



Feinberg, Leslie (1949-2014)

by Teresa Theophano

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Leslie Feinberg.
Courtesy www.transgenderwarrior.org.

Political organizer, grassroots historian, and writer Leslie Feinberg was a pioneer of transgender activism and culture. Long a part of the struggle for queer liberation, Feinberg openly identified as transgendered and was outspoken about "hir" experiences living outside of the gender binary. ("Ze" has expressed the need for our language to incorporate alternate pronouns such as "hir" rather than "her" or "his," and "ze" or "sie" as opposed to "he" or "she.")

Feinberg was born in Kansas City, Missouri on September 1, 1949, and reared in Buffalo, New York, in a working-class Jewish family. At age 14, ze began supporting hirself by working in the display sign shop of a local department store, and eventually stopped going to hir high school classes, though officially ze received her diploma. It was during this time that ze entered the social life of the Buffalo gay bars.

Facing blatant discrimination as a transgender person, ze found it difficult to attain steady work. For most of hir life, ze earned her living through a series of low-wage temporary jobs, including working in a PVC pipe factory and a book bindery, cleaning out ship cargo holds and washing dishes, serving an ASL interpreter, and inputting medical data.

Feinberg is perhaps best known as the author of the widely acclaimed novel *Stone Butch Blues* (Firebrand Books, 1993). In response to the common assumption that the novel is semi-autobiographical, ze insisted that the book is a work of fiction. Ze went on to explain that ze chose to write from a first-person point of view in light of the limitations using third-person pronouns would have imposed upon the narrative.

Still, many readers have recognized aspects of Feinberg's own life in the story of protagonist Jess Goldberg, a Jewish "he-she" growing up in 1950s Buffalo and struggling around being differently gendered.

Like Feinberg, Jess identified as a butch lesbian before fully coming to terms with hir gender identity, which falls outside the norm. Jess is unable to find a sense of home and self until ze discovers a community of gender/sexual minorities and then later becomes politically active as an organizer.

The deeply moving novel is already regarded as a classic, and rightly so. It has won both an American Library Association Award for Gay and Lesbian Literature and a 1994 Lambda Literary Award.

In addition to *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg has published two nonfiction books: *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul* (Beacon Press, 1996), which won a Firecracker Alternative Book Award for Nonfiction in 1996, and *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (Beacon, 1998). In addition, a second novel, *Drag King Dreams* appeared in 2006.

Feinberg was especially vigilant in hir writings about documenting the otherwise ignored contributions to history various oppressed groups have made. Hir nonfiction works explore not only transgender issues, but the crucial relationships and parallels among the women's, people of color's, and queer rights movements.

In addition to hir writing career, Feinberg was also a leader of the Workers World Party, an independent Marxist organization, and a managing editor of its newspaper. Ze co-founded Rainbow Flags for Mumia--a coalition of GLBTQ people calling for a new trial for political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal--and organizes with the International Action Center, an activist group that resists war, corporate greed, and oppression.

Feinberg spoke publicly about a serious illness ze survived in the 1990s, during which ze nearly died due to the discriminatory treatment ze received from doctors. Feinberg has shared the experience to illustrate the dire need for better understanding of trans health issues and needs among the medical establishment.

Feinberg lectured widely at colleges and universities, spoke at Pride marches, and gave numerous keynote speeches at various transgender events.

Ze was the first theorist to advance a Marxist concept of "transgender liberation." Hir work influenced popular culture, academic research, and political organizing.

Feinberg died on November 15, 2014 in Syracuse, New York, where she succumbed to complications of multiple tick-borne infections after decades of illness. Ze died at home, with hir partner and spouse of 22 years, poet Minnie Bruce Pratt, at her side.

Feinberg and Pratt met in 1992 when Feinberg presented a slideshow on hir transgender research in Washington, D.C. After a long-distance courtship, they made their home for many years in Jersey City, New Jersey. They entered into a domestic partnership in 2004, a civil union in 2006, and were married in Massachusetts in 2006 and in New York State in 2011.

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"Transgender Pioneer and *Stone Butch Blues* Author Leslie Feinberg Has Died." *The Advocate* (November 17, 2014): <http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/books/2014/11/17/transgender-pioneer-leslie-feinberg-stone-butch-blues-has-died>.

About the Author

Teresa Theophano, a freelance writer, is a social worker who specializes in community organizing with glbtq populations. She is also the editor of *Queer Quotes* (Beacon Press, 2004).