

Remembering Adrienne

Authors 2000

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Poet Adrienne Rich balanced world-wide fame with a regular Santa Cruz life

By WALLACE BAINE

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She may have been the most prominent single artist to have ever called Santa Cruz home. But many people around town saw Adrienne Rich a bit differently, as a neighbor and a friend.

"Santa Cruz was very central in her life," said Jacob Conrad, one of three sons of the internationally respected poet who died in March at the age of 82. "I think of how much affection she had for the shops she knew, places like New Leaf and Bookshop Santa Cruz and Capitola Book Café, and for her favorite drycleaner and the waitress at Johnny's (Harborside). You would walk into these place with her and everybody would want to say hi. I don't know how many of the people she was coming into contact with in the course of her day actually knew she was an acclaimed poet. They just knew her as a nice lady."

On Sunday evening at Santa Cruz High School, in an event sponsored by Bookshop Santa Cruz, Rich will be remembered both as a pillar of the community, and as a towering figure in the world of feminist poetry and literature.

"The Adrienne Rich Memorial Reading" will feature a handful of prominent poets and Rich admirers including Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Bettina Aptheker, Linda Janakos, Doren Robbins, Michael Warr and Eavan Boland, all to read from Rich's work and to share how she influenced their own work.

For decades now, Rich has been recognized as one of the most eloquent and influential voices in poetry, particularly when it comes to the political and cultural oppression of women and gays/lesbians. Among her many accolades and honors were the National Book Award in 1974 for her collection "Diving Into the Wreck," and the MacArthur Fellowship, aka "The Genius Grant," 20 years later. She was also awarded the National Medal of the Arts, which she famously declined in protest to what she perceived as disrespect for the arts at the federal level.

Bettina Aptheker has taught for years in the Feminist Studies department at UC Santa Cruz and has herself been an influential figure in feminist thought for 30 years. She said that Rich was a mentor to her.

"She was tremendously generous," said Aptheker. "In 1982, I published a book called 'Woman's Legacy,' a collection of essays on African-American women's history. And she read the manuscript and wrote a very generous blurb on the book."

Later, Rich convinced Aptheker to write a memoir and the



CONTRIBUTED

Three giants of feminist thought: Adrienne Rich (right) with (from left) fellow poets Audre Lorde and Meridel Le Sueur, circa 1980.

result was Aptheker's 2006 memoir "Intimate Politics."

Rich, said Aptheker, was a consistent source of feedback and encouragement for writers near and far. "She was very encouraging and supportive of women writers and people of color. She would read manuscripts all the time and talk to people about writing constantly. I don't know how many manuscripts she read of other writers."

"One of the things that I discovered since her passing," said her son Conrad, "was how large a circle of younger writers she was corresponding with and engaging with on their work. It was something she did very quietly. She felt like she was part of a community of writers sharing with writers."

Rich had moved to Santa Cruz in the early 1980s with her long-time partner Michelle Cliff. For the rest of her life, Santa Cruz continued to be a source of comfort and inspiration for her, artistic and otherwise, said Conrad.

"(Santa Cruz) had a very strong impact on her and her work," he said. "In her poetry, you can just read it in the references to the landscapes and the climate. But beyond seeing it as an inspiration in her poetry, she felt that Santa Cruz was a very sheltering place for her. She didn't feel it was just a college or resort town. She really appreciated that it wasn't just

SEE RICH ON { PAGE 12 }

Endpapers

i.

If the road's a frayed ribbon strung through dunes
continually drifting over
if the night grew green as sun and moon
changed faces and the sea became
its own unlit unlikely sound
consider yourself lucky to have come
this far Consider yourself
a trombone blowing unheard
tones a bass string plucked or locked
down by a hand its face articulated
in shadow, pressed against
a chain-link fence Consider yourself
inside or outside, where-
ever you were when knotted steel
stopped you short You can't flow through
as music
or as air

ii.

What holds what binds is breath is
primal vision in a cloud's eye
is gauze around a wounded head
is bearing a downed comrade out beyond
the numerology of vital signs
into predictless space

iii.

The signature to a life requires
the search for a method
rejection of posturing
trust in the witnesses
a vial of invisible ink
a sheet of paper held steady
after the end-stroke
above a deciphering flame

2011

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an academic bastion, but that it was a place where all sorts of views are aired."

W.W.Norton recently published the posthumous vol-

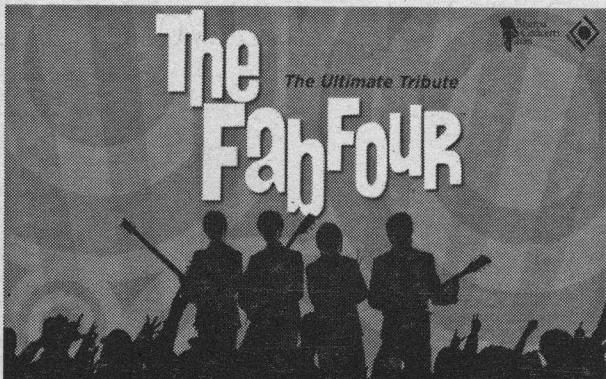
ume "Later Poems, Selected and New, 1971-2012," including a handful of poems written in the last months of her life such as "Endpapers." It is the culminating chapter in a career that began more than 50 years ago when she first emerged in the 1960s as one of the few women writ-

ers willing to address the systematic subjugation of women in American culture. Particularly influential was the 1976 treatise "Of Woman Born."

"I knew her first as a feminist writer," said Aptheker. "... So her work was very influential in that way, not only in a uniquely personal way, but in an analytical way for the conditions that women and gays and lesbians lived under."

Rich lived her life in Santa Cruz with a reputation for fearlessness and intensity in her poems and essays. But, said her son, those who assumed that her poetic intensity was also part of her personality had it wrong.

"She was a person with an incredible sense of humor, who loved to laugh. That was just how she went through life. There was a sweetness about her that, if you only read her work, you might misinterpret."



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