Is fact really stranger than fiction? Muriel Spark’s short novel weaves fact and fiction together to produce a crazy cocktail of the two. Her plot and characters may appear fantastical, but it is unclear which of the two – fact or fiction – is the stranger or the most implausible. Even the ending – in which African cannibals eat Lord Lucan to absorb his noble British blood – seems no less likely than the known facts upon which Aiding and Abetting is based.

Briefly, the facts are that Lord “Lucky” Lucan, a dissolute member of the British aristocracy, is accused of having murdered his child’s nanny (possibly in the belief that he was killing his wife), that he escaped the police, probably with the help of London gambling cronies, and then disappeared. These well-documented events took place in 1974 that Muriel Spark says she has absorbed “creatively” in telling her tale. Since 1974, newspapers have occasionally reported sightings of Lucan in various parts of the world, but his whereabouts and subsequent life – he may still be alive – remain a mystery, except in Muriel Spark’s novel where Lucan had ended up dead but not buried.

The other main protagonist – fake Parisian psychiatrist Hildegard Wolf who had previously made her way out of poverty in Germany as a fake stigmatic – is also based on a real person - Spark calls her character Beate Pappenheim. Here Spark has some wicked fun. Bertha not Beate Pappenheim was a prominent feminist in Germany – and translated Mary Wollstonecraft’s Rights of Women from English to German. She was the original Anna O whom Freud wrote about and is believed to be the inspiration for psychoanalysis. Breuer, Freud’s colleague, found that talking to Bertha about himself and gradually drawing her out to express her own feelings, was the best cure for her “so-called hysteria.” Spark’s Beate earns huge sums from her clients by using these methods herself. For the first few sessions she only talks about herself.

Bringing Hildegard Wolf together with Lucan is entirely Spark’s invention. In Spark’s plot, they spar with each other over what each knows of the other’s past, leading Hildegard to disappear to the London from which Lucan had once escaped, and Lucan to travel to his death (mistaken identity with his double) in a small, mythical African state.

Opinion in our group was sharply divided between those who loved Spark’s fantasy and those who found it dull, boring and inconsequential - even predictable. Enthusiasts were puzzled at how any reader could truly foresee the bizarre absurdities and the story’s hectic series of twists and turns. Those who knew of the real Lucan story – even vaguely – were most engaged though some found the grotesque ending forgettable and disappointing.

Those with direct or indirect knowledge of Britain of the 1970s and the remnants of a class-based society based on lineage and money were vastly entertained by Spark’s accurate but satirical take on attitudes of the time. Others found her depiction simply incredible.

How seriously are we to take the book? As several group members noted, serious British writers seem able to tackle such subjects with high comedy – without denying their seriousness – with a lightness of touch that seems alien to much German literature. Graham Greene – another Catholic
writer obsessed with religion and guilt – divided his books into serious novels and “entertainments”. Certainly Spark’s novel falls into the category of “entertainment” but the many serious themes – however ironically they are treated – provoked a lot of discussion.

Redemption, justice, guilt, personal responsibility for “aiding and abetting” the guilty to escape justice: all play a part. Lucan’s double Walker helps him to continue escaping justice, Hildegard’s loving partner Jean-Pierre (one of the most sympathetic main characters) does the same for her and Hildegard and Lucan are each in a position to bring the other to justice, but choose from a variety of motives not to do that. Some intriguing parallels between Hildegard and Lucan are obvious. Both are fugitives from justice, both believe they have a hold on the other, and both reinvent themselves as they disappear from their original milieus.

The highly Catholic concern with blood is a leitmotiv, and blood also provides a strong link between Lucan and Hildegard. Lucan’s crime was particularly bloody in its execution – his nanny’s blood was found splashed all around the scene of his crime – and it’s a theme that Lucan remains obsessed with. He expresses his continuing astonishment at how much blood was spilled by his nanny – he says this is a feature of the lower classes that astonished him and continues to haunt him. But blood plays a huge role in Hildegard’s former life. She had used her own menstrual blood as the stuff of her fake stigmatic bleeding enabling her to take enough money from gullible believers to create a new life and identity for herself in Paris.

The events which eventually condemn Lucan to continue his “bloodline” in the African children who finally eat him provokes a brief exchange among their tribal leaders about the “blood of the lamb” and its apparently inexplicable importance to Christians. They, as Hildegard too knows, realise that blood is far too sticky to be used for cleansing oneself, as some Christians believe it can. Lucan’s liking for smoked salmon and lamb at every meal is also surely a jokey reference to this theme.

Spark’s language and character portrayal are sparse throughout the book. We learn little of the inner life of her main protagonists, except what we glean through their decisions and actions. Some in the group found this a major flaw, wanting more than Spark’s generally short, staccato sentences. Others liked the stark crispness of Spark’s style and her way of forcing her readers to imagine all the detail she omits.

Spark’s main characters seem completely devoid of any conventional morality, and few are what they seem to be on the surface. Lord Lucan, as to the manor born, believes he is entitled to whatever he wants and his wife is in the way. The nanny he kills is a case of mistaken identity. None of them are wicked for the sake of being wicked, but are completely amoral in acting only to pursue their own ends. Is this Spark’s bleak view of humanity? Should we condemn Hildegard for her earlier activities as a fake stigmatic and now as a psychiatrist, who charges patients huge amounts to talk mainly about herself? Are religion and psychiatry equally bogus, or are they equally valid in helping people to feel better, however that is achieved? As one member pointed out, communities like Lourdes, Santiago de Compostela and many others survive on the offerings and hotel bills of believers.

Spark delights in creating rather monstrous characters. Here she has taken a suspected murderer and weaved her story around his “clever” escape. Her vivid imagination bumps him off in a
gruesome way. Spark saves Hildegard and gives her the chance to continue with her life in Paris. There is little doubt which fugitive is more guilty in Spark’s judgement.

Some comments:

“A wonderful surprise. I hadn’t expected to enjoy it. I loved it from the first sentence ... so concise and to the point ... I was intrigued, couldn’t put it down. I found it funny, tragic and surprising.”

“profound, funny and entertaining...”

“I was so bored by it. The language was too simple. I thought it was predictable and the humour was lost on me.”

“It was so witty. The possible demise of Lord Lucan was so delightfully explored.”

“I don’t normally like fiction based on fact. But the sparse language was so engaging that I changed my mind on this occasion.”

“I liked the characters, the language, the flow of the story, all the twists and turns - everybody was hiding something - which was intriguing. But I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to make of the behaviour of the characters.”

“I was really puzzled by this book. I couldn’t wait to find out what everybody else made of it.”

“I hadn’t heard about Lord Lucan before reading the book. At first I was fascinated and loved the opening fifty pages or so. Then I think Spark lost her way. I began to be frustrated as a reader - I was no longer learning anything new - the plot seemed to stagnate. I had to force myself to continue reading it.”

“I was disappointed. The idea was very clever but it didn’t entirely work. I began to feel that she may have written the novel quickly to pay off some debts! All aspects were too exaggerated.”

“Spark combined a real event – a mystery- and created a plausible explanation to what may have happened.”

“The bizarre evocation of Lucan’s circle- the aiders and abetters - felt right. The police at the time were most reluctant to interview “people of the realm”. Social attitudes of the time were redrawn effectively.”

“It’s a thoroughly good romp but doesn’t quite work. Finally, I have to say that it is enjoyable but flawed.”

“I found myself asking could such a wall of secrecy happen now. Here in Germany? It seems unlikely.”

“The doppelganger theme is fascinating. Has Lucan used one or not? Is that why there have been so many sightings of him all over the world? It’s intriguing that he may well have been able to read this book for himself and we will probably never know.”
“The subplot of the couple looking for Lucan and the number of their near coincidental meetings added to the tension. But their story faded away and was a little unsatisfying.”

Recommended as an entertainment. Quirky, imaginative and witty - but not to everyone’s taste.