

Joan Dejean, Romance Languages

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Joan Dejean

Joan Dejean, Trustee Professor Emerita of Romance Languages in the School of Arts & Sciences and renowned scholar of 17th and 18th century French literature, died on December 2 from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. She was 75.

Dr. Dejean was born in Opelousas, Louisiana and grew up in a French-speaking family. She received her BA in 1969 from Tulane University's Newcomb College and earned her PhD from Yale University in 1974, where she studied with Sterling Professor of French (and later Yale Provost) Georges May.

Dr. Dejean's first teaching position was at Penn in 1974, where she received a Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching in 1977 (*Almanac* April 26, 1977

(<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v23pdf/n30/042677.pdf>)). She then taught French

literature at Princeton and Yale before returning in 1988 to Penn as the Trustee Professor of Romance Languages, with affiliations in English and women's studies. Dr. Dejean remained at Penn from 1988 until her retirement in 2021.

The author of twelve books, Dr. Dejean was recognized with numerous honors and awards for her work on women's writing, the history of sexuality, the development of the novel, and material culture. *The Age of Comfort: When Paris Discovered Casual and the Modern Home Began* (Bloomsbury) was named one of 2009's top art and architecture books by *The New York Times*. Dr. Dejean received the 2002 Modern Language Association's Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for French and Francophone Studies for her book *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies, and Tabloids in Early Modern France* (The University of Chicago Press). Dr. Dejean was awarded fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the American Council of Learned Societies for her research. Her work on fashion and style in pre-Revolutionary France gained notice beyond the academy through interviews in venues such as NPR, *The New York Times*, and Rick Steves' Europe.

"Joan was a pioneer in the feminist readings of French texts, and in the feminist literary critical movement, a field that was neglected for many years," said Lance Donaldson-Evans, a former colleague in Penn's department of French and Francophone studies. "I know very few scholars who were as passionate about their scholarship as Joan."

In addition to authoring books on 17th-century fiction (*Scarron's Roman Comique*, 1977); a history of women's writing in France (*Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France*, 1991); the history of sexuality (*Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937*, 1989); the development of the novel (*Literary Fortifications*, 1984; *Libertine Strategies*, 1981); and the cultural history of late 17th and early 18th century France (*Ancients Against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle*, 1997; *The Essence of Style*, 2005), Dr. Dejean published the first uncensored edition of Molière's *Dom Juan*, as well as editions of Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and Duras' *Ourika*.

In 2020, Dr. Dejean was elected a fellow of the prestigious British Academy for the humanities and social sciences. In 2021, the American Association of Teachers of French (AATF) published a volume of essays edited by Amy S. Wyngaard and Roland Racevskis in Dr. Dejean's honor: *How to Do Things with Style: Essays in Honor of Joan*. Dr. Dejean's 2022 book *Mutinous Women: How French Convicts Became Founding Mothers of the Gulf Coast*, which investigates the lives of female prisoners deported in 1719 from Paris to the French colony of Louisiana, led to the creation of an interactive digitized map (<https://mutinouswomen.sas.upenn.edu/>) that situates these women's biographies in New Orleans settlements.

In 1999, Dr. Dejean became a member of Penn's 25-Year Club (*Almanac* January 11, 2000 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v46/n16/benchmarks.html>)).

Dr. Dejean was a committed researcher of French and American archives and libraries. The Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries has received significant collections, focused primarily on early modern French literature, culture, and women's writings, donated over the years by Dr. Dejean. She was also an aficionado of opera and a devoted supporter of the arts, especially Philadelphia's contemporary dance company BalletX and the Curtis Institute of Music.

Photo courtesy of Candace diCarlo