

Renée

If you don't get your head out of a book,
my girl, you'll end up on Queer Street



Read NZ Te Pou
Muramura Pānui

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Read NZ Te Pou Muramura is grateful for the generous financial support of Luke Pierson.

Thanks to Luke's donation, we are able to deliver and publish three Pānui over three years, the second of which is *If you don't get your head out of a book, my girl...*

Kia ora rawa atu, Luke.

Foreword

Kia ora tātou. Talofa lava. Mālō e lelei. Bula vinaka.
Greetings.

This is the last foreword I shall write as Chair of Read NZ Te Pou Muramura for the annual Pānui, an event that has become a landmark opportunity for one of Aotearoa New Zealand's leading writers to discuss an aspect of literature close to their heart.

It has been an immense privilege to serve the readers, writers and book community of this country over the last twelve years. One of my great satisfactions has been to shape, along with my fellow Board members and the Read NZ Te Pou Muramura team, an updated strategy for the organisation and its mahi. The driving ambition of Read NZ Te Pou Muramura is 'better lives through

reading', which is underpinned by the key idea that reading is a superpower that transforms the lives of individuals, families, whānau, communities and our entire country.

If there's a tangible and powerful example of reading's superpower quality, it's found in the remarkable life of Renée. Hers is a compelling journey from a working-class life with a widowed mother amid struggle and hardship, to being one of this country's most acclaimed writers of short stories, plays and novels. And her discovery of reading and books was the crucial agent of transformation. As Renée writes towards the end of her memorable Pānui:

I was taught to read before I was five and that was just the best gift anyone has ever given me. I fell in love with it then and I love it still. Books are not about covers or print, they're about words. They're about the words writers write. They're about life and death and war and lovers and children, they're about cities and good people and bad people, they're about strange lands and strange happenings and they're about this land and the strange

historical cover-ups and the glory of the uncoverings. Books – plays, poetry, short stories, novels, nonfiction – they feed us, they heal the broken places, they teach us new things, lead us back to old.

Unfortunately, a significant number of Kiwis today are missing out on the gift of books and reading. As the report ‘The Literacy Landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand’¹ by Professor Stuart McNaughton, Chief Education Scientific Advisor, revealed in August 2020:

- There has been a marked decline in reading for pleasure in Aotearoa New Zealand, with nearly half of this country’s 15-year-olds never reading for enjoyment.
- 52 per cent of students said they only read if they have to – and read less often, with fewer students reading fiction, non-fiction, magazines and newspapers regularly.²
- In 2018, 28 per cent of 15-year-olds believed reading for enjoyment was a waste of time – up from 18 per cent in 2009.

- At Year Eight, 27 per cent of boys and 23 per cent of girls disagreed that ‘the things we read in class are about people like me and my family/whānau’.³
- Compared to girls, fewer boys read for enjoyment.

As Professor McNaughton says: ‘Given the importance of language, culture and identity to achievement, it is concerning that about one quarter of Year Eight students say they have never had the opportunity to read books that reflect their identities.’⁴ Moreover, comparative studies also show a persistent equity problem in Aotearoa New Zealand, with some of the widest gaps from lowest to highest reading performers in the world.

Read NZ Te Pou Muramura, through a range of visionary programmes and partnerships, seeks to turn this situation around. And compelling voices and inspirational life examples such as Renée’s play a crucial role in that effort. If every person in our country, especially our young people, can echo Renée’s words – ‘books have been my salvation, my education, my relaxation and my love,’ then the mahi of Read NZ Te Pou Muramura will have been worthwhile. And we shall be an immeasurably better country.

So, my thanks to Renée for her provocative and uplifting Pānui. Also, sincere thanks to all who support us – in particular, our generous donor, Luke Pierson, for his belief in the work of Read NZ Te Pou Muramura and the essential place of the annual Pānui.

Ngā mihi nui

Peter Biggs CNZM
Chair Emeritus
Read NZ Te Pou Muramura

I was born in 1929, the year Jean Devanny left Aotearoa New Zealand for good because her novel *The Butcher Shop* had been widely condemned, and the year Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* was published.

New Zealand readers were horrified and repelled by Devanny's novel. It was heresy. This beautiful, idyllic, green and pleasant place, dotted with little white woolly clumps that baa-ed or larger brown clumps that moo-ed? Where the sun always shone? And this woman portrayed it as a violent and murderous place for both women and cattle? Oh, dear me, no. We can't have that. It didn't help that Jean was a communist.

Woolf, from an illustrious British upper-middle-class family, well-educated, married to Leonard, large house, servants, wrote about the necessity for a woman to have a room of her own.

At the time, I imagine I was only interested in sucking milk and sleeping, but I'd place a bet that my mother Rose read *The Butcher Shop*, and I wonder about her perspective as a farm-worker's wife. As for Virginia's idea, a room of her own would never have occurred to Rose as a possibility – when she was growing up, she might perhaps have dreamed of a bed of her own...

My father shot himself in 1934, the year Ngaio Marsh's first crime novel *A Man Lay Dead* was published, and the year the Reform Party in New Zealand put off the election because they thought they'd lose. There were no great thinkers in the Reform Party, but they got this one right. Gordon Coates, their finance minister, completely unable to explain his financial management even to his colleagues, or indeed anyone else, was said to have told out-of-job workers, who complained about a lack of money to feed their families, that they could eat grass. I don't think he did say this, but it didn't matter anyway – it was like putting stuff up on Facebook: everyone believed he had said it, it was the kind of thing he did say, so the election was put off and 1934 became 'the forgotten year'. But not for me. I remember 1934 because it was the year my mother taught me to read.

Rose knew about hard work; she'd lived or existed through the headlines and reality of my father's death. YOUNG FARMER SHOOTS HIMSELF, screamed the headlines. Pākehā man married to Māori woman, great copy, fulfilled all expectations, editors and readers loved it.

The house went with the job, so once my father wasn't there to *do* the job we were chucked out. Rose got a room with Daisy, and she and us three kids lived in one of the big front rooms in this old villa on Guppy Road, Greenmeadows, in Hawke's Bay while Rose looked for a house to rent. This was a pretty hard ask. A young Māori woman with three kids, whose husband had shot himself – landlords were not lining up. Daisy's husband was in jail. She had four kids, which increased to six after the next two times her husband came out of jail. Daisy was a working-class Scot I think, or maybe cockney – a small, pretty, garrulous and good-hearted woman, and she needed the money – so letting a room to another outsider helped both of them. What didn't help was my continual questioning.

Why have we moved?

Why are we living here?

What is that word?

That word was either in the big black headlines

of *The Daily Telegraph* (the local paper) or in the reports. And so, it was in that room on Guppy Road that, grieving, lonely and heartbroken, Rose began teaching me to read.

She'd gone to St Joseph's in Wairoa. She and her older sister Mary ended up in the same class because Mary was a sickly girl who was often away, and who eventually, aged 33, died of tuberculosis. One day, Rose got the answer to Sister's question first and hissed it to Mary. Sister strapped them both. Mary got three for not presenting her own answer, and Rose got six for telling her the right one. Unsurprisingly, Rose hated school, but the one thing she learned was to read. She was a fast and voracious reader. She liked being taken away from this world and transported to another better one, or perhaps it was that she liked the respite from thinking about money, rent and food. She read anything and she liked to read in peace.

I saw Rose staring at these black marks on a white page and I was curious.

Rose was short, dark, good-looking, highly intelligent, hard-working and irritable. When she had time off, she liked it uninterrupted – so when she began telling me the words, she expected me to remember them. I knew a lot of words but didn't

have much idea how to join them together. She was an impatient woman, and I am too, so I understand how it irked her when I asked the meaning of a word she'd already told me. I have a good memory, and it didn't take me long to recognise the words again and know what they meant. I do not mean I understood them completely, I just had an idea.

We moved into a rental house and then, as successive landlords decided to sell, we moved to another – and another – and as rents went up, the houses she could afford gradually got grottier and grottier.

I went to Greenmeadows school, which had Primers 1–4 and Standards 1–4. I tore through the Primers in a year, simply because I could pick out words, and in Standard 1, I learned very quickly how to put little joining words between them to make sentences. The world opened up. I began to read stories.

I liked learning and I loved, loved, *loved*, reading. And the bonus was that this got me approval from the teachers. I hated the playground, hated not being friends with someone, *anyone*, hated the sidelong glances, the whispers... So there I was, liking the classroom, loathing the outside world of school. Sometimes I wished I'd be naughty and sent

to a room with a book and told to read it, which is what happened to some kids but never to me. I couldn't deliberately be naughty, because Rose would be furious – she was very decided on what she saw as good manners. You said 'please' and 'thank you', you did not say 'can I' when you should say 'may I'.

The teachers never quite knew how to take me. 'Pretty little thing, pity she's so dark,' one said to another as they stood in front of me. Did they think I was deaf? They never put me higher than second in the end-of-year tests. I suppose it would not have done to have this little dark kid, whose mother was Māori and whose father had shot himself, be placed first. However, I liked the work and I liked learning, so I had a sort of love-hate relationship with the whole thing.

Michael Joseph Savage and the Labour Party were delighted to have the election put off for a year. It gave them just that little bit of extra time to sort themselves out and storm to victory in 1935, the year one of my all-time favourite novels, *Gaudy Night* by Dorothy L Sayers, was published. I didn't read it till I was eleven, and although I didn't fully understand it then, I got the main theme, which was about the fact that when a woman got married she gave up any hope of a career and

became subservient to her husband – bearing his children, being a good mother and baking for church socials. If you were middle or upper class and could afford a nanny, a cook and a housemaid, you might be allowed to interest yourself in some charitable society or cause.

Michael Joseph spoke the language of the out-of-work farmhand, teacher, hospital worker. He spoke the same language as the poor – he'd been hard up himself. Christened Michael, he'd added the name Joseph in memory of his brother, who died when quite young. Like thousands of others, Rose had his photograph on the wall. It hung along from the dog collar, which Rose used to strap us when we did something really wrong.

In our house, there were grades of punishment: a good shouting at, a lot of swearing, no pudding, to bed with no tea and – a last resort – the strap. I only got the strap once. I'd put three oranges on Rose's bill at the grocer's. She knew to a penny how much the bill would be, so it was a shock when she found out there were extra items. I remember that huge longing when I looked at the oranges, then the idea, then the giving in to temptation. I had intended to give my brother and sister one each, but I ate one and could not resist eating another one,

so my brother dipped out. When Rose challenged us, my sister denied she'd eaten one – so I got the full force of Rose's shame and fury. Not only had I done the wrong thing, I had also made a fool of her, because she'd queried the bill, and Mr Rundle had told her '*in front of two other people*' that I had put them on the bill. She felt I'd added to the shame she experienced on a daily basis: that of being Māori in a Pākehā world.

Rose, after she got home from work, weeding carrots, would make herself a cup of tea, roll a cigarette from yellow Zig-Zag papers and her tin of Melrose tobacco, light up and read. She had an internal clock and when that buzzed, she'd get up, prepare tea, cook it (she was a terrible cook) and, when it was time, command us to wash our hands ('We might be poor, but we can be clean,' was her mantra). I thought of Rose when Dr Siouxsie Wiles told us that cleaning everything with soap and water was best, and that frequent handwashing was the answer to frightening Covid away. Rose would have approved.

Once I learned to read, I read in bed, I read in the lavatory, I read walking down the long drive to the letterbox, I read walking along the road to school. I read girls' annuals, single stories and then,

when I was around seven or eight, I discovered novels – long stories that went on and on. It was pure bliss, and at first I loved the novelty of them. However, after the first heady exhilaration and reading each one two or three times, I got very bored. The kids in the books went to boarding schools where they had midnight feasts, which I thought was mad. Why would you get up in the middle of the night and have a feed? And they were always saying ‘*scrumptious*’. What the hell did that mean? I didn’t know anyone who said ‘*scrumptious*’. If I’d said it in front of Rose she’d probably have said, ‘Don’t try and be funny with me, my girl.’

One day, I was moodily looking for something to read, and I picked up Rose’s library book. Rose hated going out. She went out on pension day, when she went to the post office and collected her widow’s pension. Then she would go to Mr Rundle, where she paid the grocery bill and bought her one treat: a packet of Capstan ten tailor-mades. She saved these cigarettes for special occasions, or perhaps for when she was feeling tired or discouraged. She eked them out so that the pleasure lasted. Yes, she hated going out, but she loved reading, so she had to go out once a week to borrow books from the library. The Taradale library was a lovely place, situated at

the back of the Taradale Town Hall, with brown varnished walls and shelves, and a smiling, very kind librarian.

I'd enjoyed *Anne of Green Gables* by LM Montgomery and the rest of the Anne books, and I loved *Emily of New Moon* and the rest of the Emily books, but I couldn't go on reading and re-reading them forever. The alternative seemed to be the scrumptious ones, so yeah, nah to them. In desperation, I picked up one of Rose's library books.

These were crime novels: Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham, Dorothy L Sayers, later to be known as the Queens of Crime. Of course, there were other writers, other books, but these are the ones I remember. Dorothy L Sayers was the best writer I decided later, but they all held my interest. They were puzzling though. There were manor houses, there were butlers, people said 'rather', the working-class characters were always slow and stupid, and it was always left to the upper-class sleuth to solve the murder. Hercule Poirot was regarded with suspicion at first because he was a 'foreigner', but he overcame that handicap by using his little grey cells and solving murders. These novels were racist, classist and sexist, but at ten I didn't notice that. In any case, these were people

in books, they weren't real, so I concentrated on the puzzles. Unfortunately, Rose didn't care whether I was in the middle of a murder case – if she'd read the last line in the sixth or so book, she'd gather up the others, stick them in a basket, walk up to the library, return those and take out some more.

I got used to making up my own ends to the stories, which were like reading about life on Mars anyway. Some of them even said '*scrumptious*'. I made up my mind that if I ever got an invite to a weekend party at a manor house, I would refuse. I had no wish to be strangled or shot or stabbed in a library, locked on the inside.

Rose decided that if I was old enough to read her library books, I was old enough to go to the library and change them. This was a fraught business because I had to remember what she'd read or hope the librarian had kept the card up to date. The books I borrowed were entered on a card, but once the card was full and a new one started, it depended how busy the librarian was, whether she had time to check the full cards at the back of the box. I either had a good memory or was just plain lucky because Rose never complained.

I was coming up to twelve and looking forward to going to high school, until a few weeks before

my birthday when Rose said, 'You can't go to high school, we haven't got the money. You can go to work and that will mean Jimmy and Val can go to high school.'

I was upset, angry, hurt beyond measure, but I didn't dream of arguing. I turned twelve, left school and got a job at the woollen mills around Pandora Point in Ahuriri. I told the manager I was fifteen, and he pretended to believe me.

I caught the workers' bus at 7:30 a.m. I was paid 22 shillings a week. The bus ticket cost 4 shillings, I gave Rose 10 shillings, and I had 8 to go mad with.

A week or two after I started work, a man in a tweed overcoat and his wife came to live down our street. They were from England. On the way to the bus stop one morning, he said, 'You like reading?'

'Yes,' I said. I had no idea how to talk to adults, and he didn't have much of an idea how to talk to a kid either. He probably thought I was older than I was. Everyone else did.

'What do you like reading?' he asked.

'Books,' I said. This must have been a bit discouraging but he persevered.

'Here's a newspaper about books,' he said. And he gave me my first copy of *John O'London's Weekly* and continued to do so every week until two years

later when he moved away. I loved them. I wrote in my memoir *These Two Hands* about the effect they had on me. They had articles about writers, about books, about plays. They published poems and wrote about poets. They had letters to the editor – some of them not very nice.

Here I was, sitting on the workers' bus going into Napier, reading about books, writers, playwrights, poets in that faraway place called England, and like a little literary vacuum cleaner I sucked up all the words, stories, reviews, poems, letters to the editor. I read voraciously. I was only happy when I was reading.

Rose sent us to the Methodist Sunday school so she could have a lie-in on Sundays and read. At Sunday school, we were divided into things that boys did and things that girls did. Boys sang *Dare to Be a Daniel*, but girls were not allowed to sing that song. Girls learned texts and sang 'Wide, wide as the ocean, blue are the heavens above, deep, deep as the deepest sea is my Saviour's love'. We had hymn books and learned hymns off by heart. We were told that every time we did a good deed there would be another star in our crown, so that when we died, we would go straight to heaven where we'd sit at the feet of Jesus. I wasn't too shook on the idea

of sitting at anyone's smelly feet but, hey – better than being 'cast into the flames', which seemed to be the other option.

Books took me into new worlds, they told me things, some interesting, some not. I read the Bible, which was a bit startling, but I plugged on, only understanding about a tenth of it. I read the Bible three times, the last one when I was sixteen, and I decided enough was enough. I started to form some sort of consciousness about the world, or at least the world of books. I read Essie Summers and Rosemary Rees, who both made fortunes from their light romance novels. I knew they were froth that had no relationship to real life, but that was good. Sometimes real life was too hard.

I never got over not going to high school. It wasn't the education – anyone could educate themselves if they had access to a library – it was the large gap that opened up between me and my own age group. It seemed to me that the rest of the world had been to high school and I hadn't. The chance to form friendships, to observe different lives, to compare and contrast other lives with mine and to grow at the same rate as others was absent, and as it was, I grew up very lopsided – instead of forming friendships with girls my own age, I read books.

The only relations that visited regularly were my father's brothers, my Uncle Cliff and my Uncle Ormond. I loved Ormond and he was very good to me. He went off to war and I missed him enormously. Later their two sisters became regular visitors, and so did my mother's younger sister, Grace. Apart from Rose and Grace, the only other Māori I'd known were the ones at school and they were, like me, outsiders. Sometimes I walked past the group of old Māori women who used to sit outside the butcher's on the footpath in the sun and smoke, and one of them would say to me, 'Hey girl, you Rose Brown's daughter?' I used to run past and pretend I didn't hear.

I did not read books about this kind of situation. I did not read books about this country, about the towns. I read about other countries, about other rivers, about other mountains.

The only female friend I had around my own age was my sister. My workmates were five or ten years, or more, older. One of them not only told me about sex, but she also told me to show a bit of spine. She said, 'Tell the others you won't answer to Reeny or Brownie, you'll only answer to Renée.'

So I used my spine, and it worked.

At the time I thought I was the only one in the

entire world called Renée. Why Rose named me Renée I'll never know. It was not a family name, although my second one, Gertrude, was – but every goat in the district was called Gertrude, so I grew out of hating my name and into loving it. My mother taught me to read, and she gave me my name. Both of these gifts have served me well.

I met Laurie and he fell in love. I liked that. I liked being the one who was loved. I got engaged and then married at 19 and turned 20 the following July. I had my first son a couple of months before I turned 21. I thought I knew everything, and I acted like I did. I read Vera Brittain and Rebecca West. I read Dr Marie Stopes' *Married Love*, published in 1918, and I said Laurie had to read it too. *Married Love* talked about sex and pleasure and said both parties should get pleasure. I had not a clue what that meant. I had very vague ideas about what happened when you went to bed after your marriage, but books enlightened me.

In a way, I think I did know a few important things. I knew I did not want to end up like Rose or Daisy. I might read light romances sometimes, but I was sceptical, cynical, and I suspected everyone's motives. I chose well when I married and I got exactly the right person – someone who loved

me more than I loved him, who never said no to anything I wanted to do. I wanted to be respectable, I wanted a nice house, nice kids, I wanted everything other people seemed to have.

I left the factory and got a job at a chemist shop – Breen’s on Emerson Street in Napier. I stepped up in the world. Working in shops was superior to working in a woollen mill or a printing factory. Mr Breen was a good employer and a stickler for good service. I wasn’t allowed to serve in the shop until I’d dusted the damn thing three or four times, read all the labels and, when asked, could go straight to the requested item, take it from the shelf and hand it to him. I wasn’t, of course, allowed to sell condoms, which were called French letters. Men would shuffle in furtively to the counter or swagger in, grab a bottle of cough syrup and then ask for three packets. Mr Breen always knew what they wanted. There would be a hushed, muttered transaction and out the man would go and become part of the Friday night shoppers.

I came across *Te Ao Hou*, a magazine that published Māori writers. I read JK Sturm and Rowley Habib – at last I was reading about the people and the country I knew. I was dragged to a rehearsal by a friend and called up onto the stage

with five others. The director ordered us to scream, and I screamed the loudest and I got the part. And so began my long love affair with theatre and reading plays.

Lou Johnson came to work at the *Hawke's Bay Herald-Tribune* and began a series of poetry readings, where he and other poets read their works. I began reading poetry. The last time I saw Lou, he was standing in the foyer at Circa Theatre. He grinned at me and said, '*The House of Bernarda Alba*.' This was a low blow. I had played Martirio, one of the daughters in this play by García Lorca. The story was about an old woman who had seven daughters and none of the younger ones were allowed to get married until the older one married, which was not going to happen. The director said, 'when you stand there, I want you to show repressed sexuality.'

So I stood there, but I did not show repressed sexuality. I didn't have a clue how to show repressed sexuality. Or unrepressed sexuality for that matter. It was not the sort of thing you could look up in the dictionary or roll up and ask a neighbour about.

In the play, the guy who wants to marry the youngest sister hangs himself, but hanging was a bit quiet, the director thought. She wanted something

more dramatic, so she decided he'd shoot himself.

In his scathing review, Lou Johnson tore the production to pieces. He didn't actually say I failed the repressed-sexuality test, but he was furious about the director's cheek in changing the ending, so we all bore the brunt. And we all hated him, but standing there in Circa all those years later, both of us older and wiser, we laughed about it.

I began teaching English and history at Wairoa College by accident. Their regular teacher got sick; I was studying history extramurally from Massey, so I was asked to fill in. I had not been to teachers' college, but I'd had 20 years in theatre. I'd read hundreds of books and a couple of hundred plays. I was short and skinny, with a deep voice. I was told via Facebook last year by one of the students in that first class, that when I walked into the room no one took any notice of my command to stop talking – so, she said, 'You stuck *Dark Side of the Moon* on very loud and we all got such a shock we stopped talking.' I had not read any books about teaching, but I had done 20 years in theatre, so I knew about preparation and performance, and after that first shock, we all got on okay.

My kids and I went on a summer holiday to Mahia. I read *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, *To Kill a*

Mockingbird by Harper Lee, and I read somewhere in a magazine that Elvis' favourite sandwich filling was peanut butter, bacon and banana. Bob Dylan had arrived in the early '60s with *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, and they were, but for the moment we didn't notice – the kids dug for pipi, collected paua, bought fish and chips. I read, and I read. We were all happy. The year was 1972 and *Broadsheet* came along. What a breath of fresh air. I loved it and waited impatiently for each new issue. I went to the United Women's Convention, here in Wellington, where Margaret Mead told us to go home and do something. Wairoa had three pubs and a Working Men's Club, which catered for men, and for women there was something called a women's rest, which was a small concrete edifice containing a lavatory and a washbasin. Clearly room for improvement. So we shouted a bit, talked to the council, the Jaycees, the Lions, and finally we got some larger rooms with hot water and a kettle and some comfortable seats, and The Wairoa Women's Centre was opened by Sonja Davies.

I read the *NZ Listener*, *NZ Woman's Weekly*, *New Idea*. I read hundreds of plays. I read Arapera Blank, Rowley Habib, Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, Fiona Kidman, Rachel McAlpine. I read Germaine

Greer, I read English and American feminists, and I directed plays. I directed numerous plays for Wairoa Little Theatre, the last a feminist play called *Sweetie Pie*, which caused a huge stir – three women who'd worked on the play left their husbands – so when the little theatre wrote their history, they left every play I'd ever directed, my work on the committee and even all the dunnies I'd emptied and cleaned, out of the story. After I wrote my memoir, *These Two Hands*, a woman who'd been in that play came to see me, and we agreed that leaving me and my work out of their history was on a par with the general history of this country – which, if it didn't like what had actually happened, just cut it out. That is until Vincent O'Sullivan and a few others wrote the real history and showed that what had been called 'history' before was a fantasy of the colonists, who did not want anyone to think dear Governor Grey was a land-grabbing, money-sucking hypocrite.

In the 1980s when I did the twentieth-century women's literature paper with lecturer Aorewa McLeod, she took me right into the heart of what was happening in women's writing. I was introduced to the American poet Adrienne Rich. The first poem of hers I ever read began 'A wild

patience has taken me this far' and I thought, *ka pai, Adrienne, ka pai*. She was a lesbian feminist, poet, essayist.

Walking up Albert Park to university, I remembered when Janet Frame's *Owls Do Cry* came out in 1957, then Ruth France's *The Race and Spinster* by Sylvia Ashton-Warner in 1958, and how exhilarating they were to read, and right then in Albert Park, I felt a huge delight. I might not have gone to high school, I might be cleaning toilets to earn money, but I was at university. I was reading Adrienne Rich and *Broadsheet* and I knew I would write too. I'd arrived on Queer Street, but it wasn't the street Rose had predicted.

This street was fun and parties and talking and shouting. It was also scary – it was marching for law reform, it was enduring the hate and the cries from onlookers, 'Get back to the gutter where you belong.'

This Queer Street was discussion, endless discussion late into the night. Rose was from the 'do it because I say so' kind of school, she was not a fan of 'let's discuss it'. I can't say I'm a complete fan either. I like to get things done, but those women on Queer Street made room for me.

I got a part-time job at the university bookshop and decided heaven was here on earth – to hell with sitting at the feet of Jesus. This was good enough for me. I started writing seriously. I wrote plays. I wrote theatrical revues. When I was awarded the ONZM, I laughed along with the audience when the nice guy with the beautiful voice read out the titles of my works: *Asking for It*, *What Did You Do in the War*, *Mummy?*, *The MCP Show*.

And I kept reading and I'm still reading, albeit with big type, on an iPad.

At my 90th birthday party, my oldest son said when he thought of me, it was me reading. He says I would be reading when he got home from school, and I would get up, see to him and his brothers, give them a biscuit or two, a glass of milk, send them out to play and settle back down with a book. I was a Rose duplicate.

He says I used to take the three of them to the river, find a safe spot, get them sorted, then once they were in the water, I'd open my book and immediately be lost to the world. I suppose I'd have looked up if one of them was drowning, but who knows?

Reading books has been my salvation, my education, my relaxation and my love. I suppose it

was almost inevitable that one day I would start losing my sight. Life, Rose had informed me more than once, was not fair.

I have a Lilliput Library on my fence, and when I put it up, I imagined I'd refill it every couple of days with books from my own library, but it refills itself. At least, the people who love the books do. After the first refill five years ago, I have only put in four books. The rest are put in and taken out by people who like reading. All age groups. They don't have to replace the books they borrow but it's like they want to spread the love of books. Some knock on my door and say, 'Thank you,' and I say, 'It's a pleasure,' because it is.

Reading books will continue. Early one morning, I had a slightly irritable text from one granddaughter. It said, 'Nan, for God's sake, he woke me at *five* this morning to read him that damned Doug the Bug *again*.'

My eleven-year-old granddaughter reads adult books as well as ones from her own age group, and she likes re-reading.

Reading books, whether from print on pages or print on a screen, continues because we need stories, we need facts and we need adventures. There is

nothing like that personal connection that happens between us and the words on a page or a screen – just us and the words.

I was taught to read before I was five and that was just the best gift anyone has ever given me. I fell in love with it then and I love it still. Books are not about covers or print, they're about words. They're about the words writers write. They're about life and death and war and lovers and children, they're about cities and good people and bad people, they're about strange lands and strange happenings and they're about this land and the strange historical cover-ups and the glory of the uncoverings.

Books – plays, poetry, short stories, novels, non-fiction – they feed us, they heal the broken places, they teach us new things, lead us back to old. They are still working.

The internet is great. I love technology, but there is room in our lives for more than one love.

I was about eleven when Rose said, 'If you don't get your head out of a book, my girl, you'll end up on Queer Street.'

Well, Rose, you were right, I didn't take my head out of a book, and I did end up on Queer Street. It's not the Queer Street you meant – not the one

where all the pawnbrokers and second-hand shops are, where all the poor people go, and it's not one that's always sunshine and roses either.

On this Queer Street, we had to struggle and march and smile and shout, we had to sit and talk and argue, we had to read and tell our stories, we had to write a new ending and we had to heal ourselves – and on this street called Queer, that's exactly what we did and exactly what we do.

*He toka noa te toka
He rākau noa te rākau
Kia tapiri rā anō ki te kōrero.*

*A stone is just a stone
A tree is just a tree
Until it is a story.*

Kia ora and thank you.

Renée

Endnotes

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Read NZ Te Pou Muramura

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