In a small unit off a main road in Ōtaki on the Kāpiti Coast, lesbian playwright and feminist writer Renée sits waiting. Today it is Friday, and she wears a yellow jersey. "It's my favourite colour," she says.

Past the lilliput library with free books stacked in her front yard, and a manicured garden with colourful, well-groomed plants, the 92-year-old offers cups of tea, coffee and water. As well as her jersey Renée wears yellow socks with pink flamingoes, a large pounamu necklace, rose-gold spectacles and navy trousers.

Inside her kitchen—which has porcelain cups painted with oranges hanging on a mug tree, neatly-folded tea towels, a gravy boat and some Kāpiti-made olive oil—the jug boils. We walk into her living room past a bright yellow keyboard and Apple monitor, disposable masks, and hung framed photographs.

Renée shuffles her cane tables around to accommodate our drinks before sitting down on a red sofa. As she begins to speak, we realise she is directly underneath a painting of herself.
Renée was born in 1929 and left school at age 12 to work in woollen mills.

Rose taught Renée how to read before she went to school — the greatest gift of her whole life.

When Renée was four her father Stanley, who was Pākehā, shot himself. After the incident Rose, being Māori, became a target for journalists and Renée still remembers racist headlines and people blaming her mother for Stanley’s death.

Being a working class family with a lack of money did not help. But others’ experiences were worse — boys were made to work on farms as young as 10. They didn’t have blankets and had to wash their own clothes.

As a child worker Renée mingled with damaged people — the types who couldn’t cope in social situations, and preferred to sit in corners with a drink but nothing to say. “That was the ‘30s, and that was the life.”

Rose died aged 42. Renée says she had “15 years of hell” from society, but somehow kept the family together. She weeded carrots for sixpence an hour and lived in a mostly Pākehā community. The family did not speak te reo in the house. Renée admired Rose, describing her as courageous, determined, good-looking and went through immense hardship. She says she takes after her mother, being a hard worker. It does not occur to her not to work. In fact, she’d probably be very unhappy if she stopped.

With Rose, Renée learned how to understand what was not being said — the language between the lines. Renée says people have lost this ability.
“Are you expecting me to be very wise?” she laughs as the microphone goes on. Renée is speaking to Stuff in the lead-up to her national Read New Zealand Te Pou Muramura pānui at Wellington’s National Library at the end of last year. Titled If you don’t get your head out of a book, my girl, you’ll end up on Queer Street, Renée says she named the event after something her own mother said to her when she was about 11, and because of the double meaning of queer.

“I did end up on queer street, but not the queer street ... where all the homeless people sleep and everyone’s down and out. I didn’t end up there, but I did end up on queer street. She was right. Our mothers are always right.”

Renée, of Ngāti Kahungunu, was born in Napier in 1929, and attended Greenmeadows School. Why mononymous? The first, Renée was the only name that was hers—she either had her father’s name, or her husband’s. Renée was the name her mother Rose gave her. It also removes barriers when engaging with others. “People have to address me as Renée. Not Mrs, Miss, or Ms. Just Renée. It is what it is. And because it was unusual, I got away with it.”

Renée left school aged 12 to work in woollen mills and later, a printing factory where she learned how to bind books. Good at school, Renée thought she would attend higher education, but just after her 12th birthday Rose told her she had to work so her younger brother and sister could go to school, too.

Renée reckons out of the three siblings, she would have been the one who benefited the most. “But it’s OK because I’ve done alright ... Because I was a reader, you can educate yourself if you want to.”
Renée met her husband at work at Swailles Printing Company on Dickens St in Napier, and was married at 19, later having three sons. They moved to Wairoa, in northern Hawke’s Bay, and ran a grocery shop. Renée then went to work at Wairoa College as an English and history teacher. She lived next to another teacher, who recommended she enrol in a degree. “She got the form and stood over me while I filled it in. I hadn’t gone to high school, but they took me. Perhaps they were short that year or something.”

She started her Bachelor of Arts, majoring in English, when she was about 40, but lumbered through her studies in between working, parenting and theatre work – which she was increasingly interested in. She also wrote short stories, columns and reviews for newspapers, and acted in plays at the Napier Repertory Theatre and directed plays for schools and groups across Hawke’s Bay. She says it’s important for people to look forward, find a job they like and stick to it.

In her third year, Renée had to study her degree internally. She moved to Auckland where she was exposed to 20th Century women’s literature, and she began to read feminist and lesbian writing and poetry. She cleaned toilets at Auckland’s Theatre Corporate for money and, after getting her degree in 1979, she worked again as a teacher of English and drama in Auckland.

She wrote her first play, Setting the table, with four lesbian characters as the heroines, in 1981. Writing it was almost an accident. “It was just unbelievable when I look back.” She went on to write several plays which featured women, and Māori women, in leading roles, and humanised working class people. “Writers never have [meaningfully featured women], and they never will, I suppose, unless women write about them.”
Renée wants queer people to feel safe and not alone. Some of her other well-known works include *Wednesday to Come*, *Pass It On* and *Jeannie Once*.

In Auckland Renée lived on Richmond Rd in Ponsonby. She fell in love with a younger woman – a relationship that lasted two decades, they remain friends.

As she grew older she cared even less about people’s perceptions of her, or her work. “I mean really, who cares in the scheme of things.” Attitudes and people have changed. Renée marched for Homosexual Law Reform in 1986 and said it was terrifying, with people on Queen St shouting abuse at her. “But I’d do it again.” She says men were far more at risk, as they could be arrested. Many queer women lived double lives and didn’t want people drawing attention to their situation.

Renée described the 1980s as a fun mix of "absolutely fabulous and absolutely fearful". She was in Auckland for the whole of the 1980s, but went to Dunedin in 1989 for the Burns Fellow literary residency. She remembered one march up Ponsonby Rd where people from the Salvation Army cursed at her. "The hatred on their faces [was obvious]."

Renée carries grudges. Her activism was radical then, but not now, she says. "I don’t think I was radical either. I just think I was honest. People were not used to that – saying, ‘alright, I’m queer, so f... off, who cares.’"
Renée's favourite colour is yellow.

She remembers going to pubs mostly populated by men, with her girlfriends in a group – they would make noise and order beer and always go home in pairs or threes for safety. "We had a card we used to hand out that said, 'you have just insulted a woman—in three days your penis will drop off,'" she said. Those environments could be physical, threatening. Despite pushback, they still went.

She went to lots of parties, met lots of people, drank too much – "did everything" too much. She says she was only scared once or twice. "I'm short, but I've got a loud voice." She doesn't regret anything. "Not one moment. ... I'd never had an adolescence because I started work at 12. So that was it. It was just so great. I didn't give a damn, and I credit being 50 with that. I just did not care."

She wants people turning 50 to know it will be the best decade of their life. "It's better to be old now than it ever was before. There are more opportunities. People do not expect you to sit and knit until you drop off the chair." A ball of red yarn and a pair of knitting needles are on her bed.

When Renée took her musings on tour she had women-only nights and mixed nights. Once in Reefton, a woman in a front row sat with tears running down her face hearing Renée's discourse on feminism and queerness. On another night, four nuns came. "We were talking about rape, church, religion."

Her influence lasts. A few years ago in Dunedin after speaking at the library, a West Coast woman told Renée that she changed her life by coming out later in life. "I don't know what it's like now," Renée says, "but I'm sure it was harder then. I might be an old woman looking back, but ... it was vicious". She's pleased she told the truth.

These days Renée marvels at how far society has come. She marched in Wellington for marriage equality in 2012 and remarked at the amount of
parents with pushchairs and pets present, and people clapping and smiling at
the parade outside Kirkcaldie & Stains department store. “They weren’t saying
‘get back to the gutter where you belong’.”

Renée says she loves what she does.

She knows people still have a hard time, but says these days police do not
strip-search on-site. People don’t leave items in her letterbox any more, or ring
her up to yell at her. “It wasn’t that you didn’t feel safe — you weren’t safe.”
Renée says she received more homophobia, and flack for being a feminist
than racism for her being Māori. She was often stereotyped into a person
attacking others.

The bonds of her friendships, her relationships, and her writing got her
through.

These days her life is smaller. She works every day at 92 and is still, in her own
words, compos mentis. She’s had severe arthritis and a double mastectomy.
But her brain is in working order. She’s proud of keeping going. She wants
cannabis to be legalised. She just got a new computer. “I hesitated buying it
because I thought I might die two weeks after ordering it — it would be money
wasted. Then I thought, ‘well, so what’. Well, I’ve had it two weeks and I haven’t
so far.”

Renée says she owes a great deal to technology, but has huge grief over her
loss of eyesight, which is the worst thing that ever happened to her. “But I
can’t complain ... A lot of people have lost a great deal more than that.” Renée
is comfortable and warm. She wants a happy ending. Her favourite thing is
coming out of the shower in the morning, making a cup of coffee, carrying it
to her computer, and starting work.

“One of the reasons I’m lucky is I’ve got something to do that I love. I think I’ll
write until my hands drop from the keys. That’s my intention, anyway.”