

Gribben, colleagues make English department a battlefield

In his letter of July 9, 1990, Alan Gribben, the lone principled, producing scholar of the tiny nation of the UT English department, pictures himself as the equivalent of a U.S.-funded Contra fighting a Marxist-controlled Third World government.

Beleaguered by a governing body turned hostile, radical and militant, he imagines himself as an academic freedom fighter requesting political aid from a powerful and wealthy government, the Liberal Arts Foundation Council. Gribben's guerrilla army, a "handful" of professorial colleagues in English, must be supported by allies within the University but outside his department; the psychology department, the nearest neighboring country in our freedom fighter's imaginary geography, would control the ideological "reform" of the "out of control" English department.

This picture of Marxist revolution and right-wing counter-insur-

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THE HOWLERS

gency is ludicrous, since traditional scholarship continues to dominate all areas of the English department. The professors committed to reforming the curriculum to include the English literatures of women, people of color and lesbians and gays are the real beleaguered minority.

The real base of power of the Gribben faction is revealed by his switch from the language of counter-insurgency to the language of "receivership" drawn from the world of banking. Gribben identifies himself with bank directors and CEOs and asks for the true governing bodies at the University, the alumni stockholders to whom this secret letter was addressed, to call in the Feds.

When the federal trust takes

control of a failing savings and loan, it splits the assets into two funds, one holding only those assets that they will be able to sell, and another holding the bad loans and junk bond issues. The Federal Reserve investigators from the outside trust decide which are the bad investments, based on the chances of a profitable return. But profit-return scenarios like this reveal the real stakes in the struggle to control pedagogy. Gribben is not fighting for the best possible education of students, but rather for the image of the University as a stable arena for investment.

Gribben suggests that the takeover bank, the psychology department under CEO Donald Foss, divide English in two branches, one for all the profitable assets, English Literature and Language, and the others segregated under a separate holding company, Critical Theory and Cultural Studies. Teaching of "true literature and writing" would fall to the litera-

ture professors, while the theory professors would be removed, thus returning the investment environment to the stability of the status quo.

By creating a new and separate "discipline" Gribben hopes to segregate those who study the literatures of people of color and women among others from the category of literature itself. Yet Gribben, a Mark Twain scholar, has himself benefited from the kinds of connections made by those who take a "cultural studies" approach. If the canon of English literature were to be reduced only to those who write fiction and poetry, then most of Twain, who wrote political satire for the press, would be excised from the curriculum and placed over in journalism. We would we study Hume, a political scientist. The Bible could only be read in Religious Studies, along with Dante and Cotton Mather. Shakespeare, of course, would be a sub-

ject relegated to the drama department. What is left for the category of "literature"?

Disciplinization across the academy has always served to stabilize it by making certain questions impossible and controlling the kinds of information those studies will produce. Discipline relies upon a decreasing complexity enforced by the isolation of the object of study. Object-creation empowers the observer to control the boundaries of the field of knowledge. The observer becomes the expert, whose voice is authorized by the academic system as the only voice. The subject position of the observer remains unexamined; one standardized version of history, literature, life becomes conflated with history, literature, life itself. What Gribben would segregate, in his effort to control and define the field of literary study, is the examination of our subject position in all our relations.

Gribben calls himself "a princi-

pled person oriented toward stability in his family's life and activities," and adds, "Can the same be said of my detractors?" Using the rhetoric of the far-right, which transposes the moral for the political, Gribben claims legitimacy for his subject position, and admits that we are not talking about literature but about power.

Gribben's obsession with stability and control reveals his fear that the entry of new faculty recruited from among the most "radicalized (but prestigious) graduate programs" will displace his authority. Gribben hopes to profit by retaining his job, his academic career and his influence in the department.

Gribben's garbled use of the language of politics and economics and his claim to apolitical, academic objectivity shows he could use a lesson in Critical Theory.

The Howlers are a graduate student activist-research group.

FIRING LINE

English 306 is fair game

Several writers in *The Daily Texan* have recently alleged that opponents to the English 306 change assume that students are manipulable. Nonsense. Our argument is simple: If the course cannot influence students, the changes are pointless, since their purpose is to change attitudes about race and gender. If the course can influence students, its political orientation is a legitimate subject of concern.

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AI a departmental casualty

The recent column by Margot Fitzgerald ("Students, AIs deserve changes in E306," *The Daily Texan*, Wednesday) is very revealing about the situation in the English department generally and the E306 situation in particular. In the column she showed a strong desire based on conscience not to use her position as instructor to "sell" her students on her social and political views. Instead, she sought "support [for] a safe and fair hearing of all perspectives within the classroom." She also describes convincingly the impossible situations the English department placed her in by their failing to provide a syllabus to support a safe and fair hearing of all perspectives. I feel compassion for her in her situation and have respect for her fine intentions. However, I do not assume, as

she appears to assume, that the syllabus being prepared by the English department would provide what she expects. The recent attempt by the Lower Division English Policy Committee to use *Racism and Sexism* by Paula Rothenberg as the sole textbook makes that assumption unwarranted. The syllabus in preparation when that book was canceled was never made public. It is unfortunate, indeed, that the individual graduate student, due to the postponement of a standardized syllabus, shall "fall back, in desperation, upon whatever political, cultural and critical perspectives s/he knows best." If that happens it shall be the fault of the English department. When the patient is sick, don't give him some unknown medicine. It might make him worse.

*Sidney Ellis
Special student*