

## 10 YEARS OF SUPPORTING AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHERS: HAZEL ROWLEY LITERARY FELLOWSHIP



**On the 10th anniversary of the creation of the Hazel Rowley Literary Fellowship, Della Rowley speaks with us about her sister’s legacy as one of the world’s leading biographers and the role the Fellowship has played in supporting Australian writers.**

“When Hazel died unexpectedly in March 2011, we decided straight away that we should do something significant to remember her,” explains Della.

“We wanted her legacy to mean something, and so we established the Fellowship.”

A decade on, the Fellowship has [just announced](#) Sydney-based writer Mandy Sayer as the 2021 recipient. The award will support Sayer on her current project: a biography of the extraordinary McDonagh sisters, Paulette, Isabelle and Phyllis, Australia’s first female filmmakers.

“Announcing our 10<sup>th</sup> Fellow is a significant milestone,” says Della, who sits on the Fellowship’s Committee along with three of Hazel’s closest friends.

“Over the years, our Fellows have used the money to help them progress biographies on a variety of subjects, including writers, political activists, ethnologists, journalists, independent women and memoir.”

In this Q&A, Della tells us how the Fellowship continues to honour Hazel’s legacy and support Australian writers of biography.

### **What are some of the highlights of the Fellowship so far?**

**Della Rowley:** We always enjoy our annual Fellowship announcement and the Hazel Rowley Memorial Lecture, which has become a celebrated event on the literary calendar. As well as an opportunity to celebrate our winner, it is also a celebration of writing, biography and ideas.

In the past we have had stimulating speakers such as Alex Miller, David Marr, Maxine Beneba Clarke, Jenny Hocking and Maria Tumarkin. Copies of previous lectures are available on [the Hazel Rowley website](#).

Of course, the biggest highlights are when our Fellowship recipients publish their books. That's when we really feel we're doing something important.

### **Why did you decide to establish the Fellowship?**

After Hazel died, her friends and I were motivated by a shared ambition to support writers and encourage the writing of high-quality biography. We knew from Hazel's experience that it was hard to be a full-time writer in Australia. And we also knew that it's hard for writers when they're between projects, trying to work out who to write about next and finding ways to fund their own research even before they have a book proposal to present to a publisher.



So, we came up with the idea of a fellowship to support a work in progress and to fund research and travel. Hazel's own career received a boost when she received a fellowship that enabled her to travel to the USA while researching *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*.

### **What did you do next?**

We established the Hazel Rowley Literary Fellowship Committee. There are four of us: Della Rowley and three of Hazel's close friends – Lynn Buchanan, Irene Tomaszewski, and John Murphy.

Following Hazel's death, family, friends and acquaintances generously and quickly donated money – enough money that we were able to create a sub-fund with Australian Communities Foundation. This gave us tax-deductibility and meant that ACF would

invest and manage the money for us. It freed us up to concentrate on doing the core work of the Fellowship and ACF has done a magnificent job.

We then partnered with Writers Victoria to administer the application process. It all happened fast – Hazel died in March 2011 and by October that same year, we advertised the first Fellowship, which was awarded in March 2012.

### **What has been the impact of the Fellowship in supporting writers?**

For the first five years we gave \$10,000 to the Fellowship winner. Thanks to Hazel's family, friends and supporters who keep donating, and the ACF funds management, we were able to increase this to \$15,000 in 2017.

This money has enabled writers to pursue their projects and undertake research, including visiting libraries and archives, conducting interviews and visiting countries where their subjects have lived.

We are thrilled when we see those writers get published. Since we started the Fellowship, we have seen the successful publication of six biographies.

Fellowship winners have told us:

'Quite simply, the Hazel Rowley Literary Fellowship was the difference between my writing this biography or not.' Mary Hoban, Inaugural Fellow

'Winning the Hazel Rowley Fellowship provided valuable time, space and resources for me to work on my memoir, *The Hate Race*, at a crucial time in my writing career.' Maxine Beneba Clarke, 2014 Fellow

'The Hazel Rowley Literary Fellowship boosted my confidence as a professional writer, gave me an enhanced status in the community of writers and enabled me to travel to the places significant in the life of my subject.' Stephany Steggall, 2013 Fellow

### **What role does the Fellowship and philanthropy more broadly play in supporting the arts?**

Since we commenced the Fellowship, we have given away over \$150,000 to support Australian writers of biography. We have been told that the Fellowship has not only provided much needed financial assistance, but is also seen as a prestigious prize. It gives a confidence boost both to the winners and to the shortlisted writers. It has helped some of those writers obtain a publishing contract and other financial assistance. It's hard for writers to make a living in Australia, so it's an area that really needs our philanthropic help.

We also believe in the importance of our work in promoting discussion of ideas – a strong arts sector is the foundation of a strong and inclusive society.

Jane Sullivan, [writing in \*The Sydney Morning Herald\*](#), said: 'Perhaps the greatest boon to Australian biography today is the Hazel Rowley Literary Fellowship... The late Hazel Rowley left Australia to become one of the world's leading biographers, and the prize in her memory enables future biographers to fund their projects in ways that might never otherwise be possible. ... it will certainly encourage original, intelligent and provocative work.'

It's been a revelation how much you can achieve with small amounts of money and lots of goodwill.

Along the way, we've created valuable partnerships with Writers Victoria, Australian Communities Foundation, and Adelaide Writers' Week, and have been inspired by the enthusiasm shown by all involved. We've met many encouraging people, some who knew Hazel and some who only knew her through her writing, and now the Fellows and their books are part of her legacy.

We love giving money away to worthy writers! Hazel would have loved it too; one of her big enjoyments in life was conversations and the connections they create – and we've certainly continued that.