

Influential Santa Cruz poet Adrienne Rich dies at 82

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By TARMO HANNULA
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

SANTA CRUZ — Gifted and influential Santa Cruz poet Adrienne Rich died Tuesday at home in Santa Cruz. She was 82.

She was known for her socially conscious verse that influenced a generation of feminists, anti-war activists and gay rights advocates.

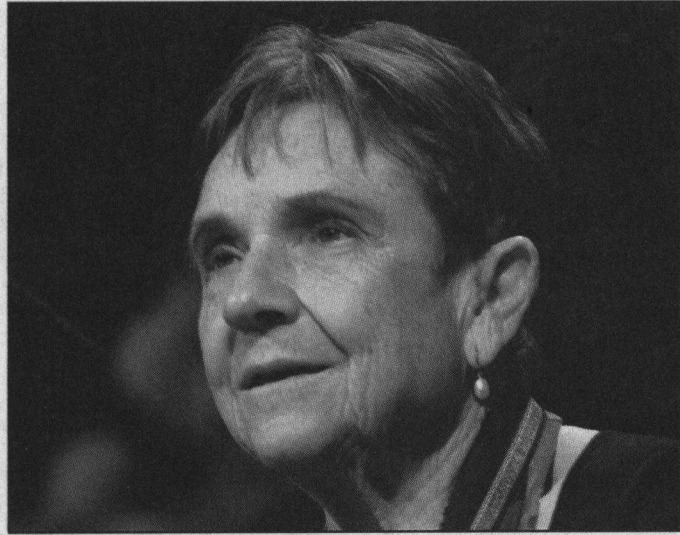
Rich was a staple in numerous modern poetry anthologies and was a household name throughout the poetry world. Her works were commonplace in college and university literature classes.

Her poems such as "Orion" and "Diving Into the Wreck" were routinely picked apart and expounded upon in courses on poetry as examples of cutting-edge, modern poetry.

Rich, who earned the National Book Award for "Diving Into the Wreck," lived in Santa Cruz since the early 1980s.

According to the poetry anthology "Modern Poems," Rich was born in Baltimore 1929. She graduated from Radcliffe College in 1951. She married in the 1920s and bore three children before the age of 30.

A verse from her poem, "Diving Into the Wreck," reads:



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Poet Adrienne Rich in 2006.

"There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently,
close to the side of the schoo-
ner.

We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
otherwise

it is a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment."

Rich published more than a dozen volumes of poetry and five collections of nonfic-

tion. She won a National Book Award for her collection of poems

"Diving into the Wreck" in 1974, when she read a statement written by herself and fellow nominees Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, "refusing the terms of patriarchal competition and declaring that we will share this prize among us, to be used as best we can for women."

In 2004, she won the Nation-

al Book Critics Circle Award for her collection "The School Among the Ruins." According to her publisher, W.W. Norton, her books have sold between 750,000 and 800,000 copies, a high amount for a poet.

She gained national prominence with her third poetry collection, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," in 1963. Citing the title poem, University of Maryland professor Rudd Fleming wrote in The Washington Post that Rich "proves poetically how hard it is to be a woman — a member of the second sex."

She was, like so many, profoundly changed by the 1960s. Rich married Harvard University economist Alfred Conrad in 1953.

But she left him in 1970 and eventually lived with her partner, writer and editor Michelle Cliff. She used her experiences as a mother to write "Of Woman Born," her groundbreaking feminist critique of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, published in 1976.

"Rich is one of the few poets who can deal with political issues in her poems without letting them degenerate into social realism," Erica Jong

once wrote.

Unlike most American writers, Rich believed art and politics not only could co-exist, but must co-exist. She considered herself a socialist because "socialism represents moral value — the dignity and human rights of all citizens," she told the San Francisco Chronicle in 2005. "That is, the resources of a society should be shared and the wealth redistributed as widely as possible."

"She was very courageous and very outspoken and very clear," said her longtime friend W.S. Merwin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. "She was a real original, and whatever she said came straight out of herself."

As Merwin noted, Rich was a hard poet to define because she went through so many phases. Or, as Rich wrote in "Delta," "If you think you can grasp me, think again."

Rich taught at many colleges and universities, including Brandeis, Rutgers, Cornell, San Jose State and Stanford.

She won a MacArthur "genius" fellowship, two Guggenheim Fellowships and many top literary awards including the Bollingen Prize, Brandeis Creative Arts Medal, Ruth Lilly

Poetry Prize and the Wallace Stevens Award.

But when then-President Clinton awarded the National Medal of Arts in 1997, Rich refused to accept it, citing the administration's "cynical politics."

"The radical disparities of wealth and power in America are widening at a devastating rate," she wrote to the administration. "A president cannot meaningfully honor certain token artists while the people at large are so dishonored."

In 2003, Rich and other poets refused to attend a White House symposium on poetry to protest the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

Her father, a doctor and medical professor at Johns Hopkins University, encouraged her to write poetry at an early age.

Rich graduated from Radcliffe College in 1951 and was chosen for the Yale Younger Poets Prize for her first book of poetry, "A Change of World." Living in Cambridge, Mass., she befriended Merwin, Donald Hall and other poets.

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The Associated Press contributed to this report.