

**Melinda J. Cooper. *Middlebrow Modernism: Eleanor Dark's Interwar Fiction*.  
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Among the cluster of Australian women writers working in the early to mid-twentieth century and engaged with the debates and experiments of literary modernism, Eleanor Dark has always held a place of prominence. While her work has always attracted scholarly attention—even when it was accused of popularism—scholarly book-length studies of Dark are few and far between, limited to primarily biographical works like *Eleanor Dark: A Writer's Life* (Barbara Brooks and Judith Clark, 1998), although a new collection on her work, edited by Brigid Rooney and Fiona Morrison, is scheduled for imminent publication by Sydney University Press. Melinda J. Cooper's *Middlebrow Modernism: Eleanor Dark's Interwar Fiction* therefore marks a welcome and long overdue focus on one of Australia's most important writers of the twentieth century. The book can be seen as part of a growing movement of new scholarship on Australian women writers working around the wartime period, including Meg Brayshaw's *Sydney and Its Waterway in Australian Literary Modernism* (2022), and Brigitta Olubas's *Shirley Hazzard: A Writing Life* (2022).

As the title indicates, Cooper's study focuses on Dark's interwar writing, selecting for detailed discussion six novels (*Slow Dawning*, 1932; *Prelude to Christopher*, 1934; *Return to Coolami*, 1936; *Sun Across the Sky*, 1937; *Waterway*, 1938; *The Timeless Land*, 1941) from Dark's prolific output, which included ten novels, as well as hundreds of poems, short stories, and essays. The interwar period, Cooper points out, is when Dark became known and recognised as an intellectual both nationally and internationally, a reputation cemented when she was awarded the ALS Gold Medal at the end of the 1930s, and when *The Timeless Land* was selected in October 1941 by the US Book of the Month Club.

Of significant interest to Cooper is the way in which Dark's writing blended the radical experiments of literary modernism with the more accessible modes of popular fiction. This "successful and intelligent negotiation of a complex range of cultural and market trends" (27) results in what Cooper terms "middlebrow modernism." Although Dark travelled overseas only once, Cooper traces the ways in which she was highly engaged in the intellectual movement of ideas across transnational spaces. More blended than liminal, then, Dark's cosmopolitanism is reflected in her interwar writing which draws on a range of influences and ideas to contribute to global literary, social, and political discussions.

Chapter 1 engages with some of Dark's little-examined early work, including what Dark described as the "sentimental" short stories she published in popular magazines, including *The Bulletin* and *The Home* (35). These were genre pieces, primarily romance, detective stories and science fiction, much of it published under a pseudonym. One of these stories formed the genesis of her first novel, *Slow Dawning*, a *bildungsroman* of the modern Australian woman, bearing echoes of the British feminine middlebrow novel exemplified by writers like Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamond Lehmann, and Elizabeth Taylor.

Cooper's second chapter attends to one of Dark's most famous novels, *Prelude to Christopher* (1934), a work inspired by European high modernism: like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), it takes place on a single day. Cooper traces the way in which Dark's narrative experimentation here—including stream of consciousness and intertextuality—mimics the modernist/anti-modernist conversation going on in Australia in the 1930s. This novel operates as a warning, she argues, against attempts to quarantine Australia against outside cultural influences by comparing such attempts to eugenics, observing that "the fact that Dark aligns *Prelude to Christopher* with a woman associated with disease

and degeneracy seems particularly significant, as it suggests that she was pushing back against fears of both genetic abnormality and cosmopolitan, hybrid narrative styles” (90).

*Return to Coolami* (1936), the focus of Chapter 3, is a “more conventional” (103) novel than *Prelude to Christopher*, but it is precisely for this reason that it enabled Dark to break into the US market. Dark even termed it “a strategic novel,” Cooper points out, and told her friend Miles Franklin that if she “hadn’t written it, both *Prelude to Christopher* and *Sun Across the Sky* [1937] would ‘still be doing the rounds of publishers, unaccepted and despised!’” (104). Cooper thus argues that *Return to Coolami* constitutes a merging of modernism with the middlebrow, particularly through the use of recognisable techniques borrowed from the cinema, such as flashback and closeup, in order to negotiate its insertion into the international market.

*Sun Across the Sky* could therefore afford to be more experimental, and Dark took the opportunity to offer up a political discourse which “sought to resolve the social crises of the period through the realm of culture and art” (138). Chapter 4 thus adopts David Carter’s term “aesthetic utopianism” as a way to describe the modernist impulse to ascribe to art the power to heal and educate (138). Cooper also identifies in Dark’s novel an interest in Henri Bergson’s *élan vital*, in which “life is fuelled by creative energy and a vital force that can be accessed through instinct and intuition” (148). Dark’s work can thus be seen to echo the interest in life energy of modernists like T. S. Eliot in his epic poem, “The Waste Land” (1922), or D. H. Lawrence in much of his poetry and significantly in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928).

Chapter 5 turns to *Waterway* (1938), written on the eve of the Second World War, and echoing the moment’s sense of looming disaster in a plot based on a real ferry accident that occurred in 1927 in Sydney Harbour. Cooper argues that although this novel returns to Dark’s interest in aesthetic utopianism and the important cultural work of writers and the professional middle-class (181), its focus on real historical forces exemplifies the ways in which Dark merged realism and modernism as a means to reach wider audiences (171). Cooper’s study is focused on Dark’s interwar writing, but this chapter also gestures towards *The Little Company* (1945), where the novelist’s weight of responsibility is also shown to be critical during the war.

Cooper’s final chapter deals with *The Timeless Land* (1941), the first in Dark’s famous trilogy, and her “most celebrated and commercially successful work,” appealing to a middlebrow “international trend in historical sagas and a contemporary Australian interest in reassessing the colonial past” (203). Cooper chooses to include this novel, even though it does not fall within the interwar period, “in order to counteract the tendency to treat Dark’s historical writing as separate from the novels with contemporary settings” (216). Cooper’s focus here is on the extent to which Dark is able to achieve what Dominic LaCapra calls “empathic unsettlement,” and what he describes as “a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognising the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (205). Dark’s historical trilogy raises the problem of speaking for others when one novelises the past—a problem she does not ultimately resolve, but which sets the stage for contemporary engagements with Australia’s traumatic history.

Cooper’s is a sophisticated and wide-ranging re-evaluation of Dark within her time, merging literary analysis with extensive historical contextualisation (personal, national, and global). It makes extensive use of archival material not easily accessed by the lay reader, including many new photographs and images of ephemera from the Dark archives. Although it engages thoughtfully with relevant literary theory, this is lightly worn. The result is a highly readable work, of interest both to scholars and to the general reader interested in Dark or in Australian writing of the period, as well as to those exploring global modernism and its movements.

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