

Dr. Joel Dorius
“The Accidental Activist”

by Connell O’Donovan, copyright 2006

Dr. Joel Dorius (1919-2006) was a brilliant Elizabethan literary scholar and one of the Smith College professors caught in the “pornography” scandal of 1960 in Massachusetts. And he was also a Mormon from Salt Lake City. 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.



The Dorius home, next to the State Capitol

Joel’s father “Ray” was the grandson of Danish polygamist Nicolai Dorius of Copenhagen, an early settler of Ephraim, Utah; Ray worked as a rather unsuccessful traveling suit salesman and had affairs on the road (certainly with women and Joel felt probably with men as well), while acting the part of the overly self-righteous Mormon patriarch when in Salt Lake, singing in the Tabernacle Choir, teaching adult Sunday School, and being a tour guide-cum-missionary downtown.



Ray Dorius, Joel’s father

Dr. Dorius' eccentric 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. Although married, there were really 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.



Claire Dorius in drag as Julius Caesar

Joel attended West High School in Salt Lake and then sang in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir during his teen years, from around 1935 to 1940 (although the official Choir website erroneously lists 1937 to 1946).¹ Also around 1935 (after years of "awkward groping" with fellow Mormon boys), when Joel was 16, he finally had sexual relations with his well-known LDS piano teacher, 52 year-old Sterling Carlsberg. Although Dorius would have preferred someone his own age, their sexual relationship was still "one of the great breakthroughs" in his life. Their relationship continued for two years but then Dorius ended it; he had been told by another Mormon boy that each orgasm shortened life by one day and drained the body of a quart of blood, which terrified him. Around 1938, a year after ending their sexual relations, Sterling Carlsberg died unexpectedly in Salt Lake from a heart attack.²

¹ <http://mormontabernaclechoir.org/roster/>

² Joel Dorius, *My Four Lives*, p. 65-66.



Joel Dorius as a teenager in Salt Lake

At this time, Joel was also attending the University of Utah, where he increasingly questioned his childhood religion and found Mormonism deeply lacking; several of his friends on campus were homosexual, but they never openly discussed this with each other. By his junior year at the “U”, he had become what he called an “agnostic” and “apostate”, 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 1941 and won a small graduate scholarship to attend Harvard, permanently moving away from his home state. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he left Harvard to teach mathematics at MIT to young women during World War II; the women needed to learn math so they could rapidly assemble electronics parts for radar equipment as their part in the war effort. Toward the end of the war, the Utah draft board attempted to draft him into military service but wishing to remain in school, he presented a letter from a psychologist stating the he was homosexual. The draft board devastatingly branded him as having “Constitutional Psychopathic Inferiority” but he had 4-F status and returned to Harvard.³

³ *Lives*, p. 98.



Joel Dorius as a graduate student

At Harvard, Dorius assisted famous Utah writer Wallace Stegner in researching his 1942 book, *Mormon Country*, and became a devoted student of Dr. I. A. Richards (an agnostic Welshman who revolutionized English literary criticism). Dorius discovered his love of Shakespeare here and wrote his thesis on the “themes of economy and waste in the English Histories” of Shakespeare.⁴

In the summer of 1949, Dorius had his first serious relationship with a peer, fellow graduate student Phillip Holster; they were both graduating from Harvard and moving on to Yale for doctoral work. Their mutual elation found in love inspired Dorius to have his “most rewarding and successful year” at Yale. But Holster had come out to his strict military parents and they had sent him to a therapist in Boston, who convinced him to lead a “conventional” life and act as though he were heterosexual. Holster married and raised a large family, but the two men continued to correspond with each other until Joel’s death in 2006, Holster confessing to Joel that “he still ached acutely for male companionship”.⁵

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.

⁴ *Lives*, p. 102.

⁵ *Lives*, p. 105.

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 and nude 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.

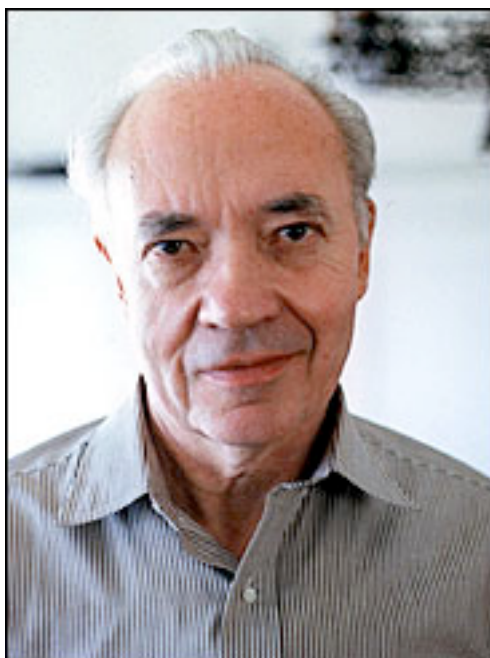
In 1964, Dr. Dorius joined the San Francisco State faculty, where he remained until his retirement. Although the “porn professors” scandal was nearly forgotten as a mere historical footnote, in 2001 Barry Werth published a biography, *The Scarlet Professor – Newton Arvin: A Literary Life Shattered by 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”.



**Pamphlet from Smith College’s 2002 lecture series
in honor of Drs. Arvin, Dorius, and Spofford**

Dr. Joel Dorius died February 14, 2006 at his home in San Francisco, California after a lengthy battle with bone marrow cancer. He is survived by his sister-in-law, Arlene Dorius of Newport Beach, California, and her three children.



Dr. Joel Dorius

Compiled from:

Dr. Joe Dorius, *My Four Lives* (an autobiography which was once published online)
"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