

An Unassuming Radical

Christobel Mattingley discusses the powerful influence of author Nene Gare's work

If enough people care, we will change things.

—Nene Gare

Writer Nene Gare broke new ground in 1961 with her first novel *The Fringe Dwellers*. Earlier novelists—Katherine Susannah Prichard in *Coonardoo* (1929), Xavier Herbert in *Capricornia* (1938), and Donald Stuart in *Yandy* (1959)—had introduced Aboriginal themes and characters in outback settings. But Gare confronted readers with the situation of urban Aboriginal people. In 1961, Aborigines were still not recognised as Australian citizens, after almost 200 years of living on the fringe of the society that had usurped their lands.

Just as in 1988, when Sally Morgan's *My Place* helped change perceptions in the bicentenary year of Australia's colonisation, publication of *The Fringe Dwellers* and its timely 1966 reprint made its contribution towards the landmark 1967 referendum, which gave long overdue recognition and citizenship to Aboriginal people. Gare wrote in response to white attitudes to Aborigines that she found while living in Geraldton, Western Australia, with her husband Frank, then a district officer in the Native Welfare Department:

I wrote about another culture because nobody else had and I was shocked at the attitude of white people to part-Aboriginals. I saw them as individuals and resented it when people wrote them off as a mob. I had a desire to let people know what was happening to the Aboriginal population in my small town, the awful treatment by most whites of black people. Especially since so many of them were my friends. My novel is factual. I keep a diary. I keep notes. In my memory I hear Aboriginal people talking. I hear it and I type what I hear. I wrote about incidents I knew had happened. I simply sat down and wrote about the people I knew. I had such affection for them and their gentle ways—so different from us. Every character is one I know personally. I was writing for anyone who would read what I wrote.



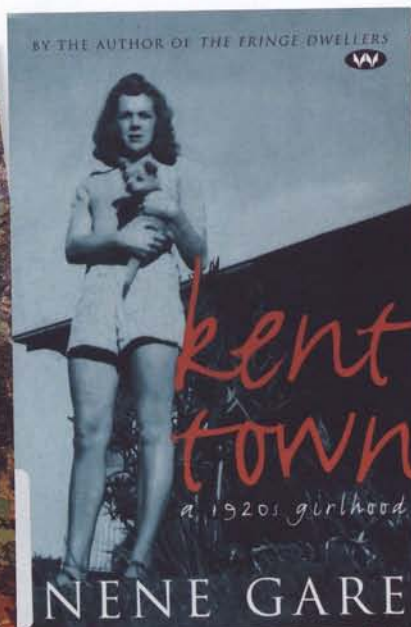
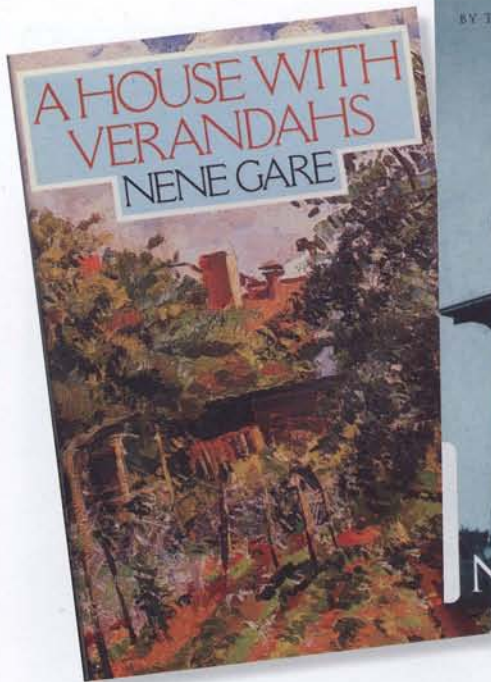
Reviews were glowing. It was hailed as an impressive first novel, strongly and compassionately written. The *Sydney Morning Herald* said it was 'by far the best that has appeared on the social problems of caste in Aborigines ... artistic, knowledgeable and filled with discerning character studies'. The *Bulletin* described it as 'sad and funny, warm and tragic', while *The Age* pronounced it 'stark in places ... truly moving'. The London *Tribune* declared it to be 'an honest book, an event, a force for good'. But the ultimate tribute came from Gare's best friend, respected Geraldton elder May Forrest, who said, 'I didn't think a white woman could write like that about us'.

By 1985, *The Fringe Dwellers* had been reprinted 18 times. Filmmaker Bruce Beresford recognised its potential and kept in close contact with Gare through the seven years it took to obtain finance for a film. Gare held him in high regard, identifying with his feeling for disadvantaged people and respecting

Pat Barblett (b.1932)
Portrait of Nene Gare 1986
gelatin silver photograph;
25.0 x 20.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11383145

Cover of *The Fringe Dwellers*, by
Nene Gare (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966)
Courtesy of Shelley Gare





above left:
Cover of *A House with Verandahs*, by Nene Gare (South Melbourne, Vic.: Macmillan, 1980)
Courtesy of Shelley Gare

above middle:
Cover of *Kent Town: A 1920s Girlhood*, by Nene Gare (Kent Town, S. Aust.: Wakefield Press, 1997)
Courtesy of Shelley Gare

above right:
Cover of *An Island Away*, by Nene Gare (London: Heinemann, 1963)
Courtesy of Shelley Gare

his refusal to compromise. Consulting with her, he wrote five scripts before both were satisfied the final draft was true to the spirit of Aboriginality and the book. Gare regretted that one character and incidents had to be omitted, but acquiesced, realising the different medium's constraints. She travelled interstate to spend five days on location with the film crew and cast, which included Kath Walker, Justine Saunders and Bob Maza, because she wanted the actors to know her. She was delighted that the young actress who played Noonah had grown up with the book and loved it.

In 1986, after its Sydney Film Festival premiere, *The Fringe Dwellers* was chosen for the top bracket at Cannes, and screened in a number of countries. But despite overseas success, response in Australia was lacklustre. However, when shown on television in 1991 it attracted much more attention and was rated as film of the week. But Gare remained modest about her work.

I believe I am respected, may be because readers of my books know that I in turn respect the truth. The most important thing is to tell the truth (as you see it). It is my opinion that writers such as myself are distinguished for only one thing and that is a knowledge of human nature. Human nature is all we have to study and so we make a career of it.

Gare acknowledged that her subsequent three novels, *Green Gold* (1963), *A House*

with Verandahs (1980) and *An Island Away* (1981) were autobiographical, as was her posthumously published *Kent Town: A 1920s Girlhood*.

Born in 1919 in Adelaide, she grew up in an extended family, with aunts and uncles much better off than her own parents, who made do as best they could. Feeling second-class, and observing hardships suffered by other families during the Depression, gave her empathy for the struggles of the Aboriginal people she met later in Western Australia.

In *Green Gold* Gare wrote about life with her husband Frank, growing bananas in Carnarvon in the late 1940s. *An Island Away*, based on their earlier years in Papua New Guinea where her husband was a patrol officer, is told from the wife's perspective. *A House with Verandahs* draws on her childhood, as does *Kent Town*. Peace, the leading female character in these three latter books is, Gare disclosed, herself. 'I have always written about my own experiences. I write as I feel. I have been too afraid to write from my imagination in case I mislead. My own reading when I was very young caused me to expect so much more from life than one ever gets. So I distrust most fiction. I'd never never contrive to make a plot. Things must happen, as I think they do. No working up to a climax—possibly unfortunately for my publishers,' she added wryly. Indeed, she reproached herself for having been persuaded to add an untrue

happy ending to *A House with Verandahs*: 'I always cross out the last couple of paragraphs when I give away a copy.'

When a publisher wanted a sequel to *The Fringe Dwellers*, Gare felt she was not given time to write a novel and in *Bend to the Wind* regretfully resorted to short stories. She was successful too in that genre, with work published in the *Bulletin*, *Meanjin*, *Overland*, the *West Australian*, the *Canberra Times*, and various anthologies. Some stories travelled widely. In 1992, she was thrilled when one was included in a Chinese anthology.

Authors she most admired included Patrick White, Rumer Godden, Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf. Candidly assessing her own work she wrote: 'I am aware that my style lacks elegance.' Gare said she had learned from every book she had ever read but, to her knowledge, never modelled herself on any other writer. She declared: 'There are writers with a distinctive style, Patrick White among them, whom I would not go near if I were myself working on something because I would be afraid of some little eccentricity reflecting itself in my work. I think it is better for my type to write straight from the heart, without worrying too much about style.'

Nevertheless, she felt the name Doris Violet May, given to her by her parents, John and Mary Wadham, was not stylish enough for an author. So she called herself Nene, pronounced Neen, which she believed was Greek. Much later she discovered that Doris, 'frequently the name of housemaids' in her childhood, is also Greek and confessed, 'I feel humble enough now to resume it but it is too late'.

Like other successful authors, Gare had to spend much precious time answering letters. At least three students did postgraduate theses on her work and she was generous, gracious and disarmingly frank in responding to their many questions. The correspondence, warm and affectionate, continued for years with Manuela Cannatelli of Rome University and Denise Gutteres, with whom she commiserated about the difficulties of writing a thesis, describing how discouraged she felt when editors wanted further work on a manuscript with which she was satisfied. She was touched to receive an invitation to Cannatelli's wedding, and sent one of her paintings as a gift.

Gare was a talented artist, winning several awards in the 1970s, and holding five exhibitions in Perth. With typical altruism she donated the proceeds to charities, including Amnesty International, WA AIDS Council, the local dogs' home and a woman lawyer assisting Aboriginal women and children. She was eloquent about Aboriginal art, the subtle earth colours and careful delineation of their handed-down stories: 'This is their land that they know better than we ever shall.' Even after moving to Perth, when Frank became commissioner for Native Welfare, she maintained contact with her Aboriginal friends, taking pride in their achievements.

Nene Gare died on 29 May 1994. Her plea, written in her notebook on location almost 20 years earlier—'God, just let this one thing be successful. Let me have helped to do one good thing in my life'—had been honoured. On school reading lists for many years, *The Fringe Dwellers* has been a powerful influence for the change she so passionately desired.

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Painting by Nene Gare
Courtesy of Shelley Gare

