



THE THINKING SEASON AT VARUNA, THE WRITERS' HOUSE

You see the shadow of a place. What place is it? How can you know until you write it down? How can you write it down until you know? This is the burden of the writer's art... (Eleanor Dark)

VARUNA, THE WRITERS' HOUSE, is located on the lip of the Jamieson Valley in the Blue Mountains, within earshot of Echo Point and The Three Sisters. For writers, it is a retreat in the best sense of the word – that rare place which is more than a place. It is an opportunity to immerse oneself in practice and in service to the creative force that gives meaning to their individual, and to our collective lives.

For Varuna the annual Sydney Writers' regional festival is when the inner world merges with the outer and celebrates a time we like to call the 'Thinking Season'. For 48 out of 52 weeks in the year, fingers move over

keys, glasses are put on and put aside and the house hums with a quiet industry.

Like a work of art, a sanctuary depends on all the elements of which it is composed working together for its success. In Varuna's case it was a coming together of the intention of two passionate and brilliant idealists, Eleanor and Eric Dark, who chose this place among the trees to build a home. 'This place' is more than two acres of natural bush enhanced by lovingly landscaped gardens, tended to this day by their grandson Rod. The swamp mahogany planted by Eric still guards the entrance; blue tongue lizards come out to warm

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their blood on the drystone walls beside the lemon tree. Bowerbirds flash their blue trophies beneath the rhododendrons. The house was designed along modernist lines by the Darks themselves and purpose built for them.

Eleanor favoured the solitude of her studio cottage in the garden alongside the house. There she wrote eight of her ten novels, as well as short stories and articles. It was here also that Eleanor and Eric raised their son Michael (Mick).

On writers and their community. I think that because we are living in such times of stress there's an intellectual striving. The writer feels like everyone else, and his business is to express it. So when people are searching for an understanding of their problems, they naturally turn to their literature, which gives – or ought to give – a reflection, and perhaps an interpretation, of themselves and their community.

(Eleanor Dark, ABC interview, 1944)

After the passing of Eleanor and Eric, Varuna was transformed by an act of extraordinary generosity when Mick Dark gave their house in 1987 to The Eleanor Dark Foundation for the use of Australian writers. Now writers come to Varuna in order to experience the uninterrupted writing Eleanor knew was so valuable. Mick Dark's decision precipitated an expansion of Varuna into the creative life of the whole country. A private, family home transformed itself internally to provide sleeping, working and meeting spaces.

During May when Varuna joins forces with Sydney Writers' Festival to present the Sydney Writers' Festival regional program, it's still the 'Thinking Season' and Varuna opens its arms to embrace the entire Blue

Mountains community. The search for understanding and a state of reflection which Eleanor attributes as a writer's community duty occurs en masse. The garret windows are flung open (unless it's too misty). Large pots of soup are stirred, the driveway gravel sounds like a crunchy cantata as visitors from near and far arrive at Varuna to inspire and be inspired.

Varuna Sydney Writers' Festival has had long success in this region not only for bringing writers, readers and thinkers together but due to a grassroots demand for cultural activity. This year's festival has, as always, been designed to enrich both community and cultural life. Proclaimed City of the Arts in 2001, the Blue Mountains represents a unique demographic. Many local creatives are engaged in writing for art's sake as well as in professional careers. The festival programs proudly feature over fifty percent local writers and literary facilitators and this year is responding to a need for information and guidance about the process of writing and publishing.

Bearing in mind that writers have come to be viewed as public intellectuals, festivals are emerging as a forum for engagement with important cultural, social and political issues. The Australian imagination, a

sense of place, finding home, social justice, writing landscape, writing sexual orientation, the writer's mind, indigenous histories and the freedom of the press are all subjects that, among others, resonate with the values Eleanor, Eric, and indeed Mick, lived by. They are the weather for this year's main program – this Thinking Season.

You see the shadow of a place. What place is it? How can you know until you write it down? How can you write it down until you know? This is the burden of the writer's art, to hold himself, poised, receptive, while words and emotions flow together in him and fuse.
(Notebooks) Eleanor Dark.

Deb Westbury in collaboration with Zoe Jerrat

This year the Blue Mountains is set for five days of stimulating conversation, lively discussion and hot debate. Now in its 11th year, the Varuna Sydney Writers' Festival is bringing some of the biggest names in contemporary writing to Varuna and the Carrington Hotel, Katoomba from 15 to 22 May: Vivian Gornick (NY), Magda Szubanski (Australia), James Rebanks (UK), Charlotte Wood (Australia), Ignatius McGovern (Ireland), Andrew Fowler (Australia), and Tegan Bennett Daylight (Australia). Winner of the Victorian Premier's Literary Award Mireille Juchau and shortlist nominee Miles Allinson (Victoria) join Stella Prize shortlist nominee Peggy Frew to discuss debut fiction, the landscape of memory, fractured families and survival. Further details at varuna.com.au



Opposite: Kate Fagan with Zia Haider Rahman, The Carrington Hotel

Right: Poetry Circle, Sydney Writer's Festival at Varuna