

Minnie Bruce Pratt, poet of lesbian strength and struggles, dies at 76

In Washington, Ms. Pratt helped lead gay and lesbian activism in the 1980s



By [Brian Murphy](#)

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Minnie Bruce Pratt, a prominent poet and essayist who explored issues of gender fluidity, the friction between acceptance and intolerance and personal struggles such as living apart from her sons after coming out as lesbian in the 1970s, died July 2 at a hospice in Syracuse, N.Y. She was 76.

Her son Benjamin Weaver said Ms. Pratt had an aggressive brain tumor.

Ms. Pratt moved between the worlds of literature, scholarship and activism over nearly five decades as the LGBTQ+ community achieved gains such as legalization of same-sex marriage and greater recognition of trans and nonbinary identities. But Ms. Pratt rarely adopted a celebratory tone on perceived progress.

In more than 10 books and anthologies, Ms. Pratt carved out a distinctive niche with narrative-driven poetry that had a restless energy and a wide-angle lens. She decried economic and racial injustices with the same urgency as she denounced the political and social forces opposing gay rights and different forms of gender expression.

Her work, she said, was about trying to connect the dots. She called it the “understandings of the intersections,” such as how laws can codify discrimination or how views can be shaped by culture and social class. “None of us is just one thing,” she said.

She often described her upbringing in segregated Alabama as the foundation for her belief in the unifying power of sharing stories and experiences.

“Of course, almost every Southern child, White or Black, stopped at least once at water labeled Black or White, and sneaked a sip. We said, ‘This is just like my water. What’s the difference between us?’” she recounted in 1999. “But this was a hidden, secret making of a bond between us. This was a private unspoken metaphor.”

Ms. Pratt also found a voice on the streets, taking part in early pride events and other outreach projects during eras

such as the AIDS crisis. During that time, in the 1980s and early 1990s, Ms. Pratt and her partner, photographer [Joan E. Biren](#), also known as JEB, were leading figures in gay and lesbian movements in the District and surrounding areas.

In 1984, Ms. Pratt co-founded LIPS, a lesbian-led activist group in Washington, and joined other organizations including the National Women's Fightback Network.

Ms. Pratt's years in Washington also marked some of her defining works including "[Rebellion: Essays 1980-1991](#)" (1991), a mix of autobiography and observations that have been incorporated in many college feminist studies programs, and 1990's "[Crime Against Nature](#)," a collection of poems on her relationship with her sons as a lesbian mother as the boys lived with their father.

In one [poem](#), "The Child Taken From the Mother," Ms. Pratt seesaws between anguish and anger.

And here,

perhaps, you say: That last word doesn't belong.

Woman, mother: those can stay. Lesbian: no.

Put that outside the place of the poem. Too

slangy, prosy, obvious, just doesn't belong.

The book takes its name from wording within a North Carolina anti-sodomy statute. Ms. Pratt was living in Fayetteville, N.C., when her marriage splintered in the mid-1970s after she acknowledged her sexuality as lesbian. In 1976, she decided not to wage a court battle for full-time custody of her boys, then aged 6 and 7. Instead, she reached an arrangement with her ex-husband for visitation and occasional hosting, which became more frequent as the boys moved into their teen years.

"I paid for my freedom with my children," she wrote.

Her long relationship with author and activist [Leslie Feinberg](#), which began in the early 1990s, provided a grounding for some of Ms. Pratt's meditations on gender and her own place in the spectrum. Feinberg, author of the "[Stone Butch Blues](#)" (1993), took male hormones for a time and was often regarded as a man in public.

Ms. Pratt's 1995 [volume](#) of memoir-style essays, "S/He," takes readers through her girlhood questions over gender roles, her contempt for a society that she feels shackles women and the fateful moment when her husband finds her "love notes" to another woman. It leads to the pivotal tale about a lover who is not named but clearly an homage to Feinberg.

"In the Tastee Diner we've had our french fries and coleslaw and a shared chocolate milkshake. Full of comfort, I put down the tip, you go pay the check," Ms. Pratt [wrote](#).

A song from the 60s is playing, Ms. Pratt described. They dance “in the aisle between the booths and the coat racks.”

“At the next table two women are scandalized,” Ms. Pratt wrote, “their eyebrows in O’s of astonishment.”

Southern roots

Minnie Bruce Pratt was born Sept. 12, 1946, in Selma, Ala., and raised in nearby Centreville. Her mother was a social worker, and her father worked as a clerk at a timber company.

She received her bachelor’s degree at University of Alabama in 1968, took years after marrying Marvin Weaver, who became a director of arts programs and fundraiser. She was mostly a homemaker while raising her sons.

After her marriage ended, she received her doctorate in Renaissance English literature in 1979 from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. At the university, Ms. Pratt became a member of “Feminary,” a feminist journal that describes itself as “emphasizing lesbian visions,” and was co-author of “Yours In Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives On Anti-Semitism and Racism” (1984).

Ms. Pratt’s first book, “The Sound of One Fork” (1981), examined her personal journey as a lesbian and White woman in the South. Themes of race, sexuality and injustice were explored in “Walking Back Up Depot Street” (1999), a story in poems set in the segregated rural South, and “The Dirt She Ate” (2003), about people pushed to the margins of society.

Her 2021 book “Magnified” deals with subjects of mortality and memory and was dedicated to Feinberg, who died in 2014. They became domestic partners in New Jersey in 2004 and had a civil union in 2007. In 2011, they were legally married in Massachusetts.

Ms. Pratt taught at various universities, including the University of Maryland, and retired in 2015 as professor of writing and women’s studies from Syracuse University, where she helped develop the university’s first LGBT studies program. Her awards include the Lamont Poetry Selection by the Academy of American Poets for “Crime Against Nature.”

Survivors include her sons Benjamin Weaver and Ransom Weaver, and five grandchildren.

Ms. Pratt once said she was fortunate to live “at the intersection of great waves of social change” including the civil rights movement, feminism and what she called “queer liberation.”

“The theory developed by each,” she told the online journal Contemporary Southern Writers, “has complicated our questions about the categories of race, sex, gender, sexuality, and class.”