



Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations

By Adrienne Rich

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"Adrienne Rich's new prose collection could have been titled *The Essential Rich.*?" *Women's Review of Books*

These essays trace a distinguished writer's engagement with her time, her arguments with herself and others. "I am a poet who knows the social power of poetry, a United States citizen who knows herself irrevocably tangled in her society's hopes, arrogance, and despair," Adrienne Rich writes. The essays in *Arts of the Possible* search for possibilities beyond a compromised, degraded system, seeking to imagine something else. They call on the fluidity of the imagination, from poetic vision to social justice, from the badlands of political demoralization to an art that might wound, that may open scars when engaged in its work, but will finally suture and not tear apart. This volume collects Rich's essays from the last decade of the twentieth century, including four earlier essays, as well as several conversations that go further than the usual interview. Also included is her essay explaining her reasons for declining the National Medal for the Arts. "The work is inspired and inspiring."?Alicia Ostriker "[S]o clear and clean and thorough. I learn from her again and again."?Grace Paley

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Rich's engaging new collection of essays reaffirms what Norton editors declared some 25 years ago: the "private poet" has gone public, "without sacrificing the complexity of subjective experience or the intensity of personal emotion." This certainly holds true for Rich the essayist as well, for she has firmly established herself as a major American poet and intellectual most concerned with the intersection of the public and private, the social and personal. The overarching goal of her intellectual project is to discover what's imaginatively possible in a cultural system debased by economic, social and political injustice, which, she suggests, are perhaps inherent in capitalism. While her powerful and frequently anthologized essay on "compulsory heterosexuality" is not included, the equally famous and influential "*When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*" leads off the collection. This 1971 feminist tract brilliantly strategizes how women can re-examine literature and culture in order to resist patriarchal hegemony and give voice to their own experience. Other notable entries include "Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet," which posits that "political struggle and spiritual continuity are meshed"; the title essay, a consideration of, among other issues, identity politics; and the spirited 1997 essay-letter that explains why she declined the National Medal for the Arts. As Rich herself acknowledges in the foreword, a few of the essays "may seem to belong to a bygone era." They provide, however, a prism through which to view Rich's thinking over the years, and they neatly demonstrate the transformations in her views over time. While the essays, "notes" and "conversations" may be read individually, what's perhaps most fascinating and rewarding about this collection is charting Rich's intellectual journey itself.

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From Library Journal

The author of more than 16 volumes of poetry, plus four of prose, and winner of many awards, including a MacArthur and a Lannan, Rich needs no introduction. This prose collection begins with four "background" essays, first published in the 1970s and 1980s. The rest proceed more or less chronologically, tracing the poet's thinking about her art and her time and culminating in the fine title essay (which may have been the impetus behind the book). Rich here characterizes herself as a poet of the "oppositional imagination, meaning that I don't think my only argument is with myself." She has always been concerned with issues larger than the personal, though labels such as lesbian, feminist, and Marxist do as much to obscure as to illuminate the poet's points. She wants us to look at our lives and capitalist society and ask anew the kinds of questions Marx asked. As she inquires in the title essay, "What about the hunger no commodity can satisfy because it is not a hunger for something on a shelf?" Recommended for academic and public libraries. Mary Paumier Jones, Westminster P.L., CO

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From [Booklist](#)

To read poet Rich's sharp, clear, and uncompromising essays on gender, art, and social responsibility is to enter a place where the light is brighter than in everyday life, where sound is crisper, and the line between right and wrong holds firm, a mental space that enables readers to step back from the usual clamor and recognize just how vulgar and dishonest most public discourse truly is. Rich begins this powerful collection with several early and influential essays, including "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" (1975), then works forward to "Why I Refused the National Medal of the Arts" (1997), a bracing explanation of her courageous protest against a government beholden to corporate powers and guilty of systematically

undermining education and the arts, a course, Rich argues, that puts democracy at risk. Art, Rich asserts, is "our most powerful means of access to our own and another's experience and imaginative life," the realm where the private is made public and justice and compassion take eloquent form. *Donna Seaman*
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Users Review

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