



The New York Public Library
Manuscripts and Archives Division

Guide to the

David B. Feinberg papers

1976-1994

MssCol 983

Compiled by Laura K. O'Keefe, November 1995. Additional materials were integrated into the collection by Susan M. Kline, 2015.

Summary

Creator: Feinberg, David B.

Title: David B. Feinberg papers

Date: 1976-1994

Size: 9.64 linear feet (22 boxes)

Source: Donated by the Estate of David B. Feinberg, 1995 and Gary Grossman, 2015.

Abstract: David Barish Feinberg (1956-1994) was a writer and AIDS activist in New York City. After graduating From M.I.T. in 1977, Feinberg lived briefly in Southern California before moving to New York City in 1979, where he earned a graduate degree in linguistics at New York University, and became a computer programmer for the Modern Language Association while writing in his spare time. His three published books are *Eighty-Sixed* (1989), *Spontaneous Combustion* (1991) and *Queer and Loathing* (1994). Diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1987, Feinberg was active in ACT UP for the next seven years. He died of AIDS-related illnesses in November 1994. The collection consists of correspondence, writings, other personal papers, and photographs of David Feinberg, mostly pertaining to his life in New York, as a writer and a gay man in the age of AIDS. The bulk of the correspondence is incoming from friends and relatives and concerns personal matters. Writings include novels, stories, articles and memoirs by Feinberg (and one box of writings by others) with many drafts and sketches for uncompleted works. The collection also contains printed materials about AIDS and ACT UP; personal files containing desk calendars for 1981 through 1993, financial records, and other items; photographs of gay rights demonstrations, parties, vacations, and family gatherings; and sound recordings.

Access: Advance notice required.

Conditions Governing Access:

One letter, not by or directly pertaining to Feinberg, is restricted until 2050.

Preferred citation: David B. Feinberg papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

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Creator History

David Barish Feinberg was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, on November 25, 1956, the second of two children. He grew up in Syracuse, New York, and graduated in 1977 from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he majored in mathematics and studied creative writing with the novelist John Hersey.

After graduation, Feinberg moved to Southern California. He found work there as a computer programmer, and gradually came to terms with his gay identity, coming out to his family after attending a gay pride parade. He also continued writing fiction, completing a novel, *Calculus*, in 1979. (*Calculus* remains unpublished; Feinberg later characterized it as "godawful," telling one interviewer that it was a novel that "only an MIT math major could have written").

Feinberg returned east in 1979 to attend New York University, completing an M. A. degree in linguistics in 1981. Soon after that, he accepted a job in the computer center of the Modern Language Association in New York City, where he continued to work until shortly before his death in 1994.

In the early 1980s, Feinberg joined a gay men's writing group, through which he eventually found his narrative voice, in the form of his character, B. J. Rosenthal. Rosenthal, like Feinberg, was a young, gay, Jewish man, originally from upstate New York, who worked as a programmer and lived in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan. (From 1981 to 1993, Feinberg's home was a studio apartment on Ninth Avenue near West 52nd Street.) In 1986, Feinberg submitted a story about B. J. to *Mandate* Magazine. The editor liked it, and Feinberg began doing a monthly column for *Mandate* called "Tales From Hell's Kitchenette," comic vignettes about gay life in New York, which ran from July 1986 to May 1987.

Feinberg met Ed Iwanicki, an editor at Viking Press, at a party in 1986. Iwanicki was an enthusiastic reader of Feinberg's column and encouraged him to submit to Viking the manuscript of any novel he might write; Feinberg complied in August 1987 with *Eighty-Sixed*. The heavily autobiographical work deals humorously and poignantly with gay men's lives before and after the onset of the AIDS crisis and with the illness and death of one of the narrator's friends. When it was published in 1989, it found a wide audience, and won that year's Lambda Literary Award for Gay Men's Fiction and the American Library Association's Gay/Lesbian Book Award for Fiction.

It was also in August 1987 that Feinberg took the HIV antibody test and learned that he was HIV-positive. That fall, he joined the activist organization AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP), and was a committed member for the next seven years, regularly attending weekly meetings and participating in demonstrations at St. Patrick's Cathedral, the headquarters of the Food and Drug Administration in Washington, and the laboratories of Hoffmann-La Roche Pharmaceutical Company.

In 1991, Feinberg published his second book, *Spontaneous Combustion*, a collection of short stories about B. J. Rosenthal, that, like *Eighty-Sixed*, were chiefly based on his own life. Feinberg used sarcastic humor as a way of coping with his fears about AIDS, and most of the pieces in *Spontaneous Combustion* are light in tone, though several are somber accounts of the deaths of friends.

For the next few years, Feinberg continued to balance writing and political activism with working full-time. In July 1994, however, failing health caused him to take medical disability leave from his job. That fall, he entered St. Vincent's Hospital, where he died early in November, three weeks before his thirty-eighth birthday.

Despite increasing weakness and exhaustion, Feinberg continued to write as long as he could, even while hospitalized. In his last months, he was working on a memoir about his family; a novel with the provisional titles of *Behavior* and *Twelve-Inch Remix*; and a play, *The Pathological Flirt*. On October 18, 1994, *New York Newsday* published a version of the speech he had given at an ACT UP meeting on October 3, in which, having become disillusioned with ACT UP demonstrations as a force for change, he took the organization to task for failing to focus on what he saw as the essential issues of AIDS treatment and education.

David Feinberg's last book, a collection of essays called *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone*, appeared in print before his death; most of the reviews, however, were posthumous.

Scope and Content Note

The ten linear feet of David Feinberg's papers consist of correspondence (mostly incoming); writings, both published and unpublished; clippings; such miscellany as desk calendars and monthly bank statements; photographs, and sound recordings. The materials date from the mid-1970s to 1994.

Key Terms

Subjects

AIDS (Disease)
Gay liberation movement -- United States
Gay men's writings, American

Occupations

Authors
Political activists

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Correspondence
Photographic prints
Sound recordings

Names

Divant, Kay
Dorris, Michael
Erdrich, Louise
Feinberg, David B.
Hersey, John, 1914-
Klein, Dennis
Kramer, Larry
Weir, John, 1959-

Container List

Series I: Correspondence

The correspondence consists almost primarily of incoming letters. The correspondence is mostly personal, from friends and relatives. There are also some fan letters from readers.

Notable correspondents include John Hersey, Feinberg's creative writing teacher at M. I. T. (one letter, November 22, 1977); Larry Kramer (one letter, circa August 15, 1991); and Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, who became friends of Feinberg after writing him to praise *Eighty-Sixed* (about two dozen letters, February 1989 through January 1992).

- b. 1 1976-1985
- b. 2 1986-1989
- b. 3 1990-1991
- b. 4 1992
- b. 5 1993-1994
- b. 6 undated
- b. 6 Grossman, Gary 1987-1993
Letters to Grossman.

Series II: Writings

Series II contains novels, stories, and articles by Feinberg (and one box of writings by others), including many drafts and sketches for uncompleted works. Among these papers are his first, unpublished novel, *Calculus* (Box 7); drafts of early short stories, possibly from his college writing class (Box 8); *Behavior*, an unfinished novel (Box 9); *The Pathological Flirt*, the play on which he was working at the time of his death; and the beginnings of a memoir about his family.

My Secret History, which he evidently started writing during his final hospital stay in 1994 (Box 11).

Also in Series II are published copies of *Eighty-Sixed*, including a German paperback edition, and *Spontaneous Combustion* (Box 12), and copies of *Mandate Magazine* from 1986-1987, featuring Feinberg's column, "Tales From Hell's Kitchenette" (Box 14).

Feinberg's papers do not include the typescripts of his three published books, although passages from them, often fragmented or in different form, are scattered within this series.

- b. 7 *Calculus: A Novel* 1979
- b. 8 Drafts and notes for stories circa mid 1970s-early 1980s
- b. 9 Drafts and notes for novels and stories circa mid 1980s-early 1990s
- b. 9 *Behavior (novel, never completed)*
- b. 10 Copies of published articles and notes for stories circa 1985-1991
Last writings 1994
- b. 11 *Drafts of memoir, My Secret History*
- b. 11 *Drafts of play, The Pathological Flirt*
- b. 11 Notes for stories, articles
- b. 11 Speech given at ACT UP meeting 1994 Oct 3
- b. 11 Notes on hospital stay Summer-Fall 1994
- b. 12 *Books: published copies of Eighty-Sixed and Spontaneous Combustion*
- b. 13 Reviews of and publicity for DBF's books
- b. 13 Articles mentioning DBF
- b. 14 *Mandate Magazine* 1986-1987

Series II: Writings (cont.)

- b. 15 **Writings by others**
John Weir Kay J. Divant Dennis Klein.

Series III: Other Materials

These items include five folders of clippings and newsletters about AIDS and two folders of material about ACT UP (Box 16); Feinberg's desk calendars for 1981 through 1993 (Box 17); and an assortment of personal files, from financial records and N. Y. U. transcripts to copies of his invitations to parties (Box 18).

- b. 16 **AIDS/ACT UP items: clippings, newsletters, etc 1987-1994**
- b. 17 **Feinberg's desk calendars 1981-1993**
- b. 18 **Various files**
Including: Notes from therapy, circa mid-1980s, "To do" lists, Party invitations Personal ads.

Series IV: Photographs

Series IV consists of photo albums, framed pictures, loose snapshots, and slides. None of the people, places, or dates of these pictures is identified, though there are several broad categories of topics: gay rights demonstrations, including those of ACT UP; parties; vacations; and family gatherings.

- b. 19 **Photo albums**
- b. 20 **Photo albums and framed pictures**
- b. 21 **Loose snapshots and slides**
- b. 22 **Series V: Sound Recordings**

This series contains six miniature cassettes, partly or wholly unidentified; and five cassettes, labeled "Spontaneous Combustion." Researchers should check with the Manuscripts and Archives staff about access to these items.