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Radical Feminist Writer Andrea Dworkin Dies

By Adam Bernstein
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Andrea Dworkin, 58, a self-proclaimed radical feminist whose scathing writings about sexuality, and pornography in particular, made her a provocative icon of the women's movement, died April 9 at her home in Washington.

A spokeswoman for the D.C. medical examiner's office said further investigation is needed to determine the cause of death. Ms. Dworkin had a variety of health problems and had several falls after recent knee surgery.

Encouraged by her socially conscious father, Ms. Dworkin embraced dissent from an early age. She refused to sing Christmas carols in elementary school and by sixth grade decided she wanted to change restrictive abortion laws. She admired books by the Bronte sisters as well as Che Guevara.

As a college freshman, she was arrested at the United Nations for protesting the Vietnam War and taken to a women's detention center. A humiliating body cavity search by male doctors followed. Her denunciations of her treatment helped shut down the facility.

Ms. Dworkin spent her career exploring what she considered the subordination of women, which she saw everywhere from marriage to pornography to conservative politics.

Using terms such as "gynocide" to describe a cultural holocaust against women, she was adored by some who found in her writings and lectures a refreshing rebelliousness, and decried by others, including novelist Anne Tyler, who found her tendency toward sweeping statements ludicrous.

Beginning with her book "Woman Hating" (1974), written when she was 27, Ms. Dworkin found her full, strident voice. Embracing a polemical style that sometimes overshadowed the content of her writing, she declared the book's objective was "to destroy patriarchal power at its source, the family, [and] in its most hideous form, the national state."

"Woman Hating" connected foot binding in China, witch burning in Europe, misogyny in fairy tales and pornography. She also argued that gender itself had to be eliminated before sexual equality could be achieved.

Her book "Intercourse" (1987) helped define her as a firebrand because some reviewers said she was labeling all sex as rape. She spent countless interviews denying that, but she had written pointedly over the years about marriage laws that she felt "mandated intercourse."

Perhaps her best-known title is "Pornography: Men Possessing Women" (1981). The book received positive attention from unlikely quarters, including Punch magazine, which said she "writes like a Leon Trotsky of the sex war."

About that time, she teamed with legal scholar Catharine A. MacKinnon to advocate for having pornography ruled a violation of women's civil rights. Their crusade began on behalf of Linda Lovelace, the porn actress who starred in "Deep Throat" and whose best-selling memoir about exploitation, "Ordeal," had just been published.

While teaching together at the University of Minnesota, Ms. Dworkin and MacKinnon conceived of an anti-pornography ordinance that did not ban flesh magazines and videos but enabled those "harmed" by them to sue pornographers for damages. The measure twice passed the Minneapolis City Council but was vetoed by the mayor. Other communities approved the measure, but federal courts ruled the laws unconstitutional on free speech grounds, decisions upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court.

In all, Ms. Dworkin said, she was far happier as a provocateur than a politician.

"I find compromise not impossible but incomprehensible," she said in an interview with New Statesman magazine. "Politicians kept talking to me about incinerators. I was bewildered. They'd vote for the civil rights bill if Legislator X would vote to put some incinerator somewhere -- not in their district, I think. My eyes would glaze over. Then I'd become enraged.

"The trade-offs, the payoffs, sometimes actual blackmail and bribery," she added. "I was good at holding the politicians' feet to the fire, in private and in public, to excoriate them, to move their constituents, but from a basis of principle. That I can do. I have good practical instincts on where dominant structures are vulnerable. This requires a high tolerance for risk and conflict."

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Andrea Rita Dworkin was born Sept. 26, 1946, in Camden, N.J., and raised in what became Cherry Hill, N.J. She helped care for her ill mother and was shuffled among other relatives. Her father was a guidance counselor and post office employee, so pro-labor that he once refused a management job there.

Her early desire was to be a Greenwich Village artist, and she made frequent trips to New York, paying her bus fare, she said, by finding "some stupid man . . . and basically exchange sex for money."

She studied at Bennington College in Vermont, where she lobbied the administration to allow men to spend the night in women's dorms. But she later likened the school to "the archetypical brothel," where female students were practically given to prominent guest speakers.

After Bennington, she spent several years in Europe and briefly married a man she described as a Dutch anarchist and flower child who also burned her with cigarettes and beat her, she said.

She also worked as a waitress, teacher, receptionist, salesclerk, factory worker and assistant to poet Muriel Rukeyser, who encouraged her literary aspirations.

Her earliest titles were largely ignored by reviewers but assured her a steady income through speaking engagements. By many accounts, she was a galvanizing presence at feminist and anti-pornography rallies.

Ms. Dworkin's later books included "Scapegoat: The Jews, Israel and Women's Liberation" (2000), which asked whether women should have their own country, just as the Jews received theirs.

She wrote two novels that had clusters of admirers around the globe. The response prompted her to quip that her fictions were "easier to find in English in Nigeria than in the U.S."

She and her companion of 30 years, John Stoltenberg, married in 1998. Both were gay, and they called each other life partners. She accompanied him to Washington from New York last year for his job as managing editor of AARP magazine. He is her only immediate survivor.

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