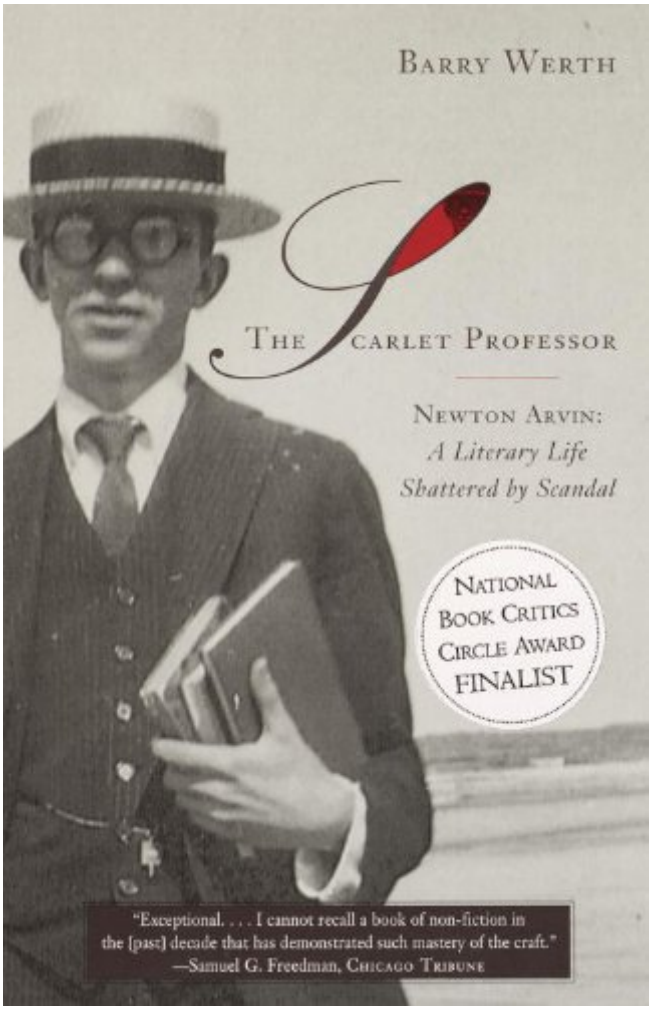
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The Scarlet Professor: Newton Arvin: A Literary Life Shattered By Scandal



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Synopsis

During his thirty-seven years at Smith College, Newton Arvin published groundbreaking studies of Hawthorne, Whitman, Melville, and Longfellow that stand today as models of scholarship and psychological acuity. He cultivated friendships with the likes of Edmund Wilson and Lillian Hellman and became mentor to Truman Capote. A social radical and closeted homosexual, the circumspect Arvin nevertheless survived McCarthyism. But in September 1960 his apartment was raided, and his cache of beefcake erotica was confiscated, plunging him into confusion and despair and provoking his panicked betrayal of several friends.An utterly absorbing chronicle, The Scarlet Professor deftly captures the essence of a conflicted man and offers a provocative and unsettling look at American moral fanaticism.From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

This was a fascinating biography of a man who was both a scholar and a tortured soul. As a Smith alumna, I was unaware of Newton Arvin or his contributions to understanding the motivations of writers like Hawthorne, Melville and Emerson. Barry Werth does a marvelous job helping the reader

to understand the challenges that Arvin faced as a closeted gay man in this society in the 1920's through the early sixties. I was disappointed about the way Smith College was portrayed but I realize that this was a different time and I may have my own biases. This would not have come across my radar had it not been for our discussion group. The book is a great read and will provide thought-provoking discourse for any discussion group or class on human behavior in the social environment.

This is a well crafted biography of an important, but now almost forgotten American literary critic, [Fredrick] Newton Arvin. Although somewhat dated now, Arvin produced a series of ground breaking literary biographies of mid-19th Century authors including Herman Melville. During his productive years he was an English professor at Smith College (then an elite all girl Vermont college). As this biography makes clear, although quite successful as both a teacher and author, Arvin was dogged his entire life by his homosexuality which was like a dark shadow always ready to engulf him.Indeed as Werth implies the homosexuality that was a hidden part of Arvin's entire adult life contributed to his frequent mental collapses and breakdowns, but also may have allowed him to have brilliant insights into the lives of his subjects such as Walt Whitman (an acknowledged homosexual) and Hawthorne and Melville (apparently both sexually ambiguous writers).Arvin was also what used to be called `a man of the left' and although he found the American Communist Party too intellectually bankrupt for his tastes, he was a `fellow traveler' who supported labor and socialist movements. Yet he also tried to be objective in his analysis of American poetry and fiction and was a knowledgeable, conscientious, and honest teacher of young ladies. His political views colored his scholarship, but did not on the whole distort it.Arvin, who was born in 1900, lived his life in a period in which homosexuality was considered either a crime or a mental illness or both. In his younger days he alternately fought his desires or gave into them in various clandestine relationships. Apparently Arvin also had an aversion to emotional intimacy that would doom him to loneliness his entire life. His life ended tragically in disgrace in 1960 when he was arrested for possessing what postal authorities claimed was 'homosexual pornography'. By that time, he was mentally and physically too fragile to deal with this sort of idiocy and died in 1963.Werth is to be commended for producing a good biography of a 20th Century American intellectual who produced serious critical analysis of works of the best mid-19th Century American authors.

"The Scarlet Professor" is the story of a rat. A man who betrayed his closest friends and thereby destroyed their careers and changed the course of their lives. Prof. Newton Arvin, when charged

with the possession of homoerotic pictures and magazines, "sang like a canary," as they used to say in ganster movies. This puzzled many of his closest friends, veterans of the McCarthy era who managed NOT to name names during the Communist witchhunts of the ’50s. And Arvin had many famous friends. One lover was Truman Capote, who was less than half his age. But the flaw in "The Scarlet Professor" might be that Newton comes across as a rat on every page. He was a whining hypochondriac; he was not attractive physically (at least in photos); he was not magnetic in conversation. So what lure did he have? Barry Werth does not address this. "The Scarlet Letter" is a wonderful book to read right now as a reminder of how poorly pre-1960 America treated homosexuals, communists and the mentally ill. It is also a good argument against those who would broaden police searches and seizures. It presents a nice snapshot of life in a women’s college as it used to be lived.

Arvin is the professor I look back on as the most influential of my college years. Teaching wasn’t something he did with ease. I’m one of the students for whom the depth and breadth of his scholarship and the excitement he conveyed led to a life-long interest in 19th century American prose and fiction. He managed to continue teaching and writing while under enormous pressure -- certainly much greater than I knew about while I was his admiring student. I rate Mr. Werth’s book highly simply because of its subject and look forward to reading it. Perhaps I’ll find something in it which justifes a really awful title.

I picked this book up after reading Arvin’s classic bio of Herman Melville (which is itself worth checking out). Werth’s treatment of the tale is reminiscent of the genre of non fiction I like to call "The Expanded New Yorker Article". That’s fine, I love the New Yorker, but the weakness endemic to the genre is the feeling that 150 pages would suffice (and you’re reading a three hundred page book). Regardless, I read the whole book and don’t regret it.Werth’s treatment of Arvin’s tortured feelings about his own homosexuality are sad. Arvin’s own betrayal of his friends and lovers at the hands of the authorities is pathetic. The fact that the "Homosexual Scandal of Smith College" (of which Arvin was the primary figure) dates to 1960 is astonishing.It’s impossible not to have sympathy for the man, but the bottom line is that he snitched on his comrades(i.e. he named names and testified for the prosecution in a co-defendant’s appeal), and that taints his legacy.I would imagine this would mostly appeal to young academics (and would be academics). That probabaly explains why there are 13 reviews of this book on !

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