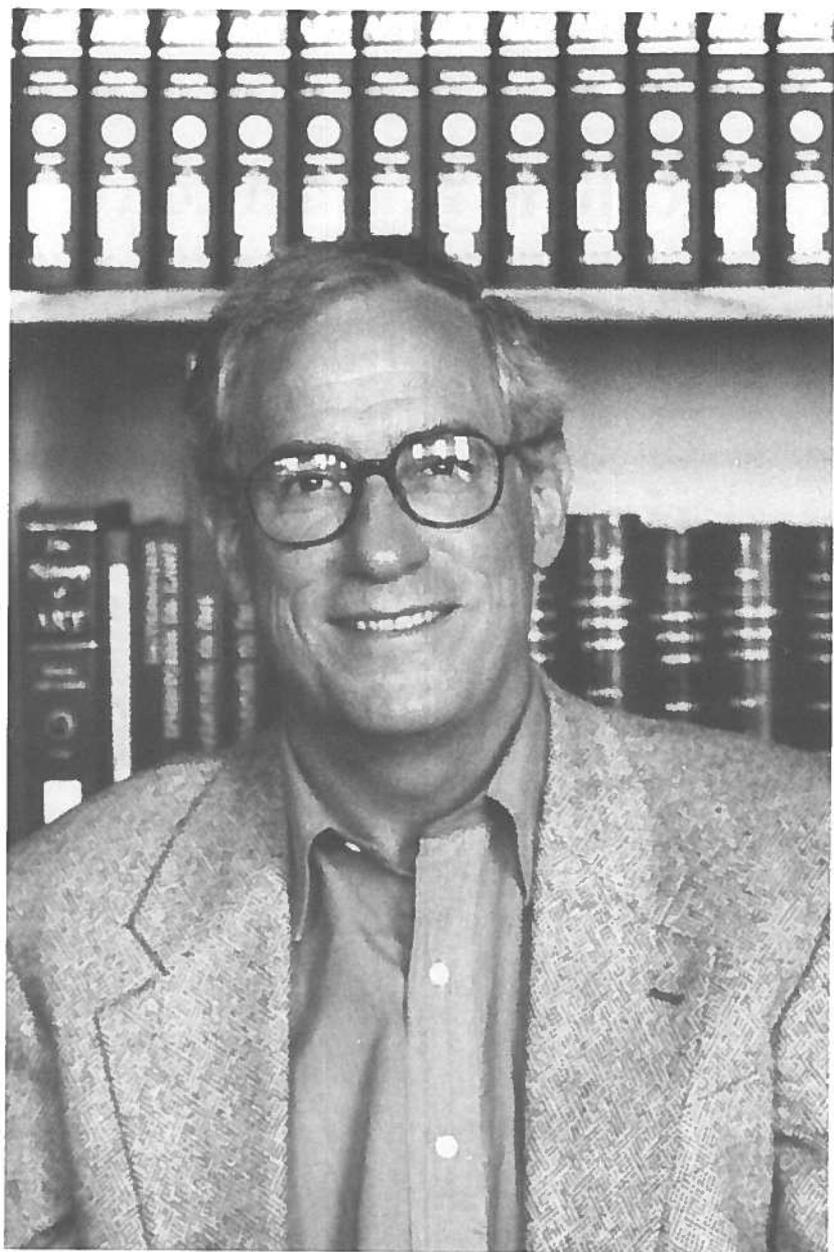


Robert C. Darnton
Shelby Cullom Davis '30
Professor of European
History
Princeton University

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The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu once remarked that Robert Darnton's principal shortcoming as a scholar is that he "writes too well." This prodigious talent, which arouses such suspicion of aristocratic pretension among social scientists in republican France, has made him nothing less than an academic folk hero in America—one who is read with equal enthusiasm and pleasure by scholars and the public at large. Darnton's work improbably blends a strong dose of Cartesian rationalism with healthy portions of Dickensian grit and sentiment. The result is a uniquely American synthesis of the finest traits of our British and French ancestors—a vision of the past that is at once intellectually bracing and captivatingly intimate.

Fascination with the making of modern Western democracies came easily to this true blue Yankee. Born in New York City on the eve of the Second World War, the son of two reporters at the *New York Times*, Robert Darnton has always had an immediate grasp of what it means to be caught up in the fray of modern world historical events. The connection between global historical forces and the tangible lives of individuals was driven home at a early age by his father's death in the Pacific theater during the war. Irreparable loss left him with a deep commitment to recover the experiences of people in the past.

At Phillips Academy and Harvard College, his first interest was in American history. His senior thesis at Harvard was a study of Woodrow Wilson. This investigation—to the great chagrin of his future colleague at Princeton, Arthur S. Link—convinced Darnton that Wilson, though unquestionably a great president, was a decidedly unlikable man. He moved into eighteenth-century studies and as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford began, in the 1960s, what has become his life's work—the study of how Enlightenment thought emerged and transformed the world, and in particular, the mental worlds of the eighteenth-century French. Ever since Alexis de Tocqueville's *Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1862),

one of the most heatedly debated historical questions in eighteenth-century studies has been the relationship between Enlightenment ideas and the political revolutions that ensued. But during the 1960s, as students throughout Europe and America were intensely politicized by civil rights movements, the Vietnam War, and struggles for greater democratization throughout the world, the historical relationship between radical ideas and political activism became one of pressing and immediate interest. Darnton was captivated by this passionate political and historical debate.

He began his graduate work when the social and political dimensions of intellectual experience were gaining renewed attention in France in the Sixth Section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris. This was the institutional home of the *Annales* school, and here a team of French historical researchers—Lucien Febvre, Henri-Jean Martin, and a younger generation, including François Furet, Roger Chartier, and Daniel Roche—were beginning to produce a series of important studies of literacy and educational life, as well as printing, publishing, and bookselling in early modern France. Following in the footsteps of the great literary historian Daniel Mornet, these scholars mined vast series of official institutional records—baptismal and marriage records, admissions lists for colleges and universities, registries of royal permissions to print and publish books—to document, with statistical rigor, how France became secular and enlightened in the decades before the French Revolution. The conclusions of this massive research effort were disappointingly modest: literacy gained ground only slowly in the eighteenth century; there was no “educational revolution” before the French Revolution; and shifts in reading habits, as measured by official permission for publication, were difficult to detect.

Working at Oxford in the orbit of Richard Cobb (also a great archival historian, but one whose sensibilities were decidedly at odds with the quantitative methods of the *Annales*), Darnton set out to recapture the political fate of the Enlightenment from a new angle. Rather than examining the records of the official cultural institutions of the Old Regime,

he delved into the police archives, where he discovered and began reading the unofficial intellectual and political debates that occurred for the most part in a burgeoning, illicitly printed, pamphlet literature in the decades before the revolution. Here Darnton found an entirely different world from the conservative one documented by the *Annales* historians, an underworld teeming beneath the world of official patronage, one that was exploding with radical ideas and proposals for political change.

A two-thousand-page doctoral dissertation plumbing the depths of this pamphlet literature ensued (Oxford, 1964), and shortly thereafter came a series of brilliant articles culminating with “The High Enlightenment and the Low Life of Literature in Prerevolutionary France” (*Past and Present*, 1971). Few essays attain the status of a historical classic, and this is one of them. From the surveillance reports of police spies engaged by the king to keep an eye on the underground literary life of the kingdom, Darnton was able to document for the first time how the abstract and politically moderate ideas of the greatest thinkers of the century—Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot—were appropriated and transformed into a visceral, and even violent, attack upon contemporary institutions and elites by a younger generation of frustrated men of letters who had been excluded from increasingly narrow channels of cultural patronage at the end of the Old Regime. It was from this generation of Grub Street intellectuals that the revolutionaries would come. The “Darnton thesis,” as it has come to be known, swept not only French history but also the historiographies of all the modern revolutions like a storm, and set an entire generation of historians of revolutions on highly fruitful new trajectories of research. It was recently the subject of an entire book (H. T. Mason, ed., *The Darnton Debate*, Oxford, 1998). This single article established Darnton as one of the most important and influential historians of his generation.

After four years at the Harvard Society of Fellows, Darnton took up a teaching position at Princeton University in 1968. More articles and books rapidly followed—most notably two books, *Mesmerism* (1968) and *The Business of Enlightenment*

(1979)—each showing in rich and vivid detail how the radical and sometimes highly improbable ideas were massively disseminated and adopted throughout all layers of French society in the years prior to the revolution. In *The Business of Enlightenment* he established himself as one of the masters of archival research in the profession today. Drawing upon the rich archives of the *Société Typographique de Neuchâtel*, this massive work reconstructs the amazing story of the creation and fate of the first small-format edition of Diderot and D'Alembert's great *Encyclopédie*, from financing of the enterprise and the commissioning of its authors to the production and sales of the completed books. Here that inimitable figure in the modern landscape—the door-to-door encyclopedia salesman—receives his first historian. In one, unmistakably Darntonian passage that will go down in the annals of working-class history, he so carefully recreates the staffing and production schedule of the printing shop where the encyclopedia was printed that he could identify the name and work history of the sloppy pressman who left his inky thumbprint on the page of one copy of the book, now residing at Yale's Sterling Library!

But neither *Mesmerism* nor *The Business of Enlightenment* won the hearts and minds of now several generations of undergraduates and general readers the way his next book, *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984), would. In the 1980s, Darnton began teaching a course on culture and history with the eminent anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. For the historian, exposure to anthropological methods opened up the possibility of recapturing the mental lives and systems of meaning created by people who had left little or no written trace of their thoughts and feelings. For the first time, a European historian had found a way to bring the premodern dreams and aspirations of illiterate peasants and artisans to life for modern readers. And he did so with such unusual passion and perception that the essays gathered together as *The Great Cat Massacre* have become the favorite history book of students throughout the world (the work has been translated into Danish, Dutch, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish).

Over several decades at Princeton, in the company of Lawrence Stone, Natalie Zemon Davis, Carl Schorske, Peter Brown, and Anthony Grafton, Robert Darnton has been a central figure in what can only be described as an American renaissance in the writing of European cultural history. Together these historians have made the cultural inheritance of Europe real and relevant to generations of students who no longer had the experiences of immigration and world war to connect them to the old world. Reputed as one of the most rigorous and intense graduate advisers in the profession, he has trained a generation of French historians who now occupy positions at key institutions throughout America.

Darnton also figures at the forefront of the first generation of postwar American historians of France to work to create a truly international historiography of our sister republic. As comfortable speaking and writing in French as in English, he early on won the respect and admiration of his French colleagues (even as he criticizes them, and often severely), and he is today one of the most admired historians in France. This is a singular distinction for any foreigner. He has been made first a *Chevalier* and then an officer of the *Ordre des Arts et Lettres*. So close is he to the world of French scholarship that he chose to write his extraordinary study, *Edition et sédition. L'univers de la littérature clandestine au XVIIIe siècle* (1991) in French. (It has never been translated into English.) In 1991 the French recognized his distinction in their language and culture with both the *Prix Médicis* and the *Prix Chateaubriand*. So wedded is he to Paris, and especially to its archives, that he bought an apartment across the square from the old *Bibliothèque Nationale* so that he can be within minutes of his research. He teaches regularly at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris and he has coproduced a French television series on the history and meaning of democracy.

He is also one of the very few historians of France in either the English- or the French-speaking world to engage deeply with German-speaking scholars. His German is reputedly as perfect as his French and in 1989, thanks to a year at the

Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, he was able not only to witness but also to play an active role in the reshaping of German academic life in the wake of reunification. He has served on the board of directors of the *Internationaler Beirat der Forschungshatte Europäische Aufklärung* in Halle, as an adviser to the *Wissenschaftskolleg Bierat* in Berlin, and as director of the East-West Seminar (1985–95). The events of 1989 captivated him. Unable to resist the temptation to follow in the family profession, he dropped his historical research to write his *Berlin Journal*, which vividly recounts how the Berlin Wall fell and with what immediate consequences for the future of German culture and society.

Now the author or editor of fifteen books and over one hundred and thirty articles, and one of the most eagerly read reviewers for the *New York Review of Books*, Robert Darnton is by all measures a major force in our profession. In recent years he has decided to use his immense knowledge of the history of book publishing to take up the challenge of reshaping the world of scholarly research and writing in the age of the Internet. Darnton believes that, as wedded as we historians are to our dusty, old manuscripts and weighty scholarly monographs, there is a future for us in cyberspace. His article in the *New York Review of Books*, speculating on the emerging dimensions of the “e-book,” has been one of the most visionary essays on the subject to date. His design and inauguration of the Gutenberg-e Book Prize during his AHA presidency may well become one of his most important and lasting gifts to the profession. What will remain in our imaginations, however, is the vivid cast of characters he has bequeathed us from the past—the printer’s apprentice who took out his frustrations on the master’s cats; the old peasant women who recounted fantastic and sometimes horrific tales to fend off hunger and cold; the French police spy who disguised himself as an umbrella salesman when he traveled to England; and Monsieur Lamourette, the deputy to France’s first National Assembly, whose kiss remade the world. If it is true that he “writes too well” the world is a richer place for it.

Carla Hesse

University of California at Berkeley

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