of copious stuffy studies of the class structure of Britain but thanks to this beautiful first edition of one of her obscurities received as a birthday gift I can safely lay those preconceived notions to rest.

The Hothouse By The East River is a strange little book of a slightly surreal nature, in fact it turns out that there's very little reality involved in this tale, but the nature of the participants and their doing cannot be discussed without very real spoilers. The pleasure comes from the slow reveal of details and the final revelation that draws all that came before in to sharp focus. And it's funny too!

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## **Ali says**

The Hothouse by the East River is a strange little novel, at once oddly unsettling and other worldly. Written

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in the present tense – a style Muriel Spark had already employed to great effect in *The Driver's Seat*, lending her story an immediacy that works well here.

As with that earlier novel *The Girls of Slender Means*, here Spark concerns herself with the fall out from the Second World War and has used her own experiences to do so. However, *The Hothouse from the East River* is entirely different with a very sixties/seventies feel to it – the war is viewed in retrospect, from the distance of 1970s New York society. This society immediately feels slightly off kilter, this is deliberate of course, and in time will make absolute sense.

In their New York apartment, overlooking the East River, live Elsa and Paul Hazlett, it is a long way from where they started. Paul; originally from Montenegro met Elsa during the Second World War when they were both working for British intelligence at the Compound deep in the English countryside. These sections recreating life at the compound in 1944 are the most real parts of the story (again this is deliberate and will make sense to the reader who realises what is actually going on.) Muriel Spark worked in a similar environment during the war, and in writing these sections of this novel was drawing heavily on her own experience.

Here they worked alongside former German POWs – including Helmut Kiel. Now Elsa insists that she has seen Helmut Kiel working at a shoe store on Madison Avenue, looking just as he always did. Paul points out that Kiel died in prison back in Germany and anyway he would have aged, as they both have, yet Elsa insists it is the same man.

Full review: <https://heavenali.wordpress.com/2018/...>

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