Artemis Cooper, Elizabeth Jane Howard: A Dangerous Innocence (John Murray, £25.00)

‘You are a bottomless pit of neediness’ a therapist remarked on meeting the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, though few would have guessed so from her public persona: majestically tall, golden-haired and with a bird-of-prey stare, Howard seemed a positively intimidating figure. When Julian Barnes met her at a party in the 70s, he felt frozen out, only to discover, years later, that she was ‘utterly terrified’ by literary parties, and likely to spend them crying in the ladies’ loo.

Giving out and getting wrong signals is a constant theme in this sympathetic biography by Artemis Cooper, the first since Howard’s death in 2014. Brought up posh and privileged, Jane was expected to marry well and bagged Peter Scott, only child of the Antarctic hero, whose formidable mother joined them for part of the honeymoon. ‘People of our sort never make any fuss or noise when they are having a baby’, ma-in-law warned, but more disappointments were to come – the baby was a girl. No wonder Jane failed to bond, either with the baby or the marriage, began having a series of affairs (one with her brother-in-law) and took to writing.

She left Scott in 1947, aged 23, and three years later her first novel, The Beautiful Visit, got an excited welcome by critics who were bowled over by her combination of talent and startling good looks. Everyone harped on her beauty; when she was chosen to interview Evelyn Waugh on television (because he had asked for ‘a pretty woman who was familiar with his novels’), he wondered aloud when she was going to take her clothes off. She strove to prove her allure was irrelevant (while milking it, obviously), and her second novel, The Long View, was more ambitious than any of her mentors expected, or could even cope with.

She carried on turning heads and turning out much better books than necessary all through the 50s, to the accompaniment of high-octane affairs, with Ken Tynan, Arthur Koestler, Cecil Day-Lewis (whose wife Jill Balcon, had been Jane’s closest friend) and Laurie Lee, among many others. Collateral damage included the suicides of two of her married lovers - one of these is mentioned merely in a parenthesis – and many degrading scenes. The novelist Romain Gary suggested she could be his mistress, with an allowance, ‘like a high-class geisha’, Artemis Cooper says, though that aspect of the arrangement ‘does not seem to have crossed her mind at all’.

Cooper (a family friend of the Howards) is the least intrusive of biographers. Perhaps she feels it unnecessary, since the subject’s own autobiography, Slipstream, was such a classic of self-exposure. Cooper quotes Howard’s grim account of her father’s sexual advances to her at the age of 15, and takes at face value Howard’s conclusion that what Daddy did was ‘irresponsible and selfish, but it wasn’t wicked’. But given that the next 300 pages chronicle a depressing parade of sexual misjudgments, disappointments and humiliations, this seems not enough.

Marriage number two, to a bounder, was brought to a brisk end by Jane’s whirlwind romance with, and marriage to, Kingsley Amis. They seemed equally smitten, with themselves and each other, but after eighteen years Amis was calling her ‘the old bitch’ and turning back to his spurned first wife for comfort.

The splendid Cazelet books lay ahead, though, anatomizing class and sex in the war and after, and Falling, the extraordinary novel based on her love affair in the 1990s with a con-man (who had heard her sounding needy on Desert Island Discs). In life, Elizabeth Jane Howard made every possible emotional blunder, but on the page she was consistently astute, unsentimental and thoroughly in control.

Claire Harman.