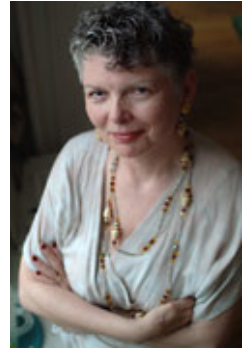




Pratt, Minnie Bruce (b. 1946)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



Minnie Bruce Pratt.
Courtesy Minnie Bruce Pratt.

Award-winning author Minnie Bruce Pratt has written moving and erotic poems and stories that explore sex and gender issues, as well as powerful essays that decry bigotry in its many forms. An activist for glbtq rights, Pratt has also worked to combat racism, anti-Semitism, and other kinds of prejudice.

Pratt, born September 12, 1946 in Selma, Alabama, grew up in the nearby small town of Centreville. She recalled feeling "strange and different . . . in a completely unarticulated way" when she was in high school but did not recognize her lesbianism at the time. She was being raised to be a proper Southern lady--good-mannered, church-going, and heterosexual.

Pratt enrolled in the University of Alabama in 1964. Always an avid reader, she then began writing poetry, an interest that she shared with her fellow student Marvin E. Weaver II. The two became engaged.

Their professors encouraged Weaver in his aspirations to become a poet but suggested the more "practical" course of an academic career for Pratt.

The couple married while still in college, and during her senior year Pratt became pregnant. Atypically for the time, she continued attending classes during her pregnancy.

A Phi Beta Kappa scholar, Pratt graduated in 1968. Her excellent work won her three fellowships, a Fulbright, a Woodrow Wilson, and an NEA Title IV. She declined the Fulbright because her baby was due about two weeks before she would have needed to leave for England.

Instead, she entered the graduate program at the University of North Carolina, where she specialized in Renaissance and seventeenth-century English literature. During her first year there she became pregnant a second time but again persevered with her studies.

In addition to her academics Pratt began to learn about feminism and became increasingly involved in the women's issues. She also fell in love with another woman.

Coming out plunged Pratt into an emotional and legal nightmare. Her husband insisted that she move out and tried to get her to sign away all her parental rights. He even threatened to call Pratt's mother to testify against her at a divorce trial, which Pratt believes that she would have done. Even years later, after Pratt had received awards for her rich and heartfelt poetry, her mother told her, "I can't be proud of you. I want to be, but I can't."

In the end Pratt, at the advice of her lawyer and in light of the prevailing legal climate of the time, agreed to an unfavorable out-of-court settlement in 1975 rather than risk a trial, in which she would most likely have lost her sons altogether because her lesbianism could have been grounds for declaring her an "unfit mother."

Weaver moved the boys out of state, but Pratt remained in frequent communication with them and visited when she could. Despite the distance she maintained a strong and loving relationship with her children.

Pratt received her doctorate in 1979; she also returned to writing poetry. In a 2004 interview she commented, "I began writing poetry again when I came out as a lesbian, not because of that specific sexuality, but because I came back to my body, after a time of terrible numbness and self-denial. It's hard to write poetry if you are completely alienated from your body. And coming out as a lesbian brought me back to physical experience in my own body."

Pratt published her first volume of poetry, *The Sound of One Fork*, in 1981, around the time that she began a relationship with photographer Joan E. Biren. Louise Kawada described these poems, which deal with lesbian desire, racism, and the domination of women by men, as "at once lucid and lyrical, sensuously evocative, and unabashedly direct." Pratt continued these themes in her second collection, *We Say We Love Each Other*, which was published in 1985.

Pratt's third work of poetry, *Crime Against Nature* (1990), chronicles her relationship with her two sons, to whom the book is dedicated. This volume was named the Lamont Poetry Selection by the Academy of American Poets and also won the American Library Association Gay and Lesbian Book Award for Literature (1991).

Although the judicial system had beaten Pratt down in her legal fight, she celebrated her success as a loving, open, and honest lesbian mother in "Another Question":

Yes, they've seen the poems. The world prefers
I not tell the children: hide, be oblique, be
secret, be grotesque. But the youngest says
when I tell it all, that's what he likes best.

Pratt's *Walking Back Up Depot Street* (1999) explores race relations, a topic that she has also treated in her essays. Pratt has stated that, after growing up in the segregated South, she came to realize that "the main public story of my upbringing had been a lie." She is strongly committed to the protection of the civil rights of African Americans and other minorities.

Pratt's most recent collection, *The Dirt She Ate: Selected and New Poems* (2003), won praise from reviewers and a Lambda Literary Award.

Pratt's non-fiction writing includes the long essay "Identity: Skin Blood Heart" in *Yours in Struggle* (1984), which she co-wrote with Elly Bulkin and Barbara Smith, and *Rebellion: Essays 1980-1991*, a wide-ranging collection in which she deals with racism, censorship, overcoming learned prejudices, and the value of community. *Rebellion* earned a Lambda Literary Award nomination.

Pratt has also written *S/he* (1995), a series of short prose pieces that explore the meanings of sex and gender and the nature of desire. Many of her stories focus on her relationship with Leslie Feinberg, transgender activist and author of *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), who has been her life partner since 1992.

In *S/he* Pratt writes of anxieties, such as her fear for Feinberg's safety after reading about the rape and murder of a transgender woman, and of the frustration that Feinberg often experiences because of hir (the pronominal form that Feinberg prefers) non-traditional gender identity. In the end, however, writes reviewer Sara Greenslit, "Pratt wants us to read her life as an example of pleasure found through sexual identity and desire."

Among these pleasures for Pratt is choosing to dress in a feminine way--"enjoying the cool swish of my skirt"--instead of wearing more gender-neutral clothing as she did upon first coming out. She is content in her femme identity.

Among the many awards and honors that Pratt has received was a 1990 Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts that she shared with Audre Lorde and Chrystos. Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina condemned the women's writings as obscene and called for a federal investigation into the "misuse" of the tax-payers' money. Because of Helms' attack, the Fund for Free Expression chose the three poets--"targets of right-wing forces"--as the recipients of its 1991 Lillian Hellman-Dashiell Hammett Award.

Minnie Bruce Pratt continues to write, speak, and teach to combat all varieties of prejudice, to work for peace, to affirm the dignity of all people, and to celebrate the gifts of love.

Bibliography

"An Interview with Minnie Bruce Pratt." Publishing Triangle. 2004. www.publishingtriangle.org/prattinterview.asp.

Benkov, Laura. *Reinventing the Family: The Emerging Story of Lesbian and Gay Parents*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1994.

Graff, E.J. "Struggling with Gender." *Women's Review of Books* 12 (July 1995): 25.

Greenslit, Sara. "Girl's Guide to Blurred Gender Lines." *Lesbian Review of Books* 2 (October 31, 1995): 25.

Innes, Charlotte. "Questioning Out Loud: A Book about Pain, Poetry, Possibility--and a Peach." *Lambda Book Report* 3 (January 1992): 19.

Kawada, Louise. "Minnie Bruce Pratt." *Contemporary Lesbian Writers of the United States: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1993. 420-426.

"Minnie Bruce Pratt." www.mbpratt.org.

Pratt, Minnie Bruce. *Crime Against Nature*. Ithaca, N. Y.: Firebrand Books, 1990.

About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.