

IRIS MURDOCH

**A biographical essay by
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Iris Murdoch was born into a lower middle class Anglo-Irish family in Dublin in 1919. The family moved to London when Iris was one year old. Iris's father was a serious, reliable man who worked as a low level bureaucrat, and her mother was a vivacious, warm, loving woman who had trained as an opera singer. Iris's childhood was a happy one, and she once described her family life as "a perfect trinity of love." Her father introduced her to books and reading, and, even as a young child, she felt she was destined to be a writer.

In 1932, Iris won a scholarship to Badminton School, a small private school in Bristol, presided over by the formidable Miss Beatrice May Baker. Baker, always known as BMB, was a Quaker, a socialist, a feminist, a closeted lesbian, and a very serious and humorless woman who once gave a sermon on the shameful decadence of hot water bottles. She and Iris hit it off, and had long discussions about the Good, a topic of lifelong interest to Iris. Iris excelled all around at Badminton. She was a good athlete, a painter, and an excellent student. She was serious and high-minded, became a socialist, and admired Stalin.

After Badminton, Iris attended Somerville College, Oxford. She had intended to study English, but, for reasons that remain obscure, she switched to Classics, called, in Oxford "Mods and Greats." Mods involved reading Latin and Greek classics, as well as writing both prose and poetry in both languages. Greats involved the study of ancient history, and ancient philosophy, with some attention to modern philosophy as well. Aside from her academic studies, she was involved in a remarkably long list of activities, was so busy she found, in her own words, that "a day of twenty-four hours" was "quite insufficient for her needs."

At Oxford, Murdoch began her lifelong career as an erotic adventuress. While some might consider her spectacularly promiscuous, and others think her simply a liberated feminist who was ahead, let's say way ahead, of her time, it is clear that, in the course of her long life, she had scores, if not hundreds, of affairs, both with men and with women, both before and during her long marriage. Some lasted a night, and some, like her tempestuous affair with Elias Canetti, lasted years. Not infrequently, she conducted two or three

liaisons simultaneously. Love, both Platonic and sexual, is a major, if not the major theme in Murdoch's novels, and she was certainly well qualified to write about it.

In 1942, after receiving a first from Oxford, Iris got a job working in London in the Treasury Department. The hours were long, and the work was bureaucratic and tedious, but Iris was able to enjoy all that London had to offer, and also was working as an active member of the Communist Party. She was also writing novels at this time. Although her first published work was *Under the Net*, which came out in 1954, she completed no less than six novels before this. In 1944, her second novel was sent for evaluation to T.S. Eliot at Faber & Faber. Eliot rejected it flatly, and, in retrospect, Iris felt his judgment was correct, since the book was, as she said, "too personal." She was intent on becoming a real writer, enthusing: "Jesus God how I want to write....Like Proust I want to escape from the eternal push and rattle of time into the coolness & poise of a work of art."

Murdoch had two ambitions at this point: to write novels, and to become a philosophy professor. But she felt she wanted to have more experience of real life before settling down, and, hoping to serve in foreign lands, she applied to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), an agency designed to help with the very serious problems of the millions of refugees created by the war. However, despite her best efforts, she was confined to the UNRRA's London office for fifteen months, during which she suffered the same bureaucratic atmosphere she had endured at Treasury. Finally, she was transferred, first to Brussels, where she met Jean Paul Sartre, who signed her copy of *Being and Nothingness*, and, finally to Austria, where she actually worked in a refugee camp.

In 1946, Iris resigned from the UNRRA. She wanted to continue her philosophy studies, and her application to receive a scholarship to Vassar College in America was accepted. Unfortunately, the US visa application form asked if she had ever been a member of the Communist Party, Iris answered "yes," and she was refused admission to the United States. She was unemployed, poor, and depressed. Eventually, in spring 1947, she was accepted to study philosophy at Newnham College, Cambridge, where she met Wittgenstein. In 1948, she was accepted as a Philosophy tutor at St. Anne's College, Oxford, where she taught for the next 15 years. In general, she was a very highly regarded teacher at St. Anne, although her bohemian manners and lifestyle raised a great many eyebrows over the years.

In 1956, Murdoch married John Bayley, an English novelist, literary critic and Oxford professor, with whom she lived for the rest of her life. Despite her numerous infidelities, she was always true to him in her fashion, and they

had a deep, abiding love for one another. In the year of their marriage, they bought a house named Cedar Lodge in the country village of Steeple Aston, fourteen miles from Oxford. The house was in a permanent state of chaos. Except in summer it was cold, damp, and miserable. It was shared with a group of rather aggressive rats. The roof leaked, and John once awoke in his bed with a large amount of water running directly onto his face. There was a muddy, shallow fishpond in which Iris liked to swim. And there were extensive gardens, which Iris enthusiastically cultivated.

John and Iris lived happily in Cedar Lodge for the next thirty years. They led quiet lives, reading, writing, teaching, philosophizing, and socializing with friends. Nothing particularly dramatic or noteworthy troubled their equanimity for the next few decades.

In 1997, Iris was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. She steadily declined. As she put it, "...I began sailing away into the darkness." She died February 8th, 1999. Her brain was donated to Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford, which specialized in research on Alzheimer's Disease. Her body was cremated, and her ashes scattered at Oxford Crematorium. As she had requested, there was no one in attendance, nor was there any memorial service for her. She left an estate of £1.8 million, which after bequests to thirty-two different friends, went entirely to John.

During her long career, Murdoch published five books on philosophy, a half dozen plays, and a few volumes of short stories and poems, but it is chiefly for her novels that she is remembered. She wrote no fewer than twenty-five novels, extending from *Under the Net* in 1954 to *Jackson's Dilemma* in 1995. Opinions differ as to which of her novels is the very best. Many single out *The Bell*. Three won special prizes: *The Sea, the Sea* won the Booker prize, *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* won the Whitbread literary award for fiction, and tonight's volume, *The Black Prince*, won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. Many consider Murdoch one of the best, perhaps the very best, of the post-war English novelists. We shall see what our members think tonight.