



The Takeover

Muriel Spark

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In the cool, historic sanctuary of Nemi rests the spirit of Diana, the Benevolent-Malign Goddess whose priests once stalked the sacred grove. Now Hubert Mallindaine, self-styled descendent of the Italian huntress, has claimed spiritual rights to a villa at Nemi - a villa with a view to kill.

The Takeover Details

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Bob says

I enjoyed The Comforters sufficiently that I plunged straight to the next Spark that had been on the shelf for some time. The difference between someone's first book and their 15th is often rather pronounced and not infrequently for the better - this 1976 book is broader in scope, funnier, more adventurous in attempting grander (even though potentially less realistic) characters. It combines Sparks' personal thematic obsessions (Catholicism, thieves) with global events of the early 70s and reflects her actual move to Italy in the late 60s. Among other things she was henceforth in a country where the Catholic Church was part of the fabric of daily life and yet a life more pagan than the polite tea-drinking world of British converts (the literary fiction about whom is more or less a persistent subgenre of 20th century English lit).

Ape says

Well, I don't know where to start. Odd tale, but I enjoyed it, and with Spark's usual very believable and complicated characters. Her characters are real and full of foibles, so it can get to the point where you can't stand any of them. This book's a lot about the love and chase of money, and people posing about whatever way of thinking happens to be fashionable, but only as far as is convenient to them. There's this young woman, Letizia, who is a nationalist and keen on left-wing politics. She's a very well off young woman, but likes to go about helping out drug addicts.... until she wants to go on holiday and then she looks for someone to dump them with so she doesn't need to worry her head over him. A mere tiny example out of the book.

Set in Italy, it focuses on three villas at the coast, all built and owned by a wealthy American woman. In one villa there's her son, Michael, and wife, Mary. At another there's a rich guy and his two children (including Letizia), who are renting from the American, Maggie, and have spent a lot on the house in improving it. Then there's the third and home of the most irritating character in the book: Hubert Mallindaine. He's British, vain, incapable of real relationships, a leech and a liar and is under the impression that the world owes him everything and he shouldn't have to lift a finger to get it. He's living in the house, fully furnished, rent free, and considers it his right. Maggie tries for years to get him evicted but the complexities of Italian law in this book seem to mean nothing ever gets done. For example, she has an original Gauguin in the property. Hubert gets a copy made, sells the original and pockets the profit. Maggie later finds out that the original is being sold in Switzerland, and is furious at thinking she's been sold a fake. Hubert, who thinks the house and furniture is his god given right, then demands compensation from Maggie for "giving" him this counterfeit painting to live with. Vile little toad. Full of stories told by a couple of mad aunts in the past, he's also come to the utterly convinced notion that he is the direct descendant of the goddess Diana, and therefore it is his birthright to be living on the land he is living on. He even starts a cult, which most people seem to attend for the easy sex, but he doesn't get it.

I won't go into all the "lovely" characters that come and go, forever trying to get one over one another for the sake of a lot of money. Many get their just desserts by the end of it. Certainly a very full bodied cast of characters here.

Richard says

Basically, this is about a pleasant but wimpy woman (Maggie) with money who fails to evict a rather affable asshole (Hubert) who's manspreading all over her property without paying rent because he's an entitled loser who thinks he's descended from the goddess Diana. Curiously, Maggie has a (third?) husband who is also kind of a light-weight. The property belongs to her and predates their arrangements, so he makes vague noises and harrumphing instead of being a He-Man spouse and just throwing the sucker out. Deadbeat Hubert becomes ever more entrenched and kooky. All rather odd if you ask me. Alright, the barely-a-comedy of Manners goes spinning out of control, and by the middle it's taken a lot of bizarre twists involving the property, the criminals, Gauguin, the help, the plans for Lauro's wedding feast, and Pauline enjoying kisses... Absolutely everyone in the cast is busily taking over something or swindling someone, and the level of absurdity is quite amusing. And then there's the cult of Diana...

It's no wonder Ms Spark was made a Dame of the British Empire. She is certainly one of its more delicious treasures.

Gena says

The characters in this novel were irritating enough to make one want to reach in and slap them silly. I suppose that means that the book is successfully written; however, I read the first half and skimmed the rest. This was read to complete the 2015 Reading Challenge: a book published the year I was born.

Rick says

Fabulously beautiful and magnificently wealthy Maggie Radcliffe owns three villas by Lake Nemi, near Rome. One villa is rented to an Italian family, one has been given to her son and his new wife and in the third is Hubert Mallindaine. Hubert had been close friends with Maggie, and she had indulged him and his retinue of 'secretaries', letting him live rent free in the grandly appointed villa, whilst, also supplying him with the wherewithal to live on. All this needs to stop, Maggie is marrying a conservative Italian marchese, who will not appreciate Hubert's louche lifestyle and the fact that Maggie is bankrolling it. Hubert needs to go.

Obviously, Hubert does not want to go and helped by Italian law regarding squatters, he digs his heels in, aided and abetted by Miss Thin, who is employed, for once, to be a real secretary. Hubert begins to sell the antiques in the villa and replaces them with copies. Meanwhile, in the outside world and in Italy, in particular, things are changing, the hedonistic days of la Dolce Vita are giving way to a more fractious world of burglaries, kidnappings and terrorist activity; a left leaning government is voted in which enrages Maggie's marchese and Maggie loses her wealth via burglary and the fraud of the crooked financier, Coco de Renault. Just to add to the brew, Lauro, once Hubert's secretary, has moved on to be manservant at Maggie's son's household, where with entrepreneurial spirit, he sleeps with most of the family, extracting sums of money along the way, becoming a close aide but also saving up for his wedding to the girl whose family actually owns the land that Maggie's houses sit on (illegally).

This is one of Muriel Spark's longer novels and it is a wonderfully sustained piece of stylish, comic writing. Spark manages to have a satiric swipe at everyone - organized religion and the cosmopolitan rich, especially - but it is also a moral exploration of intelligence, absurdity, myth, reality and the emergence of the new

'global' world that challenges the old order and its power.

Barbara says

This was entertaining.... a romp through the 70s. Lots a wicked wit. There were no "good guys" in this story. Nothing was quite what it seemed.

Jenny Yates says

This novel is about expats in the 70s in Italy. The central figures are Maggie, a much-married wealthy woman, and Hubert, a gay man who insists he's a direct descendent of the goddess Diana. The writing is facile, sometimes funny, but the characters do begin to drive you crazy after a while. They have exotic ruts, but they are ruts none the less. Those with highly developed senses of sarcasm are likely to enjoy this book more.

Elizabeth says

Spark sets this book amidst the social and economic changes of the 1970s with a focus on the lives of the wealthy and their hangers on. These are people who own multiple houses, have summer and winter jewelry (each set kept in a safety deposit box in the off-season and not insured as the pieces are so valuable as to make the premiums prohibitively expensive), and vacation in exotic places, though the main characters are Americans (one married to an Italian nobleman) and their immediate circle. The early pages of the novel set up relationships and sexual intrigues (in which it becomes clear that one of the servants is literally screwing every one of his employers, regardless of age or sex, and amassing a tidy nest egg in the process). Initially, it is hard to develop much sympathy for any of the characters, but as the novel progresses, Spark develops the property situation in a way that is both engaging and amusing. Maggie, the American matriarch, has three houses in Tuscany, one of which she built especially for a favorite hanger-on; she now wants to evict her guest/rent-free tenant, having tired of him, but is hamstrung by Italian tenant protection laws and a fear of scandal (and eventually by a duplicitous lawyer). Meanwhile, the reader learns more about the property and sees how the wealthy weather the economic crises of the 70s (which we plebeians probably remember as giving us stagflation and gas lines--something that no one worries about particularly in this novel) and the threat of crime against their immense wealth (jewel thieves, fraudulent financial advisors, shady lawyers, kidnappers, etc.). The obsession of Maggie with keeping control of her property (even though she has no use for it--either the movable property or the real estate) eventually comes to seem almost rational, even as the character's actions become (superficially at least) less rational. I was going to give this three stars, but the ending redeemed the book for me, so 4 stars it is.

Kris McCracken says

As ever, Spark manages to construct an array of odd and intriguing characters. Set amongst a group of wealthy expatriates (and locals) in Italy through the 1970s, once again Spark explores the clash of modernity

with 'traditional' values, and the pernicious influence of money.

In all, it's a breezy tale of the undeserving, complacent rich being ripped-off by chancers. As one might expect, every character is utterly liberated of any authentic moral or ethical framework. A decent read, but when all of the characters are so unlikable, it didn't really grab me.

Neil Hargreaves says

Good Spark but maybe not great? The first part is epigrammatic and delightful and builds up to a joyful (for me) comic set piece. And she has nice line and the way people intuit sounds insights about rivals and enemies for the wrong reasons. But it sort of fades a way at the end and it's the first book I've read of hers where the way she apparently made it up as she went seems like a potential limitation, rather than something miraculous.

Angie Boyter says

OMG I didn't even get through the first chapter! If this book appeals to you, DO read the Kindle sample. If her writing style doesn't annoy you to pieces you might like it, but I COULD NOT STAND IT. PERHAPS very appropriate to the kind of people she is writing about, but I did not need the narration to be as affected as the characters.

Francis Pellow says

a ridiculous farce. it doesn't have the heart or bite of much of Spark's best writing but enjoyable nevertheless.

George says

3.5 stars. Another Muriel Spark novel that would appeal mainly to Spark fans. Good dialogue and interesting characters. Set in Italy around the lake at Nemi in the early 1970s. Maggie, a rich woman is trying to make her tenant, Hubert, leave her house. It becomes quite a complicated matter! Maggie is swindled and robbed by a number of people. There is funny moments with two jesuit priests. Hubert believes he is a descendant from the goddess Diana and attains a following of worshippers. The plot is zany. Maggie is robbed of land, art and furniture but somehow remains upbeat. A fun read.

lethe says

I very much enjoyed this darkly comic novel, which was nice after last year's disappointments *The Hothouse by the East River* and *The Public Image*.

This is in the same league as *Loitering with Intent* and *Memento Mori* in my opinion, which means a shared third place in Muriel Spark's oeuvre, after *The Driver's Seat* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

Chrystyna says

The Takeover by Muriel Spark - Good

Another weird and wonderful book read as part of #ReadingMuriel2018

There isn't a single character in this book that is appealing or has any redeeming features. Every single one is spoiled and self indulgent believing that the world owes them something. As such the whole book is how they pit themselves against each other, trying to score points or swindle or seduce. Now that could be the scene for a horrible, unpleasant, book, but this is very readable. You just hope that by the end they will all get their comeuppance.

Set in Nemi, Italy, home of the cult of Diana, Maggie has bought land and three houses. She lives in one with her husband, son and daughter-in-law. Rents one out to Emilio Bernadini, his son and daughter and their English tutor. The third she has foolishly let Hubert Mallindaine and his secretary live in. He believes he is a descendant of the goddess Diana and is trying to resurrect the cult. Maggie wants her house back, Hubert has no intention of leaving....and so the manoeuvring begins.

This is all happening against the back drop of the oil crisis of the early 1970s and soon they all find themselves in difficult circumstances one way or another.
