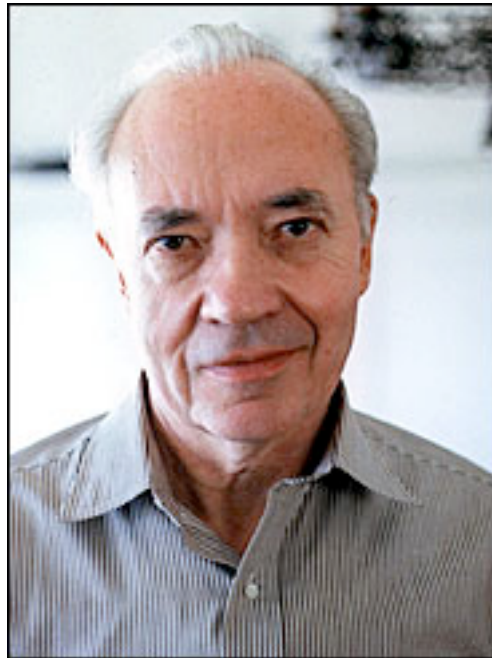


Dr. Joel Dorius
“The Accidental Activist”

by Connell O’Donovan

Dr. Joel Dorius, a brilliant Elizabethan literary scholar and one of the Smith College professors caught in the “pornography” scandal of 1960, died after a lengthy battle with bone marrow cancer at his home in San Francisco on Tuesday, February 14, 2006.



Dr. Joel Dorius

Raymond Joel Dorius (who never used his first name), was born on January 4, 1919 on Capitol Hill, downtown Salt Lake City, to Raymond Erastus Peterson Dorius and Clara “Claire” Ford Parrish. Joel’s father “Ray” was the grandson of Danish polygamist Nicolai Dorius of Copenhagen, an early settler of Ephraim, Sanpete County, Utah. Dr. Dorius’ mother, Clara, was the daughter of Joel Parrish, an early Mormon convert and polygamist who claimed founding Mormon prophet Joseph Smith as a personal friend in Nauvoo, Illinois; he was also among the first “Saints” to enter the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. Clara’s mother died of tuberculosis when she was four so she and her siblings were raised by a stern English nanny. Despite Joel Parrish’s large polygamous family, Clara was

his favorite child and he spoiled her relentlessly. Clara was drawn to drama and dramatics from an early age, and insisted upon seeing every show with her father at the Salt Lake Theater. There were only two men in Clara's life, her father Joel and her son Joel, whom she spoiled just as she had been spoiled. Joel later wrote that Ray Dorius was "only a blip" in his mother's life. It was from his obsessively dramatic Mormon mother that young Joel Dorius learned to love English literature and all the performing arts.

Joel attended West High School in Salt Lake and then sang in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir during his teen years, from around 1935 to 1939 (although the official Choir website erroneously lists 1937 to 1946). He was simultaneously attending the University of Utah, where he increasingly questioned his childhood religion and found Mormonism deeply lacking. By his junior year, he had become an "agnostic", although he would later admit that he only intellectually left Mormonism at that point; it would be many more years before he emotionally removed himself as well. Dorius received his Bachelor's degree from the University of Utah in 1939 and then permanently moving away from his home state, taught mathematics at MIT during World War II. He went on to earn his doctorate from Harvard in 1949 and taught at Yale from 1949 to 1958, when he joined the faculty at the all-women Smith College in rural Northampton, Massachusetts. Here he struggled at first, feeling like he should have been an urban teacher, rather than "deserted" in a "tiny town in the countryside". He particularly missed having male students, and found it difficult teaching courses to young women only. (Only many years later did he find out how much his female students appreciated and valued his courses, profoundly pleasing him.)

In the summer of 1960, Dr. Dorius received a rare invitation to teach at Bread Loaf, a beautiful summer retreat mansion for writers and artists, located in the Green Mountains near Middlebury, Vermont. Rejuvenated by such an exciting experience, he returned to Smith College feeling at long last that he was in a place where his "public and private worlds can finally meet". Unfortunately his new-found elation would last but a few days.

In May 1960, Massachusetts governor Foster Furcolo had established the "Pornography Squad", with Sgt. John J. Regan as head of this notorious unit charged with "ferreting out, investigating, and prosecuting" pornography cases in the state – especially those involving the US Postal System. With an election coming up in November, Gov. Furcolo needed a good pornography scandal in the papers to help him get re-elected.

With information obtained from a US postal inspector, on September 2, 1960, three state troopers, a town police officer, and the postal inspector entered and searched the Northampton apartment of Dr. Newton Arvin, a Gay professor at Smith College. Arvin, who had been Truman Capote's first lover after they had met at Bread Loaf many years earlier, had several beefcake "physique" magazines and photos in his possession that he had received through the mail

(some from Capote when he vacationed in Greece), as well as 20 volumes of journals detailing his homosexual life back to 1940. These were seized by the state troopers as evidence to be used against him (and others) in court.

Plagued by guilt and thoroughly confused by the sudden tempest surrounding his personal life, Arvin “ratted”, breaking the unwritten “code of silence” then dominant in Gay circles, and named names. He informed police that at a private party, he had shown a group of men some of the physique photos he had in his possession. Two of the men Dr. Arvin identified, Edward “Ned” Spofford and Joel Dorius, were untenured faculty at Smith College. While the two were eventually acquitted of the “possession of pornography” charges on appeal, the Smith College Board of Trustees immediately fired Spofford and Dorius, and retired Arvin on half-pay simply because they were homosexuals. Dr. Arvin was charged with “lewd and lascivious conduct” and received a one-year suspended sentence. Tragically he suffered a mental breakdown during the course of the trial and committed himself to a mental institution where he died two years later.

Dubbed by the press as one of “the porn professors”, Joel Dorius only found work teaching in Europe, far from the media scandal in the U.S. He taught at Hamburg University in West Germany during the trial and appeal. While teaching there, mishap followed misfortune when he was again arrested under Paragraph 175 (instituted by the Nazi Party to persecute homosexuals), simply for having coffee with an elderly homosexual German man. Dorius was forced to hire a lawyer, who was only able to get the case dismissed through bribery. In 1963, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that the search warrants were unconstitutional since they did not properly define “obscene materials” and the convictions of all three men (including that of the now-deceased Newton Arvin) were overturned.

In 1964, Dr. Dorius joined the San Francisco State faculty, where he remained until his retirement. Although the “porn professors” scandal was nearly forgotten as a mere historical footnote, in 2001 Barry Werth published a biography, *The Scarlet Professor – Newton Arvin: A Literary Life Shattered by Scandal* (Doubleday) detailing the rise and tragic fall of this brilliant pioneer in American literary studies. A television documentary on the scandal, *The Great Pink Scare*, was also broadcast, followed by articles in *The New Yorker* and *Out* magazine. In 2004, Dr. Dorius released his own memoir, *My Four Lives*, which was available on joeldorius.com (but this website is temporarily down).

In 2002, Smith College created a lecture series and a small scholarship – the Dorius/Spofford Fund for the Study of Civil Liberties and Freedom of Expression, as well as an annual stipend for the Newton Arvin Prize in American Studies. However the Smith Board of Trustees refused to issue a formal apology to the surviving men, and also never formally admitted the men were fired for being Gay, despite outraged protests from faculty and the student body alike. Neither Dorius nor Spofford returned to Smith when the lecture series and scholarships

were announced, although a close friend of the two men, Jesuit priest Paul G. Crowley of Santa Clara University, told the press that they two professors were “relieved and vindicated” by the minimal gesture. Crowley confirmed that “Joel was deeply touched. It really did bring this whole ordeal to a close, and freed him to enter his final years.” While Crowley called Dorius “an accidental figure in history for Gay people” he also acknowledged him as “a brilliant teacher....That was much more important to Joel in many ways. He touched hundreds if not thousands of students’ lives as a teacher”.

Dr. Joel Dorius is survived by his sister-in-law, Arlene Dorius of Newport Beach, California, and her three children. He requested before his death that donations be made in his name to the ACLU.

Compiled from:

joeldorius.com (especially chapters 3 and 9 of *My Four Lives*)

"Joel Dorius - gay professor in '60s porn scandal", *San Francisco Chronicle*,
Feb. 19, 2006, p. B8

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/20/obituaries/20dorius.html>

familysearch.org

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