

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Iris Murdoch

Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes

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Acknowledgements

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About the Authors

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Also by Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes

American Fiction
Martin Amis
Margaret Atwood
Louis de Bernières
A. S. Byatt
Roddy Doyle
Sebastian Faulks
John Fowles
Susan Hill
Ian McEwan
Toni Morrison
Salman Rushdie
Jeanette Winterson

‘An excellent and timely series, very useful for students, well-produced and well-written.’

Dr Robert Eaglestone, Royal Holloway, University of London

‘I am impressed. Students will find these texts extremely useful, and serious general readers, too.’

Professor Chris Woodhead, former Chief Inspector of Schools

‘Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes are at the cutting edge of providing English teachers with the support they need for teaching the contemporary novel.’

Dr Vivian Anthony, Training Co-ordinator,
Professional Development Services for HMC schools

‘Two highly sensitive and intelligent teachers (from school and university) lead us into dialogue with the author, the texts and their context and help us to question what and how we are reading and to arrive at illuminating answers.

Such dialogue is the essence of good practice in teaching literature.’

John Venning, Head of English, St Paul’s School for Boys, London

‘This series is the first to teach students what they most need to learn: how to teach themselves. It is informative, rigorous and yet, more importantly, playful. It combines the qualities of the best teaching.’

Anthea Church, Head of English, Kent College,
Pembury

‘I didn’t realise just how good the series was until I started working closely with it. The questions are so thoughtful and probing, and the analysis provided allows the students to lift their own understanding. The texts really do occupy their own niche between guides purely for teachers and the ubiquitous student crib, and are much better than either.’
Michael Parker, Head of English, Newington College,
NSW, Australia

‘This is a terrific series. The text and the reader’s response are at the heart of these guides; the tone is authoritative but never dogmatic, while the style is enthusiastic and approachable. The series is aptly named – not only are the subjects still alive, so too are the guides.’

Lucy Webster, *The English Magazine*

‘*Vintage Living Texts* are very modern. They are certainly democratic as they give the literary text to the reader, prompting personal critical response without suggesting what those responses should be. They will be a blessing to teachers and students.’

Iain Finlayson, *The Times Play Magazine*

‘These guides, designed to reflect the National Curriculum, are likely to appeal also to university students, and those who take their reading group

seriously.’
Independent Magazine

‘In addition to sixth formers and undergraduates, the
series also works well for those taking the
International Baccalaureate or on EFL courses.’
Liz Thomson, *Publishing News*

VINTAGE
LIVING
TEXTS

Iris Murdoch

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE
TO CONTEMPORARY
LITERATURE

The Bell

The Black Prince

The Sea, The Sea


VINTAGE

VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS

Preface

About this series

Vintage Living Texts: The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature is a new concept in reading guides. Our aim is to provide readers of all kinds with an intelligent and accessible introduction to key works of contemporary literature. Each guide suggests techniques for reading important contemporary novels, and offers a variety of back-up materials that will give you ways into the text – without ever telling you what to think.

Content

Usually the books reproduce an extensive interview with the author, conducted exclusively for this series. This is not to say that we believe that the authors word is law. Of course it isn't. Once his or her book has gone out into the world he or she becomes simply yet another – if singularly competent – reader. This series recognises that an author's contribution may be valuable, and intriguing, but it puts the reader in control. In the case of *Iris Murdoch* we have included an account drawn from published interviews with, or prefaces by, Iris Murdoch to offer perspectives on her literary opinions, methods and preoccupations. Most of the titles in the series are author-focused and cover at least three novels by that writer, along with relevant biographical, bibliographical, contextual and comparative

material. With *Iris Murdoch* we are catering for a particular school and college audience who often study these three key works of twentieth-century fiction.

How to use this series

In the reading activities that make up the core of each book you will see that you are asked to do two things. One comes from the text; that is, we suggest what you should focus on, whether its a theme, the language or the narrative method. The other concentrates on your own response. We want you to think about how you are reading and what skills you are bringing to bear in doing that reading. So this part is very much about you, the reader.

The point is that there are many ways of responding to a text. You could concentrate on the methods you might use to compare this text with others. In that case, look for the sections headed 'Compare'. Or you might want to do something more individual, and analyse how you are reacting to a text and what it means to you, in which case, pick out the approaches labelled 'Imagine' or 'Ask Yourself'.

Of course, it may well be that you are reading these texts for an examination. In that case you will have to go for the more traditional methods of literary criticism and look for the responses that tell you to 'Discuss' or 'Analyse'. Whichever level you (or your students) are at, you will find that there is something here for everyone. However, we're not suggesting that you stick solely to the approaches we offer, or that you tackle all of the exercises laid out here. Choose whatever most interests you, or whatever best suits your purposes.

Who are these books for?

Students will find that these guides are like a good teacher. They introduce the life and work of the author, set each

novel in its context, explain key ideas and literary critical terms as they arise, suggest comparative exercises in a number of media, and ask focused questions to encourage a well-informed, analytical approach to reading the novels in a way that is rigorous, but still entertaining.

Teachers will find in this series a rich source of ideas for teaching contemporary novels and their contexts, particularly at AS, A and undergraduate levels. The exercises on each text have been tailored to meet the various assessment objectives laid down in the subject criteria for GCE AS and GCE A Level and the International Baccalaureate in English Literature, and are explained in such a way that they can easily be selected and fitted into a lesson plan. Given the diversity of ways in which the awarding bodies have devised their specifications to meet these assessment objectives, a wide range of exercises is offered. We've had fun devising the plans, and we hope they'll be fun for you when you come to teach and learn with them.

And if you are neither a teacher nor a student of contemporary literature, but someone reading for your own pleasure? Well, if you've ever wanted someone to introduce you to a novelist's work in a way that will let you trust your own judgement and read more confidently, then this guide is also for you.

Whoever you are, we hope that you will enjoy using these books and that they will send you back to the novels to find new pleasures.

All page references to *The Bell*, *The Black Prince* and *The Sea*, *The Sea* in this text refer to the Vintage editions.

Iris Murdoch

Introduction

Of all the novelists working in the second half of the twentieth century, Iris Murdoch has occupied the most peculiar position. Though she produced some twenty-six novels from 1954 to 1995 we are now tempted to wonder whether she can simply be classed as 'a novelist' at all. While turning out these remarkable works of fiction, Murdoch taught philosophy in an intense and demanding academic position as a Fellow of St Anne's at Oxford, consistently writing elegant, complicated and profound works in her professional capacity. It may be that – in spite of the characters, the plots, the structures, the symbolism, the narrative styles – Murdoch's fictional works can also be read as works of philosophy.

Murdoch's own remarks on the subject suggest that, while her fictional works drew on her philosophical expertise, they were not to be confused with 'real' philosophy. As she once explained:

I am a teacher of philosophy and I am trained as a philosopher and I 'do' philosophy and I teach philosophy, but philosophy is fantastically difficult and I think those who attempt to write it would probably agree that there are very few moments when they rise to the level of real philosophy. One is writing about philosophy ... One is not actually doing the real thing.

Nevertheless, in some ways all Murdoch's novels deal with the same problem (a problem also discussed at length in her academic work): how can human beings, who crave the consolation of order, come to terms with a lack of pattern in a haphazard universe? This is the question in her 1961 essay 'Against Dryness'; it appears also in 'The Sublime and the Good' (1959), and in the much later *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (published in 1992). It is also a recurring question tackled within her novels. In many ways this explains why Murdoch was such a prolific writer; she was always seeking an answer to her question. But, by definition, in the process of putting it into a novel shape, by squeezing this oozing world into a lengthy novel, she inevitably did create an order. The only way to resist that order was to start again with nothing, with the blank page where – yet again – she would try to replicate accident, contingency, chaos, chance and all the haphazard variables in her view of the world.

The drive to shape, pattern and define destiny is overwhelming, in life, and most certainly in fiction. In *The Bell* her structuring devices consist of the symbol of the bell itself, or the contrast set up between town and country. In *The Black Prince* a structure is centred around Bradley's narrative method, his delay and digression, and his neat mirroring of the opening scene at the ending of the novel. In *The Sea, The Sea* it is Charles's obsessive account of his meals, or his habit of thumbing through past loves, that affords the novel a comic shape. And yet in each work there are surprises and gratuitous accidents to remind us of the frailty of our human condition and the indifference of a universe which is always changeable and unpredictable.

As a philosopher and academic Murdoch cared about getting things right, and especially about expressing ideas rightly. In her introduction to the Vintage edition of *The Black Prince*, the writer Candia McWilliam speaks of her own childish memory of an overheard criticism of

Murdoch's writing. This unidentified adult critic had said that they wished Iris Murdoch would not 'write her adjectives in threes'.

Once you are aware of this pattern, you can't help noticing it. McWilliam decides that this is fine, that this trait in Murdoch's writing indicates 'a want of perfectedness'. Further - and importantly - McWilliam decides that this 'want of perfectedness' is 'holy' to the 'artist and philosopher' in Murdoch. The piles of adjectives suggest a reaching after, a striving, a 'raggedness' (McWilliam's word) that explores and deplores and applauds and admires the inevitable human failure to make things perfect while - at exactly the same time - it admires and applauds the intense human desire to make things perfect. Murdoch's provisional writing style imitates what she saw as our inescapably provisional way of life.

Being a philosopher, this was a paradox which Murdoch faced clear-eyed and undismayed. As she wrote in *The Sovereignty of Good*:

I can see no evidence to suggest that human life is not something self-contained. There are properly many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search. We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to change ... Our destiny can be examined, but it cannot be justified or totally explained. We are simply here.

We may be 'simply here', but the simpleness of being here means that Murdoch - and her characters - go on giving us gems along the way. Here are two examples of her 'self-contained' view of life, taken from *The Black Prince*. The first (p. 232) is about consciousness and the circadian clock that regulates our physical lives:

The division of one day from the next must be one of the most profound peculiarities of life on this planet. It is, on the whole, a merciful arrangement. We are not condemned to sustained flights of being, but are constantly refreshed by little holidays from ourselves. We are intermittent creatures, always falling to little ends and rising to little beginnings. Our soon-tired consciousness is meted out in chapters, and that the world will look quite different tomorrow is, both for our comfort and our discomfort, usually true.

And the second (p. 316) is about the strange precision of desire:

The absolute yearning of one human body for another particular one and its indifference to substitutes is one of life's major mysteries.

It is, of course, the character of Bradley Pearson who offers these profound words. He is arrogant, self-absorbed, vain, pedantic and pathetic. But - because he is Murdoch's creation - he is also wise, if only intermittently and accidentally.

Murdoch herself has become something of a heroine in recent times. This is largely due, first of all, to her husband John Bayley's memoir, *Iris*, which described the sad mental decline of her last years. In addition, it is due to the film *Iris* directed by Richard Eyre and starring Kate Winslet as the young author and Judi Dench who played her in old age. Peter Conradi has also written the definitive biography of Murdoch and his important 1986 critical work has been reissued as *The Saint and the Artist*. In addition, A. S. Byatt's magisterial and pioneering work on Murdoch, *Degrees of Freedom* - first published in 1965 - has also been reissued.