

# in memoriam



BY EUAN BEAR

## Andrea Dworkin 1946 - 2005 Feminist Activist & Author

According to news reports and Internet sources, Andrea Dworkin, variously identified as a “radical feminist writer,” “anti-porn crusader,” and “self-described lesbian,” died on April 9 in Washington, DC, in her sleep, according to *The New York Times* account. She was 58. She is survived by her companion of 30 years, John Stoltenberg, a gay man. The two were married in 1998.

Dworkin was most famous for her book *Woman Hating* (1974), in which she explored links between women’s oppression in patriarchal cultures around the world, from Chinese footbinding to American high heels, from medieval

European witch burnings to modern Western pornography.

At least two other books she wrote achieved iconic feminist status: *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981) and *Intercourse* (1987).

She and lawyer Catherine MacKinnon succeeded in getting several cities to adopt ordinances characterizing pornography as sex discrimination and providing a basis for women who have been harmed by it to sue sellers and pro-

ducers. The ordinances were overturned by a Supreme Court ruling in 1986 on the basis of restricting free speech.

Dworkin was born on September 26, 1946, in Camden, NJ. According to the *Washington Post*’s account, she began her life of activism by refusing to sing Christmas carols in elementary school. She wanted to be a Greenwich Village artist and paid for her bus trips into the city by prostitution – exchanging sex for money.

Dworkin attended Bennington

College, graduating with a bachelor’s in literature in 1968. As a Bennington freshman, she demonstrated against the U.S. government’s prosecution of the Vietnam War at the United Nations. Her writings about her arrest, detention and treatment in a New York women’s detention center helped get the facility closed.

She was later in an abusive marriage with a Dutch man that lasted three years. Dworkin worked as a receptionist, waitress, factory worker, and teacher. She also spent time as an assistant to poet Muriel Rukeyser, according to the *Post*.

She published 13 books, including two novels, among them: *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant* (2002), *Scapegoat: The Jews, Israel and Women’s Liberation* (2000), *Letters from a War Zone* (1989), *Right-Wing Women* (1983) and *Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics* (1976); her novel *Ice and Fire* (1987) was about prostitution, and her novel *Mercy* (1991), was about serial rape. She also published a collection of short stories, *The New Woman’s Broken Heart* (1980).

Several commentators acknowledged that Dworkin was demonized by anti-feminists, often misrepresented, and when her arguments brooked no serious answer, frequently attacked because of her appearance: she was fat and had long, curly, unruly hair.

Dworkin’s ovular work on

pornography as a civil rights/discrimination issue strengthened the feminist anti-violence movements of the 1980s and made a strong case for connecting violent visualizations with

violent actions. She punched a hole in an oppressive fog of sexism to let in light on how women are subjugated in obvious and subtle ways. ▼

For tributes to Andrea Dworkin, point your browser to [www.stopfamilyviolence.org/sfvo/dworkin.html](http://www.stopfamilyviolence.org/sfvo/dworkin.html). Also check the myths vs. the truth at <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/index.html>.

### From Dworkin’s *Life and Death* (1996):

We have made beginnings at breaking the deep silence. ... We have identified rape; we have identified incest; we have identified battery; we have identified prostitution; we have identified pornography – as crimes against women, as means of exploiting women, as ways of hurting women that are systematic and supported by the practices of the societies in which we live. We

have identified sexual exploitation as abuse. We have identified objectification and turning women into commodities for sale as dehumanizing, deeply dehumanizing. We have identified objectification and sexual exploitation as mechanisms for creating inferiority, real inferiority: not an abstract concept but a life lived as an inferior person in a civil society. We have identified patterns of violence that

take place in intimate relationships. We know now that most rape is not committed by the dangerous and predatory stranger but by the dangerous and predatory boyfriend, lover, friend, husband, neighbor, the man we are closest to, not the man who is farthest away.

And we have learned more about the stranger, too. We have learned more about the ways

in which men who do not know us target us and hunt us down. We have refused to accept the presumption in this society that the victim is responsible for her own abuse. We have refused to agree that she provoked it, that she wanted it, that she liked it. These are the basic dogma of pornography, which we have rejected. In rejecting pornography we have rejected the fundamentalism of male supremacy ... Nothing that we have done for women who have been raped or battered has helped women who have been

prostituted. ...

What remains to be done? To think about helping a rape victim is one thing; to think about ending rape, is another. We need to end rape. We need to end incest. We need to end battery. We need to end prostitution and we need to end pornography. That means that we need to refuse to accept that these are natural phenomena that just happen because some guy is having a bad day. ▼