

Storyteller with a wonderful gift

Hazel Joan Rowley

Biographer and writer

Born: November 16, 1951; London

Died: March 1, 2011; New York

HAZEL Rowley's life was an intellectual adventure, an imaginative and courageous exploration of languages, countries and people that informed her four highly acclaimed biographies. She was a passionate and eloquent person who cared deeply about the world and the issues that affected it.

She was born the elder daughter of Betty and Derrick Rowley. When her father was appointed as the first professor of microbiology and immunology at the University of Adelaide the family migrated to Australia. She attributed to this move, at an influential moment of her life, her strong interest in cultural differences, languages, history and the influences and choices that shape individual lives.

At that university she studied French and German and had a year in Germany as an undergraduate. While working on her BA, Hazel was greatly stimulated by lectures on the existentialists, especially French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir. A great moment of her life was to interview Beauvoir in Paris.

After her honours degree, she spent three years studying in Europe. She loved talking French and German, and sprinkled her conversation with expressions from those languages.

She completed her PhD at the University of Adelaide, with a thesis on de Beauvoir and existentialist philosophy. She was especially interested in how individuals are formed and the degree of freedom they have in fashioning themselves - central questions in the biographies that made her reputation.

She began her academic career as a lecturer

in comparative literature at Deakin University in Victoria.

At Deakin she completed her first book, a powerful and brilliantly written biography of Australian novelist Christina Stead, author of *The Man who Loved Children*. Hazel's *Christina Stead: A Biography* won the National Book Council award for non-fiction and was short-listed for every literary prize in the country. Published in the US and in the UK, it was named a 1994 *New York Times* Notable Book and received high praise from critics.

In 1996, after 12 years at Deakin, Hazel took early retirement from an academy she saw as increasingly trammelled in bureaucracy and petty measurements of achievement.

On research leave in Texas in 1994, Hazel realised how fraught and complex the issue of race continued to be in the US. She took the bold but characteristic step of deciding to devote her next biography to an African-American novelist, Richard Wright. *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* had cover reviews in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, and was named a *Washington Post* Best Book.

In 2003 Hazel moved to Paris for two years to research her third biography, a highly acclaimed exploration of the relationship between French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and de Beauvoir. This was to be *Tete-a-Tete*. It 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.

Hazel spent her last years in New York. 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. Hazel's most recent biography, published in October last year, was *Franklin and Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage*. The book is a lucid, convincing and perceptive exploration of their complex open marriage. An engaging and sought-after speaker, Hazel highly valued the role of the public intellectual. Her essays, some of which have been included in *The Best Australian Essays of the Year*, range across literature, politics, social issues and questions of race.

A lover of good food and fine wine, of energetic walks and intellectual conversations, Hazel had a wide circle of friends in France, the US and in Australia.

Hazel Rowley is survived by her mother Betty, her brother Martin and sister Della.

Rosemary Lloyd