

Minnie Bruce Pratt, Celebrated Poet of Lesbian Life, Dies at 76

Her collection “Crime Against Nature,” which recounts her losing custody of her children after she came out, made her a literary star — and a target of conservatives.



By Penelope Green

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Minnie Bruce Pratt, a feminist poet and essayist whose collection “Crime Against Nature,” which mapped her despair, anger and resilience after losing custody of her children when she came out as a lesbian, earned one of poetry’s highest honors and made her a target of hard-right conservatives, died on July 2 near her home in Syracuse, N.Y. She was 76.

Her death, at a hospice facility for L.G.B.T.Q. people, was caused by glioblastoma, her son Benjamin Weaver said.

It was 1975 when Ms. Pratt walked into her first gay bar, the Other Side, in Fayetteville, N.C. Same-sex relationships were still considered a crime in that state — “a crime against nature,” as the statute was described — so patrons parked around the corner in hopes that their license plates wouldn’t be photographed by the police. They signed into the place under fake names, as it was run as a private club. (Ms. Pratt often used Susan B. Anthony as hers.)

No one was more shocked than she — a woman married almost 10 years and with two small sons — at the turn her life was taking, as she wrote in her memoir, “S/He” (1995). Like many women of her generation, Ms. Pratt was fired up by the consciousness-raising groups she joined. She campaigned for gender parity in university teaching positions where she was a doctoral student (learning to push back when male colleagues asked her to type their papers and groped her at academic conferences) and discovered that she loved women.



After their father took custody, Ransom (rear) and Benjamin Weaver were able to see their mother during school breaks. When she self-published her first collection of poetry, they helped her put copies of the books together. JEB (Joan E. Biren)

“You don’t have a dog’s chance in court,” her lawyer warned her when she and her husband, a poet and an academic like herself, were divorcing. He took full custody of their sons and moved out of state. “How could that happen to someone with a Ph.D.?” a fellow teacher asked years later.

“Crime Against Nature” had been more than a decade in the making when it was published in 1990, making Ms. Pratt a literary star. The Academy of American Poets awarded her the Lamont Poetry Prize, one of the organization’s highest honors. Writing in The New York Times Book Review, the poet Carol Muske declared the book a “publishing event” — “startling in the beauty of its unadorned voice,” with each poem “a verbal emergency.”

One poem in the volume, “No Place,” begins with these lines:

*One night before I left I sat halfway
down,
halfway up the stairs, as he reeled at the
bottom,*

*shouting Choose, choose. Man or woman,
her or him,
me or the children. There was no place
to be
simultaneous, or between. Above, the
boys slept
with nightlights as tiny consolations in
the dark,
like the flowers of starry campion, edge of
the water.*

Her poetry and activism came out of the Women in Print movement, in which feminist and lesbian poets began hand-printing and binding their work, often in chapbooks: short volumes that resemble zines. It was a vibrant community that gathered at lesbian and feminist bookstores and meeting places, like the basements of Unitarian churches.

Ms. Pratt was constantly on the road, touring the South, giving readings and visiting her children as their father permitted as part of an evolving arrangement that allowed them to be with her during summer vacations and other school breaks.

The movement was an extraordinary time, said Julie Enszer, the editor and publisher of *Sinister Wisdom*, a nearly half-century-old lesbian literary journal. By 1985, she said, there were about 110 feminist bookstores in the country. Ms. Pratt joined *Feminary*, a feminist journal and collective, and with a colleague who was her girlfriend she founded the Night Heron Press.

There, she published her first book of poetry, “The Sound of One Fork,” in 1981 — a collection of sensuous pieces that evoke her childhood in Alabama. Her sons, then teenagers on their summer break, helped her put copies of the book together, as she wrote in an essay for the Poetry Foundation. Making them, she said, was her favorite memory.



Ms. Pratt wrote eloquently of the “in-between” space that she and her spouse, the author Leslie Feinberg, left, inhabited as a butch and femme couple. Robert Giard Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Minnie Bruce Pratt was born on Sept. 12, 1946, in Selma, Ala. Her father, William L. Pratt Jr., worked in the lumber industry. Virginia Earl (Brown) Pratt, her mother, was a social worker and a teacher who once told her that she was disgusted by her daughter’s lesbianism but who later became an ally.

Minnie Bruce was an English major at the University of Alabama when she married Marvin Weaver in 1966. She earned her bachelor’s degree in 1968 and was also a Fulbright scholar. When her husband took the children after their divorce, she was at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill working on her Ph.D. in English, which she earned in 1979.

In addition to her son Benjamin, she is survived by her other son, Ransom, and five grandchildren.

Ms. Pratt was the recipient of many awards and grants. A 1990 fellowship given by the National Endowment for the Arts to her and two other lesbian poets — the Native

American writer Chrystos and Audre Lorde — drew criticism from Jesse Helms, the ultraconservative Republican senator from North Carolina, who campaigned to have their grants rescinded. He said that because the three were lesbian writers, their work was obscene and not suitable for federal funding. The N.E.A. disagreed.

In 1991, the three women won another grant, from the Fund for Free Expression, for being “targets of right-wing forces.”

Until her retirement in 2015, Ms. Pratt was a professor in the writing program and the gender studies department at Syracuse University, where she helped develop its L.G.B.T. studies program. She was the author of eight books of poetry, and her work has been collected in many journals. Her most recent book, “Magnified” (2021), is a collection of love poems to her spouse, the queer author and activist Leslie Feinberg, who died of complications of Lyme disease in 2014 at 65.

Like Feinberg — whose 1993 novel, “Stone Butch Blues,” was lauded for its evocation of gender complexity and considered a touchstone of queer literature — Ms. Pratt wrote eloquently about the “in-between” space, as she called it, that she and Feinberg (who mostly shunned gender honorifics) inhabited as a butch and femme couple.

In “S/he,” which is both an erotic memoir and an investigation into the myriad, shifting expressions of gender, Ms. Pratt writes of a Thanksgiving dinner the couple attended at her son Benjamin and his girlfriend’s house while they were in graduate school. Ms. Pratt was intrigued when no one claimed the seat at the head of the table or stepped up to carve the turkey. Her son clearly hung back. Ms. Pratt ducked out to the bathroom, and when she returned, her spouse was seated next to the empty chair at the head, with the turkey platter in front of them and a carving knife in one hand.

“I’ve never done this before in my life,” Feinberg said, slicing. Mr. Weaver said approvingly, “It took a lot of courage to grasp that knife.” And Ms. Pratt took her place at the head of the table.

Penelope Green is a reporter on the Obituaries desk and a feature writer. She has been a reporter for the Home section, editor of Styles of The Times, an early iteration of Style, and a story editor at the Sunday magazine. More about Penelope Green