

National literary award bestowed on local poet

Authors-1990
Tanning Prize recognizes mastery in the art of poetry

By ERIN K. QUIRK
Sentinel staff writer

LIVE OAK — Adrienne Rich began writing poems in her head at age 4. On Wednesday, at age 67, the nationally recognized poet and Live Oak resident was awarded the \$100,000 Tanning Prize by the Academy of American Poets.

The prize recognizes mastery in the art of poetry. It is the largest poetry prize in North America and the largest national literary prize awarded.

In the modest manner that so many say is typical of her, Rich told the Sentinel via fax that each honor she receives comes as a surprise to her.

"I grow more and more self-critical as I grow older," she wrote. "I see more and more the difficulties of the art."

But as difficult as her work is, Rich, who writes on topics ranging from feminist dog-

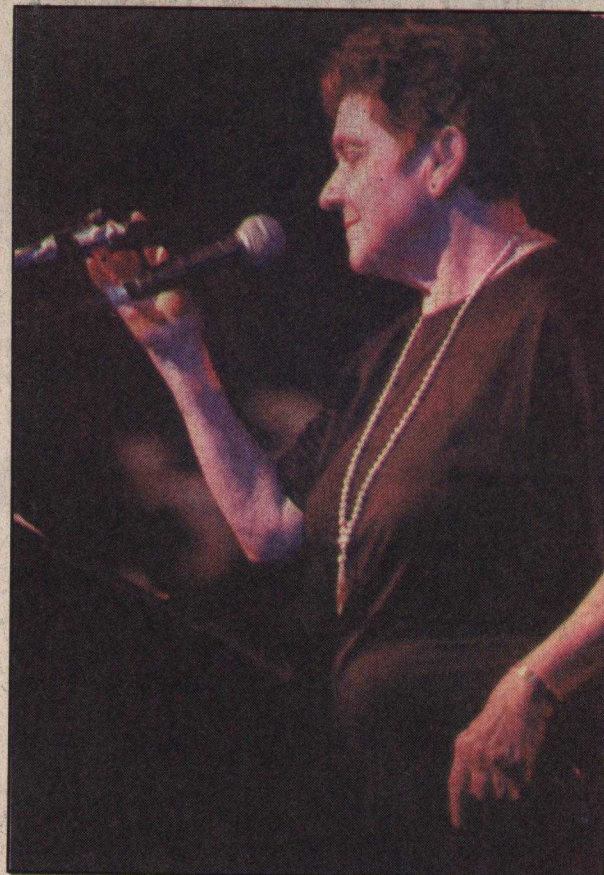
ma to the county's artichoke fields, has been widely recognized. She was one of 20 Americans to be named a MacArthur Foundation Fellow, she won the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize and was named artist of the year in 1995 by the Santa Cruz County Arts Commission.

"Poetry matters insofar as it replenishes our imagination, our desire, our dissatisfaction with conformity and commodifying," Rich said.

Santa Cruz County provides deep, mulchy soil for Rich's poetic seeds. She said the beauty of the landscape, including its history, politics and conflicts, inspires her. In a poem titled "Walking Down the Road" from her "Time's Power" collection, Rich wrote:

*"In Live Oak without pavements you can walk
the fronts of old homesteads, past tattered palms,
original rosebushes, thick walnut trees
ghosts of the liveoak groves the whitemen cleared."*

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Adrienne Rich reads one of her pieces at the 'In Celebration of the Muse' last March at Palookaville.

The \$100,000 Tanning Prize is the largest literary award in North America.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

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But landscapes are only a tiny part of the poet that is Adrienne Rich. She is a well-known voice of the feminist movement and for years wrote on her experience as a feminist, a Jew and a lesbian. She has also written volumes on the intricacies of motherhood, war and justice. So comprehensive is her scope that Fred Robinson, chairman of the English department at the University of San Diego, has built a modern poetry class around her work.

Robinson said his students read

authors who influenced Rich, like W.H. Auden and Robert Frost; they read Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, who lived through similar situations; and they read writers like Margaret Atwood who were influenced by her. Robinson said her poetry is so personal and her life so varied that her career reads like a "newspaper of the times."

"She's been a '50s mother, she's been a '60s radical, she's been an '80s lesbian ... she's been through it all," he said.

Rich, who has published more than 15 volumes of poetry, was a professor of English and feminist

studies at Stanford University. She moved to Santa Cruz County in 1984 and is a regular fixture at the Capitola Book Cafe. Eric Schoeck, event and author coordinator for the Book Cafe, said Rich frequently shows up for a cup of coffee and *The New York Times*.

"She comes in here every day, so the people that work here think she is the greatest," said Schoeck. He added that the day she discovered she won the Tanning Prize she came into the cafe. "She was beaming," he said. "But she didn't say anything other than it was a wonderful day."