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Maxine Kumin, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, dies at 88

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Maxine Kumin, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet who wrote about life in rural New England and who also published novels, memoirs and essays, died Feb. 6 at her farm near Warner, N.H. She was 88.

Ruth Weiner, one of her publishers, confirmed the death. The cause was not disclosed.

Ms. Kumin, who served as poetry consultant at the Library of Congress in the early 1980s, wrote so much about farm animals, the changing seasons and the pace of country life that she was sometimes dubbed “Roberta Frost.”

But like the bard of New England, Robert Frost, Ms. Kumin looked deeply into the timeless themes of life and death and the power of poetry to evoke the spirit of an age. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for her 83-page volume “Up Country,” in which her sharp observations about nature merged with sensitive explorations of human understanding and “something else that went before.”

“The experience of ‘Up Country’s’ 42 poems is dramatic and visionary, but above all convincing,” novelist Joyce Carol Oates wrote in a 1972 review in the New York Times. “The setting is rural New England, but the imagination is boundless.”

Although Ms. Kumin was close friends with two of the 20th century’s most celebrated confessional poets, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton — both of whom committed suicide — she was no avant-garde renegade. Her poems had a solidity of purpose and language, an earthy directness anchored in everyday life.

“What I’m always after,” Ms. Kumin said in 1979, “is to get the facts: to be true to the actuality.”

She also wrote with an awareness of poetic tradition and once borrowed a well-thumbed phrase from W.H. Auden — “Poetry makes nothing happen” — to demonstrate just the opposite, in “Lines Written in the Library of Congress After the Cleanth Brooks Lecture” (1982):

New poets will lie on their backs
listening in the valley
making nothing happen
overhearing history
history time
personal identity
inching toward Armageddon.

Ms. Kumin's poetic gaze could focus on such homely subjects as mud, excrement and dying animals, but she could widen her view to make larger points about the environment, warfare, religious intolerance and what she saw as the debasement of American public life.

She once thought poets should avoid political statements, "but I've changed my mind," she said in a 2008 interview with the Christian Science Monitor. Her later poems "were wrung from me," with a sharpened edge of anger, she said. "I had to write them."

In "Mulching," from her 2007 collection "Still to Mow," Ms. Kumin described spreading old newspapers "between broccolis, corn sprouts, cabbages and four kinds of beans." She sees old headlines about torture, suicide bombings and starvation — "in this stack of newsprint is heartbreak" — and feels like "a helpless citizen of a country I used to love."

Maxine Winokur was born June 6, 1925, in Philadelphia. Her father was a pawnbroker.

Although her family was Jewish, Ms. Kumin attended Catholic schools before enrolling at Radcliffe College, a women's school then affiliated with Harvard University. She graduated in 1946 and received a master's degree in comparative literature from Radcliffe in 1948.

An early teacher, the acclaimed novelist Wallace Stegner, discouraged Ms. Kumin from writing poetry, but she persisted on her own and began to publish light verse in newspapers and magazines in the 1950s, while raising three children.

She began teaching at Tufts University outside Boston in 1958 and published her first poetry collection in 1961.

She became close to Plath and Sexton in the 1950s and collaborated with Sexton on four children's books. Ms. Kumin was deeply shaken by Sexton's suicide in 1974 and later wrote several poems reflecting on her death.

"I think about Anne's suicide constantly," Ms. Kumin said in an oral history published last year in the Concord (N.H.) Monitor. "It's fresh. I don't think it will ever fade. I think I have finally forgiven her."

Ms. Kumin's survivors include her husband of 67 years, Victor Kumin; three children; and two grandchildren.

After years of living in the Boston suburbs, Ms. Kumin and her husband moved in 1976 to a farm in New Hampshire they called "PoBiz," for Poetry Business. The farm was at the end of dirt road, past a covered bridge.

Together, Ms. Kumin and her husband cleared the fields of trees and rocks, built fences, planted a vegetable garden, mucked out stables, split wood and helped mares give birth. They adopted many abandoned horses and dogs.

Ms. Kumin often traveled around the country to teach in colleges, and she produced a steady stream of poems and other writing, year after year. Besides more than a dozen volumes of poetry, she wrote

several novels, children's books and collections of essays and short stories. One of her most personal books was "Inside the Halo and Beyond" (2001), an autobiographical account of her recovery from a near-fatal accident in 1998.

While practicing for an equestrian carriage competition, the 73-year-old Ms. Kumin was thrown to the ground and crushed by the 350-pound carriage. She sustained fractured vertebrae in her neck, a punctured lung, 11 broken ribs and damage to her liver and kidneys.

At the hospital, she was placed in a therapeutic "halo" to stabilize her head and neck: "I wake up in this cage, disoriented, desperate, sicker than I have ever been. No feeling in my arms or legs, but a vague sense that my head is entrapped forever. No movement left or right, up or down. I am a stationary parrot inside my strict cage."

Her brush with mortality, Ms. Kumin said, only reaffirmed her lack of religious faith.

"I don't believe in rebirth," she told the Boston Globe in 1999. "To have all these people telling me that they prayed for me and that's why I'm alive . . . it feels like an invasion of my privacy."

In time, she recovered from her injuries, continued to ride horses and kept on writing.

"Writing is my salvation," she said in 2008. "If I didn't write, what would I do?"