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Hazel Rowley, Biographer With Taste for the Singular, Dies at 59

By **MARGALIT FOX**

Hazel Rowley, a biographer whose subjects ranged from a neglected Australian writer to a famous African-American one, and from a distinguished pair of French philosophers and their romantic entanglements to a distinguished American presidential couple and *their* (possible) romantic entanglements, died on March 1 in Manhattan. She was 59.

Ms. Rowley died after a series of strokes resulting from an undiagnosed infection, her literary agent, Lane Zachary, said. Reared in Australia, Ms. Rowley had lived in Manhattan in recent years.

She wrote four biographies, all of charismatic 20th-century figures. The most recent, "Franklin and Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage," was published in October by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Ms. Rowley's first biography, "Christina Stead," appeared in Australia in 1993 and in the United States the next year. It examined an often overlooked Australian writer whose best-known novel, "The Man Who Loved Children" (1940), is an acidulous study of a narcissistic father and his family.

Writing in The New York Times Book Review, the novelist Michael Upchurch called Ms. Rowley's book "a model of clarity."

Her next biography, "[Richard Wright: The Life and Times](#)" (2001), was about the American writer whose fiction (including the novel "Native Son") and nonfiction (including the memoir "Black Boy") look unflinchingly at the experience of black manhood.

In her third, "Tête-à-Tête: Simone de Beauvoir and [Jean-Paul Sartre](#)" (2005), Ms. Rowley explored the long, strange and erotically multifaceted partnership of two great philosophers. Her documentation of Sartre's amorous life prompted objections from his daughter that caused the book to be expurgated in some parts of the world.

Hazel Joan Rowley was born in London on Nov. 16, 1951, and at 8 moved with her family to Australia. She earned an undergraduate degree in French and German literature from the University of Adelaide, followed by a doctorate from the university in French literature.

Ms. Rowley taught comparative literature at Deakin University in Victoria before becoming disenchanted with academic life and turning to biography. She moved to the United States in the late 1990s.

Her doctoral dissertation had centered in part on Beauvoir, whom she interviewed in Paris in the 1970s. Ms. Rowley's continued fascination with her subject — and in particular with Beauvoir's half-century-long relationship with Sartre and its attendant parade of lovers (some his, some hers, some theirs), jealousies and intrigues — led to "Tête-à-Tête."

In researching the book, Ms. Rowley drew on Sartre's unpublished letters, in which he recounted his exploits with a welter of women while he remained in a de facto marriage with Beauvoir. (Beauvoir, meanwhile, had affairs of her own, with men and women.)

Sartre's adopted daughter, Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre, who controlled his estate, objected to Ms. Rowley's plan to quote from the letters and other unpublished material. As a result, in an unusual move, the publisher, HarperCollins, issued the biography in two different editions.

In the edition sold in North America, where copyright laws allow more liberal quotation of written matter, some of the disputed material appears intact and some is paraphrased.

In the one sold in the rest of the world, many of the passages Ms. Elkaïm-Sartre deemed objectionable are absent altogether.

Ms. Rowley's most recent book, "Franklin and Eleanor," also explores a long, vital and somewhat unorthodox partnership. Here, too, there were longstanding indications of affairs by both partners, including his with Mrs. Roosevelt's former social secretary, Lucy Mercer, and hers with the political journalist Lorena Hickok.

In the book, Ms. Rowley documents these relationships and others, but leaves their precise extent an open question.

Ms. Rowley is survived by her mother, Betty; a sister, Della; and a brother, Martin.

In interviews, Ms. Rowley was often asked what united the seemingly diverse subjects of her books. "For those who have read all four, the thread is clear," she wrote in an introductory passage on her Web site, (hazelrowley.com). "They were courageous people, who all, in

some way, felt 'outsiders' in society. Above all, they were passionate people who cared about the world and felt angry about its injustices.”