

Learner resource 9 The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and Unreliable Memoirs

Text 1

This is an abridged extract from Clive James' autobiography, Unreliable Memoirs, published in 1980. Here he describes his experiences of life at school.

Disaster struck on the first day, when Carnaby was assigned to a different class. In quiet desperation I sought out his company in the playground, but he was always surrounded by lots of new friends. Soon enough I made new friends in my own class but not in the same way as Carnaby did. His natural authority was reinforced by early maturity. Either that year or the year after, his voice broke. He had acne for about two days and grew a foot taller. During this period almost everyone except me did something similar. I obstinately stayed small. Nobody looked up to me any longer.

In that first year the only thing that made me worth knowing was my good marks. The teachers weren't brilliant but they were conscientious. At the half-yearly examinations I averaged in the high nineties, coming third in the class. Things might have gone on like that for a good while longer if it had not been for Mary Luke.

I was coping with physics and chemistry well enough while Mr. Ryan was still teaching them. But Mr. Ryan was due for retirement, an event which was hastened by an accident in the laboratory. He was showing us how careful you had to be when handling potassium in the presence of water. Certainly you had to be more careful than he was. The school's entire supply of potassium was ignited at once. Wreathed by dense smoke and lit by garish flames, the stunned Mr. Ryan looked like an ancient Greek god in receipt of bad news. The smoke enveloped us all. Windows being thrown open, it jetted into what passed for a playground, where it hung around like some sinister leftover from a battle on the Somme. Shocked, scorched and gassed, Mr. Ryan was carried away, never to return.

Back from his third retirement came Mary Luke. A chronic shortage of teachers led to Mary Luke being magically resurrected after each burial. Why he should have been called Mary was lost in antiquity. The school presented him with a pocket watch every time he retired. Perhaps that was a mistake. It might have been the massed ticking that kept him alive. Anyway, Mary Luke, having ruined science for a whole generation of schoolboys, came back from the shadows to ruin science for me.

Mary was keen but incomprehensible. The first thing he said at the beginning of every lesson, whether of physics or chemistry, was 'Make a Bunsen burner'. He was apparently convinced that given the right encouragement we would continue our science studies in makeshift laboratories at home. So we might have done, if we could have understood anything else he said. The mouth moved constantly. 'Combustioff off magnesioff', Mary would announce keenly. 'Magensioff off oxidoff off hydrogoff off givoff off'. Worriedly I slid the cap off the inverted jar and ignited the gaseous contents to prove the hydrogoff had been givoff off. Carefully I drew the apparatus in my book, already aware that these experiments would be the last I would ever understand.

In English I shone – fitfully, but sufficiently to keep my morale from collapsing altogether. Our teacher in the early years was 'Jazz' Aked. He also doubled as our music teacher: hence the nickname. 'Jazz' taught English according to the curriculum. Without resorting to violence, 'Jazz' had a way of getting results. Eventually I learned to parse any sentence I was given. I couldn't do it now, but the knowledge is still there at an unconscious level. It was invaluable training. On top of that, he set good essay subjects. My essays were sometimes read out to the class. I was thereby established all over again as teacher's pet, but at least it was something, in those dreadful days when everyone else seemed to be doubling in size overnight, while simultaneously acquiring an Adam's apple like a half-swallowed rock.



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Text 2

*This is an abridged extract from the novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, by Muriel Spark, published in 1961.*

Miss Brodie is a teacher at a girls' school. Miss Mackay is the headmistress. The extract takes place at the beginning of the school year. Miss Brodie has recently returned from a holiday in Italy.

'Good morning, sit down, girls,' said the headmistress who had entered in a hurry, leaving the door wide open.

Miss Brodie passed behind her with her head up, up, and shut the door with the utmost meaning.

'I have only just looked in,' said Miss Mackay, 'and I have to be off. Well, girls, this is the first day of the new session. Are we downhearted? No. You girls must work hard this year at every subject and pass your qualifying examination with flying colours. Next year you will be in the Senior school, remember. I hope you've all had a nice summer holiday, you all look nice and brown. I hope in due course of time to read your essays on how you spent them.'

When she had gone Miss Brodie looked hard at the door for a long time. A girl, called Judith, giggled. Miss Brodie said to Judith, 'That will do.' She turned to the blackboard and rubbed out with her duster the long division sum she always kept on the blackboard in case of intrusions from outside during any arithmetic periods when

Miss Brodie should happen not to be teaching arithmetic. When she had done this she turned back to the class and said, 'Are we downhearted no, are we downhearted no. I shall be able to tell you a great deal this term. As you know, I don't believe in talking down to children, you are capable of grasping more than is generally appreciated by your elders. Qualifying examination or no qualifying examination, you will have the benefit of my experiences in Italy. In Rome I saw the Colosseum where the gladiators died and the slaves were thrown to the lions. A vulgar American remarked to me, "It looks like a mighty fine quarry." They talk nasally. Mary, what does to talk nasally mean?'

Mary did not know. 'Stupid as ever,' said Miss Brodie. 'Eunice?'

'Through your nose,' said Eunice.

'Answer in a complete sentence, please,' said Miss Brodie. 'This year I think you must all start answering in complete sentences, I must try to remember this rule. Your correct answer is "To talk nasally means to talk through one's nose". The American said, "It looks like a mighty fine quarry." Ah, it was there the gladiators fought. "Hail Caesar!" they cried. "These about to die salute thee!'

Miss Brodie stood in her brown dress like a gladiator with raised arm and eyes

flashing like a sword. 'Hail Caesar!' she cried again, turning radiantly to the window light, as if Caesar sat there. 'Who opened the window?' said Miss Brodie dropping her arm.

Nobody answered.

'Whoever has opened the window has opened it too wide,' said Miss Brodie. 'Six inches is perfectly adequate. More is vulgar. One should have an innate sense of these things. We ought to be doing history at the moment according to the time-table. Get out your history books and prop them up in your hands. I shall tell you a little more about Italy. Keep your books propped up in case we have any further intruders.' She looked disapprovingly towards the door and lifted her fine dark Roman head with dignity.

'Next year,' she said, 'you will have the specialists to teach you history and mathematics and languages, a teacher for this and a teacher for that. But in this year

last year with me you will receive the fruits of my prime. They will remain with you all your days. First, however, I must mark the register for today before we forget. There are two new girls. Stand up the two new girls.'

They stood up with wide eyes while Miss Brodie sat down at her desk. 'You will get used to our ways.'



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Use the grids below to construct a framework which focuses on four different points of comparison.

1. First Impressions – Subject and Structure

Think about reader response to subject matter. Narrative texts can be explored through key building blocks. Viewpoint, Characters, Dialogue and Description in both texts emphasise the unusual elements of the schools.

	Text 1 - evidence	Text 2 - evidence
The narrator's point of view		
Main characters – eccentric teachers		
Other Characters – intimidated pupils		
Dialogue – comic		
Description – emphasising the unusual		



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2. Context

The language of each text reveals what is eccentric and surprising in a school context. Find a label to describe the effect of each pair of quotations:

Text 1 - evidence	Text 2 - evidence	Effect
In quiet desperation	Are we downhearted	
Certainly you had to be more careful than he was.	rubbed out with her duster the long division sum she always kept on the blackboard in case of intrusions from outside	
like an ancient Greek god in receipt of bad news	like a gladiator with raised arm and eyes flashing like a sword	
like some sinister leftover from a battle on the Somme	she cried again, turning radiantly to the window light, as if Caesar sat there	
Worriedly I slid the cap off the inverted jar and ignited the gaseous contents	Whoever has opened the window has opened it too wide,' said Miss Brodie. 'Six inches is perfectly adequate. More is vulgar. One should have an innate sense of these things	
those dreadful days when everyone else seemed to be doubling in size overnight	They stood up with wide eyes while Miss Brodie sat down at her desk	

Clearly these classrooms are dangerous places, with little regard for health and safety, and where learning often takes place by accident. They are certainly intimidating places to be.



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3. Language and Style – Narrative Voice

Both texts describe the past. Clive James uses the **first person** to describe his own experiences. Muriel Spark uses the third person, and is an **omniscient narrator**. How do the writers' voices ensure that the young Clive James and Miss Brodie are both memorable and unusual characters?

Text 1 - evidence	Text 2 - evidence	Effect
the only thing that made me worth knowing was my good marks	Miss Brodie passed behind her with her head up, up, and shut the door with the utmost meaning	
I obstinately stayed small	When she had gone Miss Brodie looked hard at the door for a long time. A girl, called Judith, giggled	
The smoke enveloped us all	A vulgar American remarked to me, "It looks like a mighty fine quarry	
came back from the shadows to ruin science for me	Stupid as ever, said Miss Brodie	
I was thereby established all over again as teacher's pet, but at least it was something	She looked disapprovingly towards the door	



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4. Language and Style – Comic Technique

Both writers use comic exaggeration to make the classroom experience as well as the teachers larger than life and funny. Both writers are determined to make you laugh. While James is laughing at his younger self, Spark may be laughing at everyone. Compare the comic effect of each pair of quotations:

Quotation from Text 1	Quotation from Text 2
Either that year or the year after, his voice broke. He had acne for about two days and grew a foot taller	Miss Brodie passed behind her with her head up, up,
Effect: the exaggeration shows that for the narrator, Carnaby seemed to mature by magic. Both texts have characters who seem larger than life.	Effect: the repetition shows how determined Miss Brodie is to defy the headmistress. Clive James shows us his own feeling. Muriel Spark shows the effect of Miss Brodie on others.
Quotation from Text 1	Quotation from Text 2
Shocked, scorched and gassed, Mr. Ryan was carried away, never to return	any arithmetic periods when Miss Brodie should happen not to be teaching arithmetic
Effect:	Effect:
Quotation from Text 1	Quotation from Text 2
Mary Luke being magically resurrected after each burial	Qualifying examination or no qualifying examination, you will have the benefit of my experiences in Italy
Effect:	Effect:
Quotation from Text 1	Quotation from Text 2
Why he should have been called Mary was lost in antiquity	Miss Brodie stood in her brown dress like a gladiator with raised arm and eyes flashing like a sword
Effect:	Effect:



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Quotation from Text 1	Quotation from Text 2
It might have been the massed ticking that kept him alive	Get out your history books and prop them up in your hands. I shall tell you a little more about Italy
Quotation from Text 1	Quotation from Text 2
I couldn't do it now, but the knowledge is still there at an unconscious level	in this your last year with me you will receive the fruits of my prime. They will remain with you all your days
Effect:	Effect:
Conclusion: Overall effect of Text 1	Conclusion: Overall effect of Text 1
Similarities:	Similarities:
Differences:	Differences:

