Iris Murdoch, by Peter J. Conradi

reviewed by Betty Thompson in the March 27, 2002 issue

When Iris Murdoch died in 1999, Harold Bloom, custodian of the literary canon, proclaimed that there were no serious writers left in Britain. John Updike calls her the preeminent English novelist of the second half of the 20th century. Murdoch's 26 novels and half-dozen works of philosophy have been the subject of numerous critical studies, conferences and interviews.

Some people may know Murdoch only through John Bayley's moving *Elegy for Iris (* 1999), parts of which appeared in the *New Yorker*--or through Iris, the recent film based on Bayley's writings about her and starring Judi Dench and Kate Winslet. Bayley, a critic and professor of literature at Oxford, describes their courtship and long marriage and Murdoch's "sailing into the darkness" (her words) of Alzheimer's disease.

Peter Conradi dedicates his book to Bayley and to Iris's best friend, philosopher Philippa Foot. Bayley dedicated *Elegy for Iris* to Conradi and his partner, James O'Neill, a psychotherapist. The two were his and Murdoch's close friends during Murdoch's difficult last years.

Is this all too cozy? No. Despite Conradi's often declared love and admiration for his subject, he writes candidly of Murdoch's human weaknesses and demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of her artistic failings.

More than any other 20th-century novelist, Murdoch was concerned with the question of belief in God and whether good can survive without it. The problem is posed both in her novels and the philosophical essays "The Sovereignty of the Good" and "Metaphysics as a Guide to the Moral Life." She considered the collapse of Christian belief the central drama of the age.

"She wanted the idea of the holy to survive in a partly terrible world," Conradi says, and she felt that we need more saints, not more prophets. Following her involvement in Anglo-Catholicism at Oxford, where her moral philosophy tutor was theologian Donald MacKinnon, she became interested in existentialism and then

Platonism. Early influences were Simone Weil, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel, Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger. Throughout her life, Murdoch called for a new theology. "The sun of Good is darkened, our life has no horizon . . . the waters are dried up," she lamented.

A beloved only child of Irish parents, Murdoch had a blissful childhood. Brought up in England, she knew Ireland only from visits but was proud of her heritage and somehow maintained vestiges of an Irish accent. Her parents sacrificed to send her to good schools. She loved her teachers and they valued her. At Oxford she attracted the attention of her contemporaries and the faculty, including the brilliant European scholar Ernest Fraenkel and MacKinnon. She briefly joined the Communist Party.

Conradi recounts Murdoch's youthful intellectual and sexual adventures in Oxford and wartime London. Following a stint in the Treasury Office, she volunteered for a job with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. In refugee camps in Austria and Belgium she aided displaced persons and developed an interest in European exiles that influenced her life profoundly. They were her windows into the suffering of the world.

Murdoch early decided that she wanted to do two things: to teach philosophy and to write novels. After a discouraging year without employment, she entered graduate school at Cambridge in 1947 to study philosophy. She came just as Ludwig Wittgenstein was leaving. Though she managed to meet him and was greatly impressed by his disciples, Murdoch later rejected the analytic philosophy that dominated British universities in the postwar period.

She returned to Oxford as a lecturer in philosophy at St. Anne's College, wrote novels and conducted many love affairs, some simultaneously. By her mid-30s, she had lost two lovers to death, been jilted by a third, had affairs with many men and a few women and launched her writing career.

Murdoch's first philosophical work was a monograph on Jean-Paul Sartre. Her first novel, the witty, brief *Under the Net*, came out in 1954 to enthusiastic reviews. From the safety of her marriage to John Bayley in 1956, Murdoch concentrated on writing her many books and loving new and old friends. Her great subject was love, both sexual and nonsexual.

Murdoch's masters were Dickens, Shakespeare and Dostoevsky--she wished to create memorable characters like Dickens, often developed intricate double plots like Shakespeare, and drew holy fools and evil monsters like Dostoevsky. She wrote at top speed. When asked how long she rested between novels, she said she couldn't imagine more than half an hour without writing. Vastly amusing but often perplexing, Murdoch's novels changed from the terse works of the '50s to the verbose, multipeopled later corpus, which often mystified even her admirers.

Conradi tends to give detailed descriptions of the novels he likes best and to ignore the lesser ones. Bloom is not alone in noting that Murdoch's plots, mixing fantasy and realism, are "less than fully controlled." Acknowledging that detailed synopses of these plots are as "embarrassing as those of an opera," Conradi argues that such summaries do the works an injustice. He finds her most memorable characters in three '70s novels: *A Fairly Honorable Defeat, The Black Prince and The Sea, the Sea.*

Bayley characterized Murdoch as "anima natureliter Christiana--religious without religion." As Conradi sums it up, "She could not believe in a personal God demonic enough to have created a world where sufferings are clear, yet she wanted religion to survive too. She wanted Buddhism to educate Christianity to create a non-supernatural religion. God and the afterlife were essentially anti-religious bribes to her. She breathed new life into the oldest philosophical puzzle--'What is a good life?' and did so by living one herself."