

**In Memory of Hazel Rowley
(1951 – 2011)**

**A Memoriam by Ambassador William J. vanden Heuvel
Roosevelt House, Hunter College
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Hazel Rowley wrote four biographies that were published before her untimely death just a year ago. They were amazing in their diversity. Hazel was an Australian, like the subject of her first biography, Christina Stead. A leading critic wrote that Hazel Rowley's book would be recognized as one of the finest biographies ever written about an Australian. It was. And it is. It contributed greatly to the fact that Christina Stead is recognized in her native land as a major literary figure of the 20th century.

It is a measure of her brilliance that Hazel's second book comprehended a totally different world, the world of African-American despair, hope and destiny. Hazel Rowley's biography of Richard Wright, the enormously talented author of Black Boy and Native Son, took him from a sharecropper's shack in Mississippi, through the Chicago South Side, to the literary magnetism of the Paris of Gertrude Stein and Albert Camus. Hazel restored his reputation, confronting those who had used the complexity of his politics and his hatred of racism to attack Wright's integrity as an American. Critics hailed what she had done.

Her doctoral dissertation had been about Simone de Beauvoir. Years later she came back to that subject, writing Tete-a-Tete, a literary portrait of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre, the extraordinary story of two passionate, free-thinking existentialist, philosophers and writers. Their intense and embattled relationship made for great biography. Hazel told the inspiring, sometimes repellent and unlikely tale of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre more completely and credibly than it had ever been told before.

And then in 2010, Hazel Rowley's Franklin and Eleanor was added to the endless bibliography regarding the Roosevelts. As Jon Meacham wrote in his review, "Hazel Rowley has brought Franklin and Eleanor alive again in all of their complexity, humanity and greatness." It was as though someone had turned on the light. She described for a new generation a bold and radical partnership as well as a marriage of enduring love.

On November 3, 2010, Hazel spoke at Roosevelt House, a treasured part of Hunter College. Her audience was transfixed. It was so appropriate that she would tell their story in the house where Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt had lived. She said then that a biographer has to have an open-minded attitude, one of understanding complex relationships, an attitude that respects historical truth. A biographer, she said, had to have an instinct for what she is writing about, an instinct that fills the gap between factual evidence and reality. As the Roosevelts had a special empathy for people in need, for the vulnerable, for the working class of our country, the necessity of a nation committed to social justice – so Hazel had an empathy for them and the broad, engaging and open world in which they – and she – thrived. She understood their struggles to find personal liberation – and in that freedom, to find strength and inspiration, never losing their ideals, never losing their capacity for both personal and human love. Hazel understood those qualities because she shared them.

How appropriate that we remember Hazel Rowley on an evening where a book about Barack and Michelle Obama will be discussed, a book that has won Jodi Kantor a national audience as this evening demonstrates. And how appropriate that the discussion will be moderated by Kati Marton, herself a brilliant author who has written about presidential marriages, whose memoir of her parents changed her life and gave humanity to one of the most difficult periods of modern history, and whose late husband, Richard Holbrooke, is mourned by all of us who admired and loved him.

Stars in the heavens are not long visible to us mortals if only because our own lives have such a limited time on Earth. It is important that we recognize the brilliance of the stars when we see them – and in remembering Hazel Rowley we do that.