BIOGRAPHY OF ADRIENNE RICH

Adrienne Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland on May 16, 1929, the older of two sisters. Her father, the renowned pathologist Arnold Rice Rich, was a professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins Medical School and her mother, Helen Jones Rich, was a concert pianist until she married. Although Arnold Rich came from a Jewish family the girls were raised as Christians. Adrienne Rich's early poetic influence stemmed from her father who encouraged her to read but also to write her own poetry. Her interest in literature was sparked within her father's library where she read the work of writers such as Ibsen Arnold, Blake, Keats, Rossetti, and Tennyson. Her father was ambitious for Adrienne and "planned to create a prodigy". Adrienne Rich and her younger sister were home schooled by their mother until Adrienne began public education in the fourth grade. The poems Sources and After Dark document her relationship with her father, describing how she worked hard to fulfill her parents' ambitions for her - moving into a world in which she was expected to excel.

In later years, Rich went to Roland Park Country School, which she described as a "good old fashioned girls school [that] gave us fine role models of single women who were intellectually impassioned." After graduating, Rich gained her college diploma at Radcliffe College, Harvard, where she focused primarily on poetry and learning writing craft, encountering no women teachers at all. In 1951, her last year at college, Rich's first collection of poetry, A Change of World, was selected by the senior poet W.H. Auden for the Yale Series of
Younger Poets Award; he went on to write the introduction to the published volume. Following her graduation, Rich received a Guggenheim Fellowship, to study in Oxford for a year. Following a visit to Florence, she decided to cut short her study at Oxford and spend her remaining time in Europe writing and exploring Italy.

In 1953, Rich married Alfred Haskell Conrad, an economics professor at Harvard University, whom she had met as an undergraduate. She had said of the match "I married in part because I knew no better way to disconnect from my first family [...] I wanted what I saw as a full woman's life, whatever was possible." They settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts and had three sons - David in 1955 (now a graphic designer), Paul in 1957 (now an elementary school music teacher) and Jacob in 1959 (now a radio producer). In 1955 she published her second volume, *The Diamond Cutters*, a collection she says she wishes had not been published.

Her third collection, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, was a much more personal work examining her female identity, reflecting the increasing tensions she experienced as a wife and mother in the 1950s, marking a substantial change in Rich's style and subject matter. In her 1982 essay *Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity*, Rich states "The experience of motherhood was eventually to radicalize me." The book met with harsh reviews. She comments, "I was seen as 'bitter' and 'personal'; and to be personal was to be disqualified, and that was very shaking because I'd really gone out on a limb [...] I realised I'd gotten slapped over the wrist, and I didn't attempt that kind of thing again for a long time."
She continued her travels during 1961 and 1962 with a second Guggenheim Fellowship to work at the Netherlands Economic Institute. In 1964, Rich joined the New Left and in 1966, she moved with her family to New York, becoming involved in anti-war, civil rights and feminist activism; her husband took a teaching position at City College of New York. In 1968, she signed the “Writers and Editors War Tax Protest” pledge, vowing to refuse tax payments in protest against the Vietnam War. Rich's activism and increasing politicisation are reflected in the poems in her next three collections, *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Leaflets* (1969), and *The Will to Change* (1971), also highlighting an expanding interest in poetic form. Rich, from this point forward, became increasingly represented with the women's movement. From 1967, Rich held positions at Swarthmore College and Columbia University School of the Arts and from 1968, with City College of New York. Increasingly militant, Rich hosted anti-Vietnam and Black Panther fundraising parties at their apartment; tensions began to split the marriage, Conrad fearing that his wife had lost her mind. The couple separated in mid-1970 and shortly afterward, in October, Conrad drove into the woods and shot himself.

In coming out as a lesbian in 1976, Rich's feminist position crystallized. In this year she published the controversial volume *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. She wrote, "The suppressed lesbian I had been carrying in me since adolescence began to stretch her limbs," lesbianism pressing as a political as much as a personal imperative. The pamphlet *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1977), which was incorporated into the following year's *Dream of a Common Language* (1978), marked the first direct treatment of lesbian desire and
sexuality in her work. *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981) and some of her late poems in *The Fact of a Doorframe* (2001) represent the capstone of this philosophical and political position. In her analytical work *Adrienne Rich: the moment of change*, Langdell suggests these works represent a central rite of passage for the poet, as she (Rich) crossed a threshold into a newly constellated life and a "new relationship with the universe". During this period, Rich also wrote a number of key socio-political essays, including "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", one of the first to address the theme of lesbian existence. In this essay, she asks "how and why women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community, has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding". Some of the essays were republished in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (1979). Rich shouted out her sexuality and took a role in leadership for sexual equality. Novelist and poet Jeanette Winterson describes Rich's impact: "Since the 1960s, her poetry and her politics have come together to create involved, engaged, challenging writing".

In 1974, her collection *Diving Into the Wreck* won the National Book Award for Poetry, which she shared with Allen Ginsberg. Rich was joined by feminist poets Alice Walker and Audre Lorde to accept it on behalf of all women. In 1976, began a relationship with Jamaican-born novelist and editor Michelle Cliff. Adrienne Rich taught at City College as well as Rutgers University until 1979. She moved to Western Massachusetts with Cliff in the early 1980s. Ultimately, they moved to Northern California, where Rich continued her career as a professor, lecturer, poet, and essayist. Cliff and Rich took over editorship of the lesbian journal *Sinister Wisdom* in 1981. Rich taught and lectured at Scripps
College, San Jose State University, and Stanford University during the 1980s and 1990s.

Both *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991) and *Dark Fields of the Republic* (1995) explore the relationship between private and public histories. During the 1990s Rich became an active member of numerous advisory boards such as the Boston Woman’s Fund, National Writers Union, Sisterhood in Support of Sisters in South Africa, and New Jewish Agenda. On the role of the poet, she has written, "We may feel bitterly how little our poems can do in the face of seemingly out-of-control technological power and seemingly limitless corporate greed, yet it has always been true that poetry can break isolation, show us to ourselves when we are outlawed or made invisible, remind us of beauty where no beauty seems possible, remind us of kinship where all is represented as separation."

In 1997, Adrienne Rich refused the National Medal of Arts, stating that "I could not accept such an award from President Clinton or this White House because the very meaning of art, as I understand it, is incompatible with the cynical politics of this administration [...] "[Art] means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of the power which holds it hostage". The volume *Midnight Salvage* was published in 1999, as she turned 70.
ADRIENNE RICH'S SELECTED AWARDS, HONOURS, AND WORKS

Selected Awards and Honours

- Yale Younger Poets Award (1950) for *A Change of World*.
- Guggenheim Fellowship 1952
- National Institute of Arts and Letters Award (1960)
- Shelley Memorial Award (1970)
- National Book Award for Poetry (1974) for *Diving into the Wreck*
- Inaugural Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize (1986)
- Honorary doctorate from Harvard University (1989)
- National Poetry Association Award for Distinguished Service to the Art of Poetry (1989)
- William Whitehead Award for Lifetime Achievement (for gay or lesbian writing) (1990)
- Common Wealth Award of Distinguished Service (1991)
- Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize (1992)
- Poets' Prize (1992) for *Atlas of the Difficult World*
- Frost Medal (1992)
- Academy of American Poets Fellowship (1992)
- MacArthur Fellowship (1994)
- Wallace Stevens Award (1996)
- National Medal of Arts (1997) (refused)
- Lifetime Achievement Award from the Lannan Foundation (1999)
• Lifetime Recognition Award from the Griffin Poetry Prize (2010)

Works

Nonfiction

• Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution
• On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose
• Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose (Includes the noted essay: "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence")
• What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics
• Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations
• Poetry and Commitment: An Essay
• A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society

Poetry Collections

• A Change of World
• The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems
• Snapshots of a daughter-in-law: poems
• Necessities of life: poems
• Selected Poems
• Leaflets
• The Will to Change: Poems
• Diving into the Wreck
• Poems: Selected and New
• Twenty-one Love Poems
• The Dream of a Common Language
• A Wild Patience Has Taken Me this Far: Poems
• Sources
• The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New
• Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems
• Time’s Power: Poems
• An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems
• Collected Early Poems
• Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems
• Midnight Salvage: Poems
• Fox: Poems
• The School Among the Ruins: Poems
• Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems
• Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems