

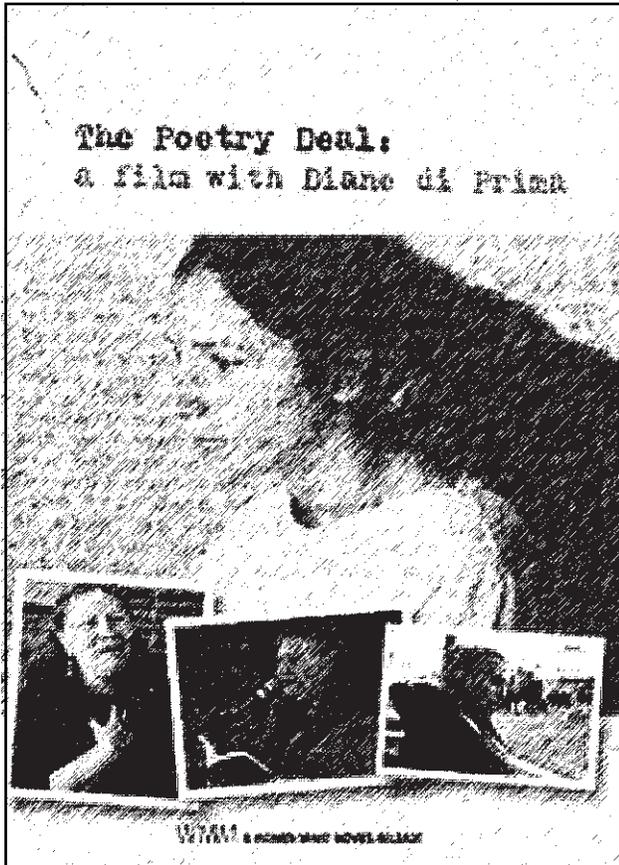
EYE TO EYE: DIANE DI PRIMA AND THE POETRY DEAL

by Ingrid Swanberg

THE POETRY DEAL: A FILM WITH DIANE DI PRIMA. 27 mins. color. 2011. By Melanie La Rosa. Distributed by Women Make Movies, 115 W. 29th St., Ste. 1200, New York, NY 10001; phone: (212) 925-0606; fax: (212) 925-2052; email: orders@wmm.com; website: www.wmm.com. DVD: \$195.00 purchase, \$60.00 rental (universities, colleges and institutions); \$89.00 purchase (K-12, public libraries, and select groups). Order no. W121074.

Poet Diane di Prima has always put her work first, before anything else in her life except for her children. Perhaps it is for this reason that she emerged as the best-known woman poet of the Beat Generation. That she could do so, despite the well-known obstacles women encountered in building successful careers in the arts, and within the milieu of the male-dominated Beat scene of the 1950s and 1960s, speaks to her tremendous energy, fearlessness, imagination, and what, in various writings about her life, she calls her “Will.” *The Poetry Deal: A Film with Diane di Prima* serves as an excellent introduction to and reflection on her work and life.

The film is appropriate for use in college-level courses in women’s studies, poetry studies, women’s history, American women writers, and the history of women artists, and will be of interest to creative writers as well as aficionados of the Beat era and the counterculture in general.



The Poetry Deal is a montage: di Prima and others read from her books of poems, memoirs, and other writing; there are clips from di Prima’s poetry readings, past and present, interspersed with photos and vintage Super8 and 16mm films of events and places touching her earlier life; there is commentary from friends and associates, filmed in various settings, and from di Prima herself, at one point painting as she speaks.

As the film opens we hear di Prima reading her 1957 poem “What Morning Is,” with the sound of jazz piano music in the background, and watch a series of photo and film images: a passing New York cityscape shot crossing a bridge, an old typewriter, old apartment facades. At one point in the film there’s a close-up of flames in the fireplace of the apartment where people gathered, and di Prima’s voice: “...nobody ever talked much; we just looked at the fire.” We move through beautiful footage of waves breaking on the northern California coast; to photos and films of di Prima’s journals, typed pages and hand-printed publications; to a brief glimpse of her, almost nude and some eight months pregnant, reveling wildly with a troupe of bohemian women dancers... At the end of the film, di Prima reads her poem “The Poetry Deal,” in which she addresses poetry itself as her life companion with whom she has a deal:

*...You can burn my favorite snapshot of myself
Lead me on paths or non-paths anywhere
You can not make sense for years
& I'll still believe you drop husbands, tribes & jobs
as you wish
You mostly aren't jealous - have taken yr place
alongside gardens, breadmaking, children, printing presses
But when yr eyes shoot sparks & you say
"Choose between me & it" - "it" has always gone
Except when "it" was my kids
I took that risk & we worked it out somehow...¹*

di Prima writes in the language of the streets of her Bronx-Brooklyn-Manhattan-San Francisco experience, without revising or polishing, regarding the moment of inspiration-creation itself as definitive and revealing. Michael McClure describes her approach: “She forced what she wanted to be into being with a very big and good soul... She was interested in what hadn’t existed before.” Hers is a poetry of a woman raising her voice, figuratively and audibly.

A theme throughout di Prima’s work is the rejection of traditional female roles. This is in tandem with the Beat re-

bellion against the conformity and repression of mainstream American 1950s culture — against what, in the film, McClure calls “a time of terrible convention.” This rebellion was largely a turn from materialism to the arts, and for di Prima this always involved “breaking out of the molds imposed on women,” as Joyce Jenkins, editor of *Poetry Flash*, comments. In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, di Prima describes it this way:

To be artist: outcast, outrider, and *explorer*. Pushing the bounds of the mind, of imagination. Of the humanly possible, the shape of a human life. “Continual allegory.” Of a woman’s life, pushing the limits.²

Yet within the artists’ subculture, patterns of women’s subjugation were still ingrained. Several commentators in the film speak to the difficulties for the woman artist. Writer Madison Young comments on di Prima’s difficulty gaining the recognition “that all the boys did.” Artist Elsa Marley gives an anecdote from a time in the late 1960s when di Prima had joined her commune in northern California and contributed a big case of Pampers for the eight two-year-olds living there. The men in the commune objected, saying that the paper diapers were un-ecological. Marley adds, “The men hated it because in some way she was upstaging them. The Pampers were a kind of a signal to be down on her without saying ‘pushy woman.’ The guys, I think really were kind of threatened by Diane.” Jenkins describes di Prima as “a woman really dedicated to her art, but also dedicated to being a full woman and having children and everything that entails.”

For Diane di Prima, the “difficulties for the woman artist” took various forms. As an example, before viewing the film, I went first to my copy of the very influential and complete anthology of the period edited by Donald Allen, *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (University of California Press, 1960), to refresh my memory of di Prima’s work. To my great surprise, she wasn’t there, though all of her contemporaries were. I later learned, reading *Recollections*, that di Prima had been deliberately left out of the anthology because of her relationship with a married man who was included.

One of the film’s high points is a clip of a radiant di Prima in 1982, reading a poem from her book *Revolutionary Letters*. Later in the film we hear her reading from the opening poem in that collection, “April Fool Birthday Poem for Grandpa,” celebrating di Prima’s anarchist grandfather Domenico Mallozzi, who inspired her from childhood on to live the life of the imagination, and from whom she learned to go for her dreams, in this instance the dream of social change through revolution.

...
*we do it for you, and yo
 ur ilk, for Carlo Tresca,
 for Sacco and Vanzetti, without knowing
 it, or thinking about it, as we do it for Aubrey Beardsley
 Oscar Wilde (all street lights
 shall be purple), do it
 for Trotsky and Shelley and big/dumb
 Kropotkin
 Eisenstein’s Strike people, Jean Cocteau’s ennui, we do it for
 the stars over the Bronx
 that they may look on earth
 and not be ashamed.*³

John Keats is the poet who has been di Prima’s primary inspiration. She recalls her moment of dedication to poetry at age fourteen, in mind of John Keats, and adds that her relationship with Keats began and continued “on the same eye to eye level” and was never one of adulation.

Now in her late seventies, Di Prima continues to write and give readings. She has published more than forty books, has been involved with printing (mimeo and letterpress) and small press publishing, and has worked in theater and done modern dance and painting. At the time of the film’s shooting in 2011, she was San Francisco’s poet laureate.

In just twenty-seven minutes, *The Poetry Deal* brings into clear view the strong determination and *élan vital* of this remarkable poet. Early in the film, di Prima announces her approach to poetry: “A poem can be anything, you have a blank piece of paper, you can go anywhere, you can do anything, you can make anything happen.”

Notes

1. Diane di Prima, “The Poetry Deal,” San Francisco, California: *SFGate*, Friday, April 16, 2010, <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/openforum/article/The-poetry-deal-3267368.php>.
2. _____, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 2001), p. 104.
3. _____, “April Fool Birthday Poem for Grandpa,” *Revolutionary Letters* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1971), p. 3.

[*Ingrid Swanberg’s poetry has appeared in numerous publications, most recently in the international journal Osiris, the online ExpressMilwaukee, and Garrison Keillor’s The Writer’s Almanac (May 7, 2013). She is the editor of the poetry journal Abraxas and director of Ghost Pony Press. She holds a Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and is the author of the poetry collection Ariadne & Other Poems (Bottom Dog Press, March 2013).*]