

Final chapter for literary star

Hazel Rowley's life was driven by her gift for story-telling, her passion for languages, and her determination to take as her models public intellectuals who cared deeply about the world and the issues that affected it.

Born at St Mary's Hospital, London, she immigrated to Australia with her family at the age of eight, a move to which she subsequently attributed her fascination with languages and with the forces that shape individuals.

That fascination also determined her course of study at the University of Adelaide, where her main focus was on French and German.

After graduating with honours in 1973, Hazel went on to complete a PhD in 1982.

While still an undergraduate she had been greatly enthused by lectures on the existentialists, particularly Simone de Beauvoir, to whose work she devoted her doctoral thesis.

Peter Hambly, who directed her graduate work, remembers "her intellectual curiosity and her enthusiasm for exploring what caught her attention," while French Professor John Davies notes that she was "an exceptionally gifted student, with a delightful personality."

Davies continues: "A free, independent spirit, she was no dry academic, but a first-rate and absorbing writer, whose work was a pleasure to read."

Brian Coghlan, Professor of German, warmly recalls his first meeting with her, at the instigation of her father, Derrick, who held the Chair of Microbiology and who himself enjoyed a world-wide reputation in his field.

"Hazel, just before Matric, school uniform, quiet, respectful, spoke only when spoken to, the imminent emergence of scholarly distinction came over loud and clear, though she would never have raised her voice."

For Brian, Hazel's hallmark was her "talent for total absorption, while never losing sight of the world at large."

It was a talent that ensured her success when she left academe to earn her living from her writing, a characteristically bold move, driven in large measure by the bean-counting that was beginning to be imposed on Australian academics in the 1990s.

While lecturing at Deakin University, she had already published her Banjo Award-winning biography of Christina Stead, a work that undeniably raised the standards for biographies in this country.

Her determination to speak for those who stood outside their communities and who struggled to make the world a better place, combined with her realisation of how fraught and complex the issue of race continued to be in the United States, led her to take the daring step of deciding to devote her next biography to an African-American, the novelist Richard Wright.

For her third, widely-acclaimed book Hazel returned to her earlier interest in the existentialists. This time she analysed the intellectual and physical passions that brought together two of the 20th century's greatest thinkers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. *Tête-à-Tête*, published in 2005, was a Washington Post Best Book, selected as BBC Book of the Week and voted as France's *Lire* magazine's best literary biography of the year.

Her fourth book took her back to the United States. She had become fascinated by the complex relationship between one of the country's most powerful presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and his wife Eleanor, the country's most outspoken, controversial, and influential First Lady.

While much has been written on these two charismatic figures, *Franklin and Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage* is seen by many as the most lucid, convincing and perceptive exploration of their complex open marriage. It is perhaps the work that most clearly exhibits Hazel's rapacious appetite for research, her constant questioning of received opinions, and her wonderful gift for story-telling.

When she died suddenly on 1 March, she left behind plans for an ambitious new biography based on the lives and works of the Hollywood Ten, those who were blacklisted during the McCarthy era. She also left an extraordinary number of people who had been

touched by her speaking abilities, by her powerful essays, by her warmth and wit, and by her great capacity for friendship.

I first met Hazel at freshers' camp, a willowy, articulate, funny young woman, who combined daring ambitions with a high degree of unpredictability. On one unforgettable occasion as we walked out of Elder Hall after a recital by David Galliver which included Schubert's "The Erl King", she burst out singing "Mein Vater, mein Vater" at the top of her voice. Over the years, in Australia, France and the US, I would find Hazel increasingly elegant, more sophisticated but still the same untamed spirit. ■

Story by Rosemary Libyd

"Hazel's hallmark was her talent for total absorption, while never losing sight of the world at large."

Hazel's family and friends intend to establish an endowment in her name. For more information, please contact her sister Della at dellarowley@bigpond.com or by phone at +61 8 8270 5130.

Left: Hazel Rowley in the Hudson Valley in New York State.

Photo by Lucia Guimarães.

