

INCORRECT ENGLISH:

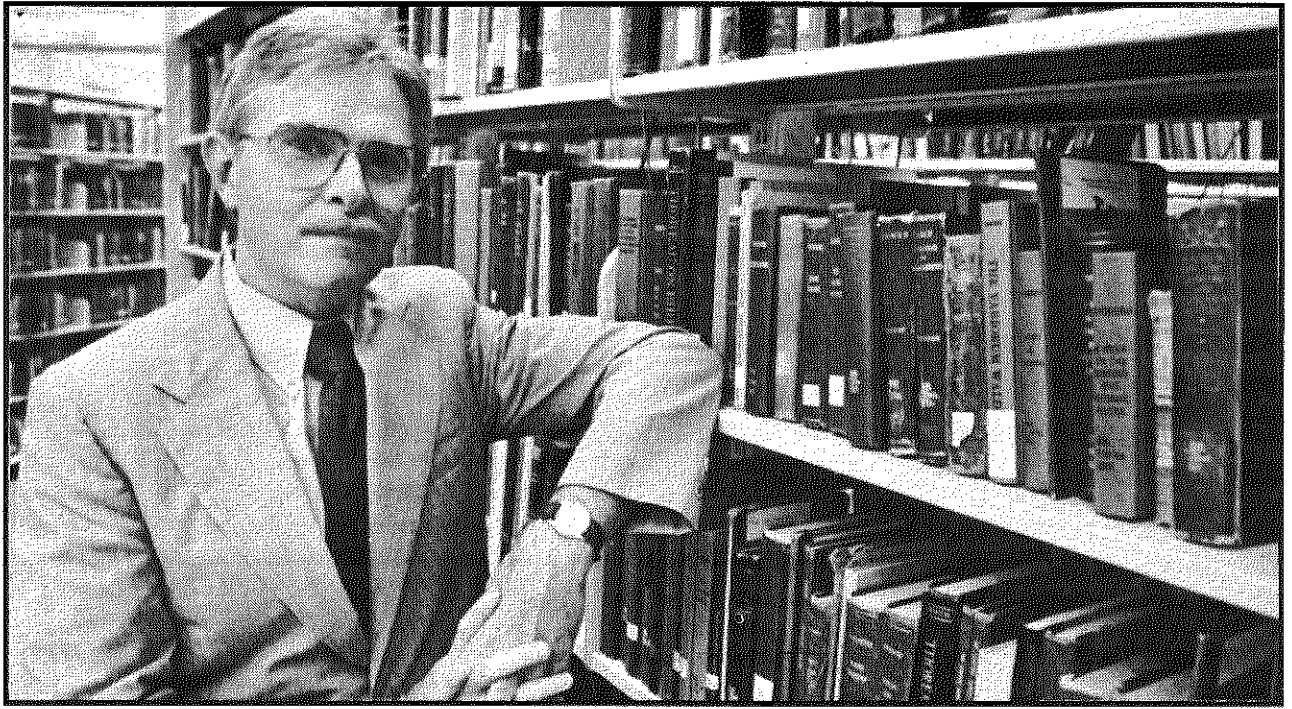
by Peter Collier

When the faculty at the University of Texas overwhelmingly rejected a "multicultural" graduation requirement in a mail ballot last month, Alan Gribben experienced an academic's version of delayed stress syndrome.

For most of his long teaching career, Gribben had been a respected and productive member of the UT English department. But by the time he left last spring to take an untenured job at the Montgomery campus of Auburn University, he had become, in the words of a sympathetic former colleague, "a designated victim of the progressive forces" on the Austin campus. His career was in tatters, and Gribben himself, in an odd reversal on the old Sixties notion that the personal is political, had been thoroughly stigmatized as a racist and sexist and (in the words of one former colleague) a "useful idiot of the Far Right." He was a victim of an intellectual culture which has made victimhood its summum bonum.

It was a strange fate for someone who had gone on his first civil rights demonstration in 1963 when he was just out of high school and whose claims to ethnic sensitivity are further established by his 20 year marriage to a Chinese-American woman whose parents did not even arrive in America until shortly before the Rape of Nanking and who are still more comfortable speaking Chinese than English. Nor did Gribben spend the radical Sixties hiding out in the library, as did so many of the spokespersons for trendy radical styles who tormented him at Texas. Arriving in Berkeley on the very afternoon in 1966 that Alan Ginsberg was brokering a compact of peace and understanding between antiwar marchers and Hell's Angels in one of those perfect Sixties moments, Gribben (who was caught in his microbus for three hours in the traffic jam that negotiation caused) soon became a movement activist himself, pursuing his PhD in English almost as an avocation. He was arrested in Sproul Plaza during the 1968 strike of the Third World Liberation Front (because it was a precursor of multiculturalism, he would later regard this movement as "the boomerang out of time warp" that returned to hit him in Texas) and went to jail again during the Peoples' Park riots a year later.

Gribben began to question the radical project only when it descended into violence and dada at the onset of the 70s. He was appalled when rioters came within a few feet of setting the priceless Mark Twain Papers (which he was using for his dissertation) on fire in the Bancroft Library. He combed from the revolutionary brink finally when comrades invited him to accompany them for target practice in the Berkeley Hills in preparation for the revolution. His doubts were intensified by the experience of his future wife Irene Wong, who had entered one of the pilot programs in Asian Studies won by Gribben and other student radicals during the Third World Strike. (Her instructors had asked her to denounce her immigrant "bourgeois" parents, and when she refused dismissed her as a "banana," yellow on the outside but white within.) Marriage into a traditional Chinese family which had wholeheartedly embraced the America he had spent years attacking caused Gribben



more cognitive dissonance, but he still considered himself enough a man of the left that he worried about how he and his Asian wife would be received in conservative Texas when he completed his thesis on Mark Twain's library and accepted his first teaching job at UT in 1974.

In fact, however, the Gribbens quickly set down roots in Austin. Irene got jobs demonstrating Chinese foods in local stores and put together a cookbook on Asian cuisine before starting a family. Like other junior professors, Alan wrote articles, joined professional organizations, worked to transform his thesis into a two-volume book that eventually won him tenure, a solid niche in Twain studies, and the respect of his colleagues. (*Mark Twain's Library: A Reconstruction* was among the top five books by Austin faculty members in terms of the number of citations by other scholars).

Gribben's specialty, bibliographic scholarship, had been well respected when he took his degree, but it began to seem a little dowdy in the late 70s when deconstructionism and the other imported intellectual delicacies began to agitate English departments across the country. Gribben was bemused by the new developments and especially by the way that his colleagues began to see themselves like an elite bomb squad dismantling what now had to be called "texts." He began to feel guilty for the old fashioned quality of the emotion, but for him, the appeal of the profession was reading books and writing about them in a way that honored the author's intentions. He hoped that the appeal of these new approaches would fade in time and that in any case the sort of work he did would always have a value, if only as a springboard which others could use in their more acrobatic critical maneuvers.

Over the next few years deconstruction itself did indeed evanesce, but radical critical theory—reader response, the new historicism, the myriad neo-Marxisms that would congeal into race/class/gender analysis—proved to be an enduring rather than a passing fad. The young people entering the department were cadre for this new movement, having been shaped at Duke, Yale, and other "cutting edge" institutions committed to "discourse theory." Speaking what was esperanto to them, but gibberish to Gribben and other traditionalists, they were Stepford Professors, talking alike and striding confidently into the tunnel of their shared tunnel vision.

In the mid-80s Gribben thought briefly about "joining up" (as one of his senior colleagues sheepishly described his own cynical conversion to this new criticism), but he decided that doing so would violate the vestiges of his Sixties commitment to authenticity, and in any case he was put off by what he saw as the puerile anti-Western dogma that had become *de rigueur* in the new theoretical sensibility. He decided that he had acquired enough stature to hold his ground and let the flash flood

of modish obscurantism wash around him. "It was sort of a 'peace in our time' approach," he now acknowledges.

He stayed out of arguments, continued to write about Twain, and concentrated on the classroom, winning a \$5000 university-wide award for excellence in teaching. Ironically (given what was to come), it was he who introduced Sara Orne Jewett and other "minor" women writers into the Texan curriculum along with little known black literary figures like humorist Charles Chestnutt. Gribben was also a good citizen in the English department, taking more than his share of committee assignments and getting elected for two terms as chairman of the graduate program.

He admits now that he was perhaps feeling a false sense of security about his career late in 1987 when he stumbled into his nightmare. The triggering event seemed minimal enough at the time—routine consideration by the Texas English department of a proposal to institute a graduate program with a specialty in Ethnic Studies and Third World literature. Gribben voted in favor of a PhD program with such a concentration, but felt that students working for an MA ought to take more "traditional" course work before embarking on such a specialization and so he asked to be recorded as being against this part of the motion, the lone objector out of 45 votes.

"I thought it would be regarded as someone emphasizing a principle," Gribben now says ruefully. "I didn't understand the depth of the waters I'd stepped into." Indeed, he readily admits that he was so anxious not to rock the boat that if he'd had any inkling what taking this position would cost him later on he gladly would have voted the other way.

Nothing was said at the time of his vote, but shortly afterward he noticed that attitudes toward him were changing. The problem, as he tried to unravel it, seemed to be less that he had voted against the program—a single vote could have been rationalized as a statistical anomaly—than that he had explained his vote in terms that seemed to challenge the new orthodoxies about race and gender. Whatever the reason, a chill had entered his colleagues' attitude toward him. The hallway companionship he had come to depend on after 12 years at UT disappeared. Dinner invitations with other faculty couples ceased. Worse than the shunning and ostracism was his discovery that the term "racist" was being used to describe him. (A friend of his wife Irene's concluded a visit by commiserating, "I can't believe Alan is such a racist. And you an *Asian!* I'm so sorry for you.") What was happening was irrational and wholly unrelated to anything that he had thought or said, but under the new intellectual dispensation such charges had a velcro stickiness.

Colleagues who before might have privately considered him "provincial intellectually and personally officious and schoolmarmish" (as one UT English professor still describes him) now felt they could be publicly con-

THE CASE OF ALLEN GRIBBEN

temptuous. The hits were subtle but palpable nonetheless. One early warning of the predicament he was in came when Gribben was talking to a student near the department's mailroom door and a colleague came by and brusquely asked him to move out of the way, even though Gribben wasn't blocking his access, and then said "I said, *please move!*" when he didn't shuffle fast enough. "This sort of thing happened more than once," says Maxine Hairston, a writing instructor at UT at the time of Gribben's ordeal. "It was that special sort of cruelty of which only literature professors are capable."

Deluding himself into believing that his problem might be one of cosmetics, Gribben went through a makeover with his wife's help: shortened mustache, less severe eyeglass frames, blowdried haircut, pastel shirts. When that didn't work, he spent part of a semester in compulsive affability, dropping complimentary notes in colleagues' mailboxes and giving hearty greetings in the hall to people who ignored him. The next semester he spent hiding out, rushing off to the library immediately after his classes were over. And staying there until it was time to go home, where his wife, exhausted from dealing with two small children every day, had trouble understanding what seemed to her his subjective complaints.

He began to feel disoriented. "One of the reasons you get into this profession," he says now, "is for the collegiality—that sense you have with others in your department that you are in this thing together, sharing new ideas and new discoveries. Abruptly deprived of that sort of companionship, I felt unanchored, like an animal in one of those experiments where they suddenly withdraw all emotional contacts." He went to the chairman of the English department and ultimately to a Dean to ask them for help. They were sympathetic but said there was nothing they could do.

The term "political correctness" had not yet been applied to the academy, but Gribben began to realize that what was happening to him was ideological, as well as personal, and could not be explained by a single unpopular vote. What he was facing had to do not only with a seismic shift in the entire discipline of literary studies but also with the growing power of a new set of clichés about Western thought. There was a large faction among his colleagues with ulterior political motives, a group who liked to be called "progressive faculty" and whose growing cachet came not from their relatively meager achievements—Gribben was not alone in noting that their intellectual activity was characterized by a constant sharpening of tools but little real agriculture—but from their beliefs. He knew, too, that this new orthodoxy was more severe and unyielding in a place like UT which had never been particularly noted for the quality of its English department or the passion of its politics and where radicals could therefore dominate in a way that was not possible in the more sophisticated atmosphere of a Berkeley or Cambridge.

But groping toward an understanding of his dilemma did not make it go away. He felt like a character from Kafka, enmeshed in a dilemma which had effects but no causes; a situation, furthermore, which had none of the objective signposts which usually function as a reality check. In fact, at times Gribben wondered if he was imagining the whole thing—exactly the theory soon to be advanced by his enemies—but then one evening he received a telephone call from one of the few colleagues who was still civil to him. "Alan, I'm sorry about what is happening to you," the man said. "I really sympathize and wish I could help. But I have a family I have to think about and so I have to ask a favor. Please don't stand in my doorway and talk to me when other people are watching."

Always before his graduate courses had been well attended, but now it appeared that students were being counselled away from him by other faculty. In 1988, he had to cancel a seminar in Literary Biography when only one student showed up; he didn't bother scheduling any others. Even some undergraduates seemed to be worried about a stigma that might come from being in one of his classes.

About this time, the Dean of Liberal Arts at UT made a decision not to authorize the hiring of two candidates in American Literature who had been recommended by the hiring committee on the grounds that they would further

the growing political imbalance in the department. After this decision was announced, Gribben got a call at home on a Sunday night from a colleague who told him, "Somebody from the department was talking to the Dean. It had better not be you. When we find out who it was, this person will be dead in this department and will just have to leave Texas." Gribben protested that he had not said anything to any administrator and pointed out that indeed he had been so obsessed with his own problems that he hadn't paid any attention to the controversy at all. But this didn't matter any more than the fact that the Dean hardly needed any urging to make his decision; he was presumed guilty. Because one of the two rejected candidates was a woman, he now found that he was being spoken of as a "sexist" as well as a racist.

The stress of the situation he was facing became implosive, driving Gribben and his wife to a marriage counselor. Some good came out of the experience—Irene began to understand what he was facing and lined up solidly behind him—but the downside was that when word leaked out about what they were doing it was magnified into a malicious rumor that Gribben was mentally ill and seeing a psychiatrist. Even today many of his former colleagues at UT claim that Gribben "constructed" (in the currently chic literary term) his ordeal out of his own paranoia and are acidic in the contemptuous way they speak of him. Professor Kurt Heinzelman, for instance, believes that everything that happened was the result of a "martyr complex" at the core of Gribben's personality: "He was self immolating at the same time he was self gratifying." Chares Rossman, another former colleague, says Gribben engaged in "willful and self induced isolation," and compares him to "Captain Queeg rolling his steel balls." Chairman Joseph Kruppa, who would become the department's point man in the conflict with Gribben, continues subtly to question his ability to perceive things coherently.

But others who watched the unfolding of this closet drama knew that what Gribben was describing was indeed happening. University administrator Robert King says, "Alan wasn't sent to the Gulag perhaps, but he certainly was sent to Coventry." And according to Maxine Hairston, "There was a concerted persecution of him by a strong contingent in the department, a group of fanatics who know that the majority of academics hate confrontation and will lie low and let this sort of thing happen."

By the end of 1989, Gribben was looking for another job. He was a finalist for a couple of positions, but when he was invited back for final interviews he faced unexpected and sometimes accusatory discussions about his attitudes toward race and gender, and was tipped off in one case that people in Austin were trying to sabotage him. (One colleague was contacted by a person on one of the search committees who said, "What is it with Alan Gribben? I have gotten all these calls about him from people in your department.") He did get two offers, but he decided at the last minute not to accept because he didn't want to feel that he had been run out of town.

Personally and politically cornered, Gribben groped through his depression for the will to fight back. And so when Greg Curtis of the *Texas Monthly* called him in the Spring of 1990 him to ask about rumors concerning dissension in the English Department, Gribben agreed to be interviewed. Curtis asked him to corroborate a story he had heard about how members of the English department had staged a "burn something Texas" party where objects ranging from copies of J. Frank Dobie books to a Texas flag were torched, Gribben told him what he knew. (Without using names, Curtis later wrote of "the established professor who believes in traditional literature and traditional teaching...[and] generally younger professors who see literature as a 'tool of oppression'...and teaching as a way of proselytizing for the gender, race, or other radical—most often specifically Marxist—political beliefs.")

When the piece appeared, it caused a minor sensation. Gribben did not deny talking to Curtis or to a columnist for the *Dallas Morning News* who wrote a follow up. He was called into the office of English department

chairman Joseph Kruppa who lectured him angrily for an hour, finally sputtering that his betrayal of the department had set back his rehabilitation by three years. After Kruppa's tirade, Gribben was taken aside by the Associate Chairman who spoke to him with concern: "Look, you've got a nice wife, nice kids, a nice home. Don't blow it..."

Walking back to his office, Gribben tried to understand how his relatively mild comments to a couple of journalists could have occasioned this Mut and Jeff act. It also occurred to him that the situation he was in did give him a certain power if a minor gesture could call forth such a furious reaction.

In the Spring of 1990 Gribben's "case" (as it was starting to be called) suddenly hemorrhaged into the controversy over E306, which would soon become for a brief moment the most famous English course in the country. The basic composition class at the University (about half of all incoming Freshman have to take it), E306 was taught primarily by graduate students who had previously been able to choose from a variety of texts and approaches. Now Linda Brodkey, new head of the composition program, and her allies in the department proposed to make it a course on "writing about difference." The text they selected was an anthology titled *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study*, whose contents included court decisions in civil rights cases surrounded by miscellaneous prose commentary. The editor of the book was a self described Marxist feminist named Paula Rothenberg whose other work was filled with *apercus* like the following: "The protection of property rights and patriarchal privilege... will not yield without a struggle, and it will be the job of the state under socialism to see that these interests are suppressed and eliminated even if this runs counter to the expressed will of the people..." In *Racism and Sexism*, the most generous remark Rothenberg could make was one distinguishing between "nice people who inadvertently perpetuate racism and sexism and out and out racists...[The former] generally apologize for their behavior and try to change it and the latter do not."

Disturbed by the idea that the sole text in Freshman English would be informed by such a perspective, two professors on the departmental committee considering revisions to E306, James Duban and John Ruscowitz, argued for a different approach. "I was stunned by the textbook," says Ruscowitz, who had taught composition at Texas for 15 years. "The Rothenberg text was not a writing book. It was not even a good sociology book. It would have been a blatant political intrusion into the lives of the students."

The two men asked that teachers of the course at least be allowed to choose from a range of texts, including Rothenberg's. Alternatively, they suggested at least starting with a pilot program to see how the radically remodeled E306 would work before making wholesale changes. Both of these suggestions were peremptorily dismissed by those favoring the new version of the course. "There was utterly no inclination to compromise," says Ruscowitz, who recalls coming away from the meetings with the proponents of the course impressed by their arrogant self confidence and thinking to himself, "Now I understand fascism a little better."

Gribben, too, began to voice criticism of E306 and was soon leading the opposition to it. Identifying himself as a dissident trapped inside a malign structure and feeling that he no longer had anything left to lose, he went all out to make people on campus and off aware of what was happening. Perhaps because of his experience as an old Berkeley radical, over the next few months he proved to be a resourceful opponent. In fact, as John Ruscowitz says, "He outwitted the radicals at every turn."

His strategy was to enlarge the constituency of the controversy from the confines of the English department, where the radicals were bound to win. So he began a publicity campaign, writing about E306 in the powerful campus newspaper and then bombarding all the major newspapers in Texas with information about the

course. (The *Houston Chronicle* eventually called it, "Elitist cant masquerading as tolerance.") He appeared on radio talk shows and television newsmaker programs. When someone from a blue-ribbon alumni group composed of individuals giving at least \$1000 a year to the University wrote him for information about the conflict, Gribben sent back an information packet with a cover letter saying that he believed the study of English at Austin was now dominated by a "highly politicized faction of radical literary theorists" and recommended that the department be put into an administrative "receivership" while its intellectual priorities were sorted out.

The E306 controversy happened to explode at exactly that moment when political correctness was becoming a nationwide concern. It became a metaphor—for those disturbed by new developments, an indication of the politicization of the campus; for those who approved a blow in the fight for "diversity." It was also one of those intramural struggles that tear campuses apart, somewhat like the loyalty oath controversy at Berkeley in the late 50s. There was intense maneuvering. Proponents of the revised course had offered to drop the Rothenberg text (later on they would disingenuously suggest that it had never been central in their plans, although it was clear at the time that it was the course) but insisted on keeping the basic approach by putting together their own packet of readings on race and gender. Gribben and 55 other professors signed a letter of opposition to the course published in the *Daily Texan*. As the rhetoric heated up, a Philosophy professor said they should change the name of the course to Marxism 306; one young female radical in the English department fatuously charged that opponents of the new curriculum were "academic death squads."

The struggle raged over the summer of 1990. Posters attacking Gribben appeared all over the Austin campus. He got wake up calls in the middle of the night ("Good morning, you have just been selected to answer our mystery question...") and hate mail ("You are a Nazi and a racist"). John Ruscowitz was in the mailroom with him one afternoon when he opened one such anonymous letter, evidently from someone in the department. "It was a terribly vicious piece," Ruscowitz remembers. "It sickened me." Nor was the character assassination confined to intramurals. The *Austin American Statesman* received a number of anonymous obscene letters about Gribben.

Fellow English professor James Duban says that what happened to Gribben can only be called a "smear." Duban's own growing doubts about E306—he and fellow critic Ruscowitz had quit the committee considering the changed writing curriculum—had made him a target too. Bothered by a petition charging him and other critics of the course with having "misrepresented" the facts in an "unprofessional manner," he called husband and wife colleagues who were circulating the document. He tried to get them both on the phone at the same time, but the husband was ill and could not come to the extension and so Duban spoke only to the wife, politely but firmly making it clear that he considered their ad hominem attack a libel.

Not long afterward, he discovered that the woman was charging him with "sexual harassment"—not the harassment arising from a salacious remark or obscene innuendo, but the more refined harassment that results from "a senior male in the department using his power against a junior woman," in the prolix definition of the offense formulated by Linda Brodkey, one of the architects of E306. "The charge was utterly ridiculous and politically motivated," Duban says now, "but the pro-306 people saw it as a good hit."

The struggle over E306 took months finally to play itself out. The Deans of Engineering and Biological Science ultimately threatened to withdraw their students from the English department composition program if the course was okayed. The administration, initially supportive of the new version of E306, began to waffle as opposition solidified, on the campus and around the state, and finally, in the fall of 1990, postponed the course changes. English department chairman Joseph Kruppa said he was "sickened" by the outcome. When he charged that the decision was the result of "misrepresentation and misinformation on the part of a few people of bad intentions," there was little doubt whom he was referring to.

Alan Gribben's opponents in the English department who had begun a whispering campaign about him

were now caught in a double bind of their own making: they had said that he was mentally imbalanced to make the claims he had about what he had suffered in the department; but if this was so, then one mentally imbalanced individual had almost singlehandedly defeated them in this apocalyptic referendum on politicizing the English curriculum.

The alliances Alan Gribben had forged with faculty members in other departments during the controversy had broken his isolation and reintroduced him to an academic community. He was still anathema in English but almost a celebrity elsewhere on campus. He knew he could stay at UT; but if so it would be as a notorious figure involved in an ongoing guerrilla campaign, not as a scholar and teacher. Staying would have implications for his wife and children, who had suffered through the ordeal with him, losing friends and playmates along the way. So, he once again looked for a new job throughout the late fall of 1990, when the prospects of a Gulf War had diverted the radicals' attention from him. ("It was great for two reasons," he says. "One because they stopped looking daggers at me and two because they were so morose when all their predictions about body bags didn't come true.") Late in the spring of 1991 he decided to give up his tenured position at UT and take an untenured one at the Montgomery Alabama campus of Auburn University.

This past fall, with Alan Gribben gone, James Duban found that something odd was happening to him. Mild mannered and well liked, at least until E306, Duban had none of the abrasive egotism that Gribben's opponents had retroactively determined to be his chief characteristic. But now, like the unwilling participant in some occult folk ritual, Duban found that Gribben's role as designated victim in the English department had passed to him. And when he noted that this was happening, most of his colleagues said that he was deluded, which was exactly what they had said about Gribben.

Duban had already crossed a Rubicon by eloquently opposing the revised E306. Now he picked up the cudgels again in the next skirmish at UT, which broke out as soon as school resumed in September. At issue was a proposed multicultural requirement which would have forced students to take two three-unit courses before graduating, one in the history of U.S. minority groups and another in non-Western culture. Duban pointed out that the first course excluded Germans, Italians and Jews from the category of minorities that had played a role in U.S. history and said that this was thus tantamount to dusting off the old "Irish need not apply" signs; and the other course, he believed, would make invidious distinctions between non western cultures in deciding which should be taught.

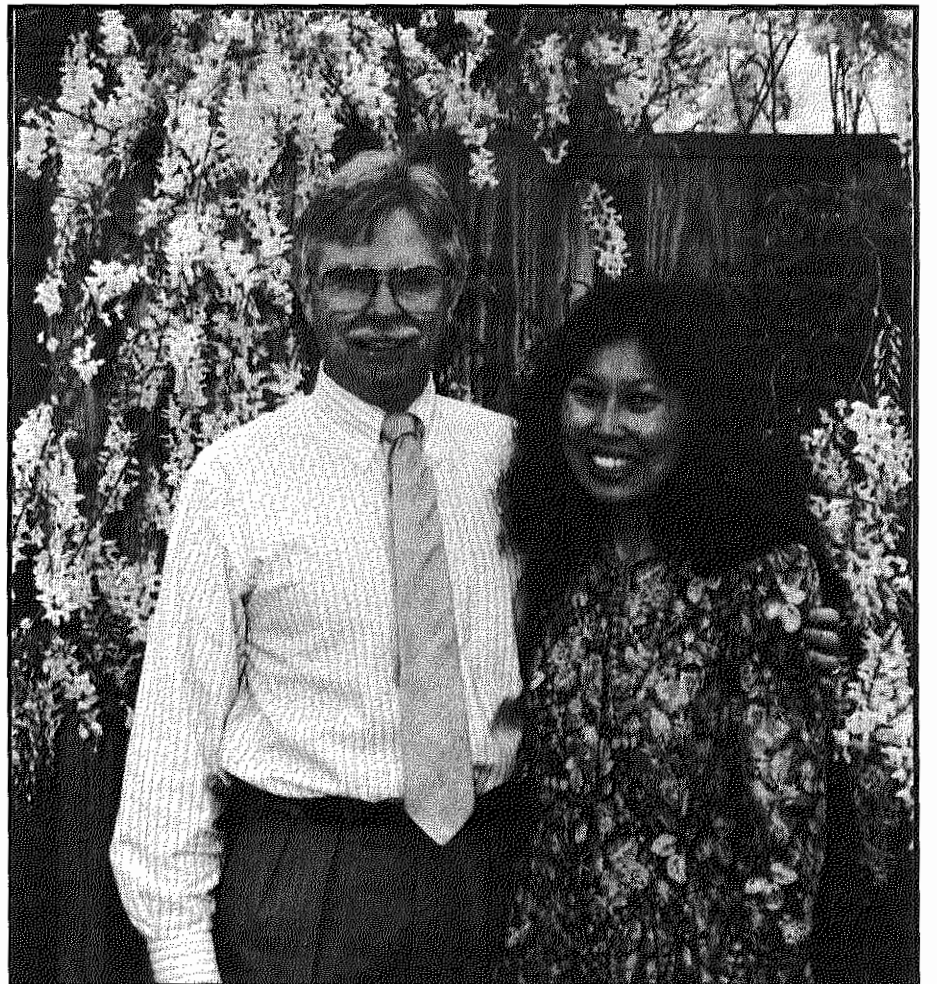
As Gribben before him, Duban was now also stigmatized as a racist, even though he had always been an outspoken advocate of racial justice and his 1983 book had reached conclusions about color symbolism in Herman Melville's work that were, if anything, prematurely politically correct. But the sanctions did not stop at words. The day after Duban made a speech against the multicultural requirement late in September, department chairman Kruppa summarily removed him from his office as Honors Advisor and since then has not given him any committee assignments, making him another of the English department's non-persons.

Alan Gribben closely followed the unfolding of the UT struggle over the multicultural requirement, which was finally defeated on March 3, after months of vexatious discussion in a faculty vote of 759 to 434. (The forces that opposed the requirement, still mobilized by the 306 controversy, won because they managed to force the first mail ballot for the entire UT faculty in 15 years). The rumors of cultural war coming from Austin made him feel happy in his new job. He had finished a short book; he was able to concentrate on teaching for the first time in four years.

The Montgomery campus of Auburn was a commuter school, not a center of research and publication like UT; it was a commuter school of the kind his former colleagues had scorned. Yet he found in his new department a solid commitment to intellectual excellence and a refreshing enthusiasm for teaching undergraduates which he felt had vanished from Austin in the years he had been there. He tried to guard against sour grapes, but had nonetheless begun to feel that the future of higher education lay with the small schools like this where the professors were deeply involved with their students' work rather than with their own academic entrepreneurship.

Gribben hoped that he had put his ordeal behind him, although like it or not he was now nationally recognized for having been a thorn in the side of the commissars of political correctness. But there was still a nagging feeling that his tormentors would reach out a long arm to cause him trouble once again. As an almost talismanic precaution, he carried a copy of the Paula Rothenberg text wherever he went during his first weeks in Montgomery in case he might be suddenly called upon to defend his character and explain why he had become notorious at Texas.

One day not long into the fall semester, Gribben saw an envelope in his department mailbox. Because he had seen so many like it, he knew the moment he opened it that this was an anonymous letter. The letterhead told him it was from one of his new colleagues and his heart sank. It is beginning all over again! he thought to himself.



But then he read the message: "I'm not identifying myself because I don't want to be seen as currying favor, but I think I speak for the rest of the department when I say that we understand what you have gone through and whatever happened in Austin stays there because we see that someone like you would only be involved on the side of principle and academic freedom."

Still shaking, Gribben went out to the parking lot where his wife was waiting for him in the car. As he slumped into the passenger seat, he waved the letter at her and said, "Well, Irene, I think it's finally over. Maybe we did the right thing after all."

