WOKING FILM CLUB

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie

Season 46 – 4th Film – **Screening 22nd October 2026**

UK/US	1969
UK Release Date	25th Feb 1969
116 mins	Certificate 12
Director	Ronald Neame
Screenplay	Jay Presson Allen, based on his play, based on the novel by Muriel Spark
Cinematography	Ted Moore
Production design	John Howell
Maggie Smith	Jean Brodie
Gordon Jackson	Gordon Lowther
Robert Stephens	Teddy Lloyd
Celia Johnson	Miss Mackay
Pamela Franklin	Sandy
Jane Carr	Mary McGregor
Diane Grayson	Jenny
Shirley Steedman	Monica
Molly Weir	Miss Kerr
Helena Gloag	Miss Kerr
Ann Way	Miss Gaunt



Dame Maggie Smith (1934 – 2024) was an actress best known to younger audiences as Violet Crawley, the Dowager Duchess of Grantham in Downton Abbey; and as Professor Minerva McGonagall in the Harry Potter franchise. But before these roles she had a highly distinguished career on stage and screen, covering over seventy years from 1952. She won many awards including five BAFTAs, three Golden Globes and two Oscars: one for Best Supporting Actress in California Suite (in 1979), and the other for Best Actress in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (in 1970). It is this film we show tonight, in a belated tribute to one of our finest screen actresses.

The film is based on a novel by Muriel Spark, a prolific writer with 22 novels published between 1957 and 2004. Born in Edinburgh in 1918, she came to fiction relatively late, her life up to that time being full of incident. In 1937 she married a man 13 years her senior and emigrated with him to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), found he suffered from bipolar disorder and left him (and her son) to return to the UK and join the intelligence service towards the end of the Second World War before embarking on her literary career initially as an editor and poet. She was baptised into the Church of England in 1953, but then converted to Roman Catholicism in 1954. The Prime of Miss Brodie was her sixth novel, published in 1961, which became one of her best known and most successful. It was adapted for the stage in 1966 and had runs in both London and New York (1968).

The story is set in the Marcia Blaine private school for girls in Edinburgh, beginning in 1932, and centres on the charismatic teacher Jean Brodie (Maggie Smith) and her class of ten-year-olds. Shunning convention, she seeks to develop the girls (‘they shall receive an education in

the original sense of the Latin verb *educere*, to lead out'), gives her students lessons about her personal love life and travels, promoting art history and classical studies. She has her favourites – the Brodie set – with whom she stays in touch over the next seven years as they progress to the senior school, even though she no longer teaches them.

The school is led by Miss Mackay (Celia Johnson) who vaguely disapproves of Miss Brodie. The married art master Teddy Lloyd (Robert Stephens) had a relationship with Miss Brodie in the past and is still in love with her; and the music master Gordon Lowther (Gordon Jackson) is in a relationship with her now and would like to marry her. But Miss Brodie is more interested in her pupils, especially the Brodie set, and has as her maxims 'Little girls, I am in the business of putting old heads on young shoulders', 'All my pupils are the crème de la crème' and 'Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life'.





The film follows these relationships as the girls pass through the senior school and prepare to leave, and Miss Brodie, after her annual visit to Italy, becomes increasingly under the influence of Mussolini.

The Radio Times Guide to Films gave the film 5 stars, writing: Although Vanessa Redgrave was a hit in the West End version of Muriel Spark's novel, few would argue that the part of liberated Edinburgh schoolmarm Jean Brodie now belongs solely to Maggie Smith. Never have such politically incorrect opinions been expressed with such disarming charm or been received with such trusting innocence. While Smith thoroughly deserved her Oscar, it is somewhat surprising that Celia Johnson was overlooked for her superb performance as the disapproving headmistress. Robert Stephens and Gordon Jackson are also on form as the men in Smith's life, and Pamela Franklin impresses as the pupil who turns Judas. Crème de la crème, indeed.

Maggie Smith was singled out for her performance in the film. The Chicago Reader wrote that Smith gives 'one of those technically stunning, emotionally distant performances that the British are so damn good at'. Turner Classic Movies opined that the film 'is one of the best British films of the decade. It is as captivating today as it was upon its release and its two central performances by Maggie Smith and Pamela Franklin are both stirring and mesmerizing. The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie is the crème de la crème'.

Finally, a shout out for some other members of the cast including the cameo from Molly Weir (who I recall as Aggie from the long-running radio programme Life with the Lyons) and Helena Gloag as the Misses Kerr who teach needlework; and Ann Way as Miss Mackay's secretary Miss Gaunt who conveys so much without saying a word.

Michael Hipkins

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Club website: www.wncc.org.uk. Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to reactions@wncc.org.uk by close Tuesday 27th October.
DVDs and Blu-Rays from most of our previous presentations are available to borrow!

In 2016, Professor Willy Maley wrote for the Scottish Book Trust on Muriel Spark's long relationship with cinema

Muriel Spark had a life-long fascination with cinema. Her parents instilled in her the habit of regular cinema attendance, and cinematic reference, themes and motifs occur in many of her stories.

It pleased her that her most famous novel, **The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,** was made into a highly successful film in 1969. But the success of the Brodie book, play and film has arguably overshadowed the rest of her work, including adaptations of her other novels. Spark once said: "A lot of my other books are overlooked due to Maggie Smith. Lots of people think that she wrote it". Her view of this particular adaptation was that it was "too brightly coloured for a true depiction of the Edinburgh scene". But on the bright side she said: "I was lucky in having a very good film script writer and the others were really rather good too. I haven't had an unpleasant experience. […] I think it is because I write very short books and it is easier for people to adapt. They can just take the dialog out, and there's very little they can go astray on".

Given that Spark personally took the view that her books were easy to adapt, it seems remiss that only a handful of her 22 novels have had this treatment. Some might say this is due to her subject matter being too subtle or sedate: we tend to think of Morningside rather than homicide when we think of Spark on screen. But as the critic Patrick Parrinder observes: "Muriel Spark films would be good news for the tomato-ketchup manufacturers. Among these bloody and unnatural acts are the stabbing of Lise (who has carefully chosen a non-stain-resistant dress for the occasion) in **The Driver's Seat;** the slicing of a victim's body in half by two jealous women in Territorial Rights; the murder of a secretary by her boss in **The Ballad of Peckham Rye**, the murder weapon being a corkscrew stabbed nine times into her neck; and the trail of goat's blood stretching halfway across the island in Robinson".

The Driver's Seat, Muriel Spark's own personal favourite novel, was also turned into a film, but did not have the same appeal with audiences as Brodie. It is a sort of Psycho in reverse, with the female protagonist, Lise, actively seeking her killer. Filmed in 1974 as **Identikit** with Elizabeth Taylor, Ian Bannen and Andy Warhol, it features the memorable strap lines, "She drove them crazy and hoped for the worst", and "Was she mad enough to plot her own murder?" While Maggie Smith's performance as Miss Jean Brodie is instantly recognizable, Taylor's portrayal of Lise is not. Spark was characteristically witty about it: "The film never came to anything. Elizabeth Taylor took the part of the protagonist, who was a girl who wanted to be killed. It was very sick. It's my favourite book, because I think it's well-made. But there was no way in which Elizabeth Taylor could look as if she wanted to die. She looked as if she wanted to drink."

A few of Spark's early works enjoyed a late flowering onscreen. The 1975 BBC three-part adaptation of **The Girls of Slender Means** (1963), directed by Moira Armstrong and starring now-author Kate Atkinson and Miriam Margolyes, was a triumph of television drama. The **Abbess of Crewe** (1974) became a 1977 film called **Nasty Habits** with Glenda Jackson in the title role. It is essentially the Watergate Scandal set in a convent, a book about omniscience, overhearing, overseeing, and being oversexed, a kind of Carry On Up The Convent, or, in its own words, "Jesuit Novices on the Spree". Spark's third novel, **Memento Mori** (1959), is a brilliant study of old age. The 1992 BBC film version, directed by Jack Clayton, whose credits included Room at the Top, and starring Maggie Smith and Thora Hird, won the Writers Guild of Great Britain screenplay award.

Yet there the list of screen adaptations ends. The majority of Spark's stories have still not been adapted despite their enormous potential: for example, **The Public Image** (1968), an odd take on fame and the world of film in which Annabel Christopher, "a twentieth-century Jane Eyre", is repackaged and marketed to cinema audiences as "The English Lady-Tiger", but has her image tarnished by her jealous husband; **Not to Disturb** (1971), a sort of Agatha Christie meets Upstairs, Downstairs with a vengeance; **The Hothouse by the East River** (1973), a tale of zombies in New York – think The Others meets The Sixth Sense, or The Waste Land meets Peter Pan; **The Takeover** (1976), an Italian romp about property and theft and the worship of Diana; and **Territorial Rights** (1979) a kind of Carry-On up the Canal or Mirth in Venice. And Spark's biggest book, **The Mandelbaum Gate** (1965), her only epic – she called it her Passage to India – also awaits adaptation.

Then there is **Reality and Dreams** (1996), a Spark novel whose actual theme is the art of filmmaking. It opens with a seminal Sparkean statement: "He often wondered if we were all characters in one of God's dreams". Tom Richards, the protagonist, is so used to controlling the scene that he finds it hard to let go when a fall from a crane during a risky shoot sees him confined to bed. And again, the film theme surfaces in her last novel, **The Finishing School** (2004), where creative writing student Chris is being courted by a producer for the film rights to his historical novel about Mary Queen of Scots.

When Dame Muriel's centenary is celebrated in 2018 it ought to be the cue for screenings of all of her adapted work. But an even more fitting tribute to her skill and her enduring interest in the medium of film would be a surge of interest in the scripting of her remaining work. Spark is a national treasure, a writer of the stature of Burns, Scott and Stevenson. The time has come for her to be celebrated as such. Roll out the red carpet and order the ketchup.

https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/writing-and-authors/spark-on-screen

Comments and reactions to **The Marching Band**- shown on October 8th 2026

No of reaction slips received = **27** Average score = **7.93**

Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Number	0	0	0	0	0	1	9	11	3	3

Position	Film	Score	Reactions	Audience
1	I Swear	8.45	31	47
2	**The Marching Band (En Fanfare)**	**7.93**	**27**	**38**
3	Hamnet	7.36	25	46

Charming, sensitive witness to way music can inspire and encourage living

A fabulous film! I would gladly watch it again. The ending was superb!!

Lovely film; fast-moving and a feel-good story, though ending a bit sad but true to life. And the music – so uplifting. Last 5 minutes were wonderful

Excellent choice, good acting, story and music Very enjoyable heart-felt film

The final scene Bolero brought tears to my eyes

Wonderful music and very well-acted. Moved at a pace and a thoroughly enjoyable film. Great end! A round of applause! Gentle and emotional but also uplifting

A real tear-jerker at the end **Excellent ending**

A little twee at times but thoroughly enjoyable A very unusual film!

Very sensitive and thoughtful – wonderful ending! Brotherly love without being mawkish **Really enjoyable, A nice, moving story**

A better film than I had anticipated and as there was not too much dialogue the subtitles were easy to follow

Thanks for another good film. It seems a shame it didn't get more showings in the UK. I enjoyed it.

Our Next Film – in 3 weeks - Thursday 12th November – The Choral



The Choral may not be exceptional but it is beautifully crafted and performed. The music is glorious. What more could you ask for? – **Leonard Maltin**

A quiet and consistent pleasure: an unsentimental but deeply felt drama which subcontracts actual passion to the music of Elgar and leaves us with a heartbeat of wit, poignancy and common sense **– The Guardian**

A typical provincial British tale about everyday Englishmen and women banding together to accomplish a controversial task against long odds. It's akin to a glass of warm milk **– The Daily Beast**