



Adrienne Rich

A prolific poet who has won nearly every major literary award.

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If you had known me once, you'd still know me now though in a different light and life

Author 5-1990

-from 'I', part of 'An Atlas of the Difficult World'

SANTA CRUZ WRITER WINS POETRY'S BIG PRIZE

BY LAURA KURTZMAN
Mercury News Staff Writer

Adrienne Rich, a longtime Santa Cruz resident and one of the most widely heard voices of the women's movement, won the nation's largest literary award on Wednesday, the \$100,000 Tanning Prize given by the Academy of American Poets.

A prolific poet whose books have consis-

tently sold well, Rich inspired a generation of women writers and became one of the most influential feminists of the 1970s and '80s with her intense and often angry works of poetry and prose.

Rich, who has taught at San Jose State and Stanford universities, is widely admired for her poetic technique. She has won nearly every major literary award and in 1994

received a MacArthur Fellowship. But admirers say she remains down to earth, eager to support lesser-known writers and devoted to working for social change.

"She's not elitist by any stretch of the imagination," said Joyce Jenkins, editor of Poetry Flash, which is published in Berkeley. "She always gives of herself in any way

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Beauty of her new home

Within two miles of the Pacific rounding this long bay, sheening the light for miles inland, floating its fog through redwood rifts and over strawberry and artichoke fields, its bottomless mind returning always to the same rocks, the same cliffs, with ever-changing words, always the same language — this is where I live now. If you had known me once, you'd still know me now though in a different light and life. This is no place you ever knew me. But it would not surprise you to find me here, walking in fog, the sweep of the great ocean eluding me, even the curve of the bay, because as always I fix on the land. I am stuck to earth. What I love here is old ranches, leaning seaward, lowroofed spreads between rocks small canyons running through pitched hillsides liveoaks twisted on steepness, the eucalyptus avenue leading to the wrecked homestead, the fogwreathed heavy-chested cattle on their blond hills. I drive inland over roads closed in wet weather, past shacks hunched in the canyons roads that crawl down into darkness and wind into light where trucks have crashed and riders of horses tangled to death with lowstruck boughs. These are not the roads you knew me by. But the woman driving, walking, watching for life and death, is the same.

From "An Atlas of the Difficult" published by Adrienne Rich in 1991.

Santa Cruz writer wins poetry's big prize

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possible."

The Tanning Prize, endowed in 1994 by Dorothea Tanning, the widow of artist Max Ernst, recognizes "outstanding and proven mastery in the art of poetry," according to the academy. Previous winners are W.S. Merwin and James Tate. Candidates are nominated and winnowed out by five judges who are poets.

"This is the biggie," said Carolyn Kizer, a California poet who won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1985.

Kizer called Rich "the best poet in the United States."

"As a poet she has moved from one triumph to another," Kizer said. "Each book that she has written is an advance on the previous one."

Since the early 1970s, she has insisted the poet's role be political as well as literary. This attitude has won her an enthusiastic popular and academic following, as well as some criticism.

Poet's role in society

In a statement released by the Academy of American Poets, Rich said her work tries to trace the "relationship between the personal, or lyric, voice and the so-called political."

She also spoke of the poet's role in society, saying, "in these times poetry, in carrying on its ancient and unfinished work, is charged with reminding us of all we are, all we are in danger of giving away."

Rich, 67, moved to Santa Cruz in 1984, because the climate was good for her rheumatoid arthritis.

"I've come to love this coast and its inland landscapes, the mountains, the Salinas Valley, the light, even the storms, with passion," she wrote in response to questions faxed to her home by the Mercury News. Rich declined a telephone interview, saying she would only talk face to face.

Along with her feminist concerns, Rich has joined peace groups concerned with the Middle East, Central America and the Gulf War. She has also worked with the National Writers Union.

"One of the things she did was to put on an event called 'Poets for Peace' during the Gulf War," said Roz Spafford, associate chair of the writing program at the University of California-Santa Cruz.

"I was struck by the ways in which she did absolutely ordinary things — from sending out mailings to planning the schedule. When she involves herself in com-

Rich has turned much of this raw political experience into material for her 15 books of poetry and four of prose.

"What makes her remarkable is that she has such a pronounced didactic purpose and that she writes such good poetry," said Thom Gunn, who teaches at the University of California-Berkeley and judged this year's Tanning Prize. "That's very refreshing."

Alan Soldofsky, director of the Center for Literary Arts at San Jose State, said Rich should not be defined solely by her political concerns.

"I think people have a tendency to sort of put poets in categories," he said. "A great poet transcends any category you want to put her in. I'm not comfortable just calling her a feminist."

Yet Rich's abiding concern with social ills has also earned her criticism.

"As a poet, Ms. Rich has had difficulty coping with the fact that it is no longer 1968 or 1974: the exacerbations are different now and not quite answerable to the rhetorical means she devised for those gone occasions," wrote Denis Donoghue, the University Professor of English and American Letters at New York University.

Donoghue complained that Rich, though at times a fine poet, was often angry and "determined to be glum."

Rich's friend, Albert Gelpi, dismissed the criticism as "an ignorant review."

No longer angry

Gelpi, the William Robertson Coe professor of American literature at Stanford, said Rich had long since jettisoned the anger that animated much of her early feminist poetry.

But he said she holds firmly to the view that "the poet has a function in society and also in changing the society."

Gelpi said that her poems may be serious, but Rich has a "terrific sense of humor."

"She is immediate and warm and deeply concerned for those she knows and loves," Gelpi said. "Besides her beautiful reading voice, she has a beautiful laugh as well. She's somebody who lives each moment and each experience and each relationship as intensely and fully as she can."

"I think probably her favorite poet is Emily Dickinson, and I think she shares that quality with Dickinson. She is totally present."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Adrienne Rich will read from her poetry at the Music Concert Hall at San