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Carmen Callil

Franklin & Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage
 By Hazel Rowley
 Melbourne University Press, 352pp; \$36.99



It is always a pleasure to read a biography by Hazel Rowley. She is an enthusiastic chronicler of the lives she chooses to present to us, and has considerable narrative and research talents. Her biography of Christina Stead remains her best. Always she chooses subjects who are unconventional or, in some way, crusaders and outsiders.

Her joint biography of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, *Tête-à-Tête*, first took Rowley into uncomfortable waters. Certainly the brutal insensitivities of those two intellectuals were worth recording but the retelling of such lives mainly through the prism of emotional and sexual concerns can make even the nastiest of humans – it's hard to view de Beauvoir and Sartre as other than this – seem footling and tedious.

Rowley is equally at odds with her better self in this new biography, in which she tells the story of the Roosevelts' marriage. Franklin D Roosevelt (1882-1945): four times president of the United States, crippled by polio for most of his adult life, a liberal leader and saviour of his country, who directed America's victory over the Nazis and the Japanese in the Pacific War. His wife, Eleanor (1884-1962): his political partner, the mother of his children, an activist of enormous energies and wide sympathies, who came to stand for all that was best in American democratic principles in the mid-twentieth century. They wrote themselves – Eleanor copiously. Many excellent biographies, memoirs, histories and accounts have been written about them; there is already a vast Roosevelt bibliography.

It has long been known that Franklin dallied with other women, that Eleanor too had other loves, including women. Rowley claims originality in this biography in her assertion that, despite these infidelities, the Roosevelt marriage was a "bold and radical partnership", one of deep love in which each accepted that the other's emotional needs might require fulfilment elsewhere. The trouble is that this has been clear for many a moon and it's difficult in the twenty-first century to contend that a marriage such as this is something exceptional and astonishing.

A further problem is that the Roosevelts are part of world history, not literature; the lack of any historical context makes Rowley's book a one-sided portrait of two most interesting beings. Where is Roosevelt the well-known political bully? Can the adoration of, and slavish servitude from, all who surrounded the couple be seen as bullying of a very high order, rather than as a series of semi-idyllic relationships?

These qualifications, however, never make her work uninteresting. Rowley is a biographer of the very first order and this rosy account of the Roosevelts shows no diminution of her skills. This book will provide a new generation with a succinct account of the lives and time of two Americans of unquestionable human worth. That in itself is something.

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