

IN MEMORIAM

DON GRAHAM

Don Graham, J. Frank Dobie Regents Professor of American and English Literature in the English Department at The University of Texas at Austin, died from a stroke on June 22, 2019. He was born in 1940 on a cotton farm near Lucas in Collin County, Texas. Like much of rural Texas, Collin County had been provided with electricity in the 1930s—just in time for Don’s entry into this world—through the efforts of a young congressman named Lyndon Johnson, so Don’s ordinary skepticism about politicians never applied to LBJ. Later Don’s family moved to McKinney and then to Carrollton, where he attended high school, but Lucas was his place of origin. Describing his early education for a *New York Times* interview in 2018, he identified his “first-through-third-grade teacher, Inez Smithy” as the person who had the greatest influence on his writing:

She heroically taught eight classes in one room of a schoolhouse in Lucas, Texas. This was cotton-farming country, northeast of Dallas, and there was nothing mythic about it. But she managed to give us a vision of a Texas bigger than life. She made history exciting, something to be a part of. Later on, I wrote books about Texas movies, Audie Murphy, a local boy from the next county over, the great King Ranch in South Texas, and “Giant” in far West Texas. It all started in those early days in that little schoolhouse on the backland prairie.

With those early days behind him, Don became the first member of his family to attend college. When an uncle learned that his nephew was now teaching writing, he remarked, “Don always had a fine hand.” Recently, Don told an old friend that his main reason for attending university was to become a college athlete. Lucas, Texas was small—“two stores, three churches, one cotton gin, and one school house,” as Don often said. But next to the school there was a

baseball field, too, essential to the little community. According to a teammate who played ball with Don in Austin's rec league back in the 1980s, "you could tell he grew up with the game.... He had a classic pull hitter's swing and laced a lot of line drives. In the field he took the right path to the ball, watched it into his glove while on the move, and then unwound his lanky frame into an efficient throw." One of his high school teammates recalls that "we called him 'Smoke' to recognize his all-district fast ball," a fact confirmed by his college roommate: "Don acquired the nickname Smoke as a result of his fastball." Maybe in some parallel world, Smoke Graham grew up to be a pitcher rather than a professor. Like good writers, good pitchers rely on craft as much as talent. They hold emotions in check, keep you off balance, and play off your expectations. It is not so hard to imagine young Don Graham standing on a mound with his cap pushed back, a hint of his little sideways smile showing as he rubs the baseball down after a strikeout.

Don Graham did become a professor, however, and a critic who knew how to throw a brushback pitch. He earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in English from North Texas State University (now the University of North Texas) and a Ph.D. in American literature from UT Austin in 1971. The University of Pennsylvania hired him as an assistant professor, and former colleagues there still retain vivid memories of the intoxicating Super Bowl parties he hosted. While at Penn, Don began a lifelong friendship with the late Russ McDonald, also raised in Texas and also first in his family to graduate from college. Russ, who went on to become an internationally renowned Shakespearean, would look up Don when he visited Austin to work in the Harry Ransom Center. Another old friend from his days at Penn, Jason Rosenblatt, would later join the faculty at Georgetown University and become an honored scholar of the Milton Society. Recalling their time together as assistant professors nearly half a century ago, Jason remarks that "Don always spoke his mind in a department that, at the time, did everything it could to suppress candor from

its junior faculty.” His colleagues in UT Austin’s Department of English regularly witnessed the same candor and most of them, to their credit, valued it and him. One thing you could always depend on was that if Don’s name appeared on the ballot for the department’s executive committee, he would be elected.

Professor Rosenblatt and his wife, Zipporah, hosted Don in Washington when he was researching *Cowboys and Cadillacs*, and they recall his “spending every hour that it was open at the Library of Congress.” “He was always a professional who didn’t wait for inspiration,” Jason writes, “but perfected his craft by working hard at it daily.” Jason and Zipporah fondly remember reconnecting with Don in Austin in 2016 and meeting his wife Betsy for the first time: “Don was happier than we had ever seen him. The conversations at meals, including a long dinner at the Four Seasons (we closed the place down), were hilarious and unforgettable. Indeed, remembering them vividly made the news of his death hard to believe.” Jason adds a final observation that, he says, “might be too obvious to mention: when Don chose to leave Penn for UT [in 1976], he was coming home. After a lifetime in the academy, I can’t think of a better fit between the person and the institution than the one between Don and UT.”

During his long career at UT Austin, Don Graham became the pre-eminent critic of Texas literature, film, and popular culture more generally, the author of ten field-making and field transforming books, and the editor of another six, countless academic articles and book chapters, introductions to other people’s books, book reviews, and magazine articles. Always in demand as a speaker, he gave witty and engaging talks all over the state. Don’s first book, *The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Aesthetic Context*, was published by the University of Missouri Press in 1978, but it was his second book, *Cowboys and Cadillacs: How Hollywood Looks at Texas* (Texas Monthly Press, 1983) that established Graham as a critical voice in Texas letters. It was followed

by *Texas: A Literary Portrait* (Corona, 1985), and then by *No Name on the Bullet: A Biography of Audie Murphy* (Viking Penguin, 1989; Penguin, 1990), which was a commercial and critical triumph. Though Don never said as much, the landmark Murphy biography was personal. Audie grew up in the same part of East Texas as Don, and both of them began life as farm boys who knew from an early age the hard labor of chopping cotton. Murphy was about fifteen years older than Don, who was only a toddler when Murphy was performing his battlefield heroics, and had much in common with the men returning from World War II whom Don looked up to as a boy.

After the Murphy biography came a collection of essays: *Giant Country: Essays on Texas* (TCU Press, 1998) and then *Kings of Texas: The 150-year Saga of an American Ranching Empire* (John Wiley & Sons, 2003). The latter won the Carr P. Collins Prize from the Texas Institute of Letters as best nonfiction book of the year. Graham continued to publish on the culture of Texas with *State Fare: An Irreverent Guide to Texas Movies* (TCU Press, 1998) and *State of Minds: Texas Culture & Its Discontents* (University of Texas Press, 2011). He took measure of the Australian literary scene in his next book, *Michael Wilding and the Fiction of Instant Experience: Stories, Novels, and Memoirs, 1963-2012* (Teneo Press, 2013), and in 2018 his long-awaited book on *Giant* appeared: *Giant: Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, James Dean, Edna Ferber, and the Making of a Legendary American Film* (St. Martin's Press, 2018). Larry McMurtry wrote of the book: "Don Graham, long a keen student of Texas literature, has given us a brilliant study of a classic American film."

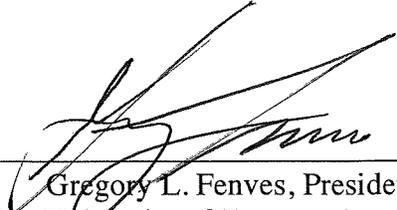
In addition to his ten authored books, Don Graham edited and/or co-edited ten anthologies on topics from Western movies to the work of Frank Norris, including key creative and critical anthologies on *The Texas Literary Tradition* and *Literary Austin*. As a writer at-large for *Texas Monthly*, Don wrote hundreds of articles on authors, artists, film, and books, as well as dozens of

academic articles on Texas literature and culture. Not for nothing did the *Dallas Morning News* call Graham “our premier scholar and critic on Texas literature, films and pop culture.” James Magnuson, the former director of UT Austin’s Michener Center for Writers, where Graham taught for many years, noted: “The students he taught loved him. He worked hard and constantly, and he had extraordinary taste as a reader. He poked great fun at some of the great figures of Texas literature—and then he went and turned into one.”

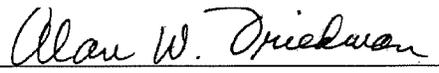
Inheriting J. Frank Dobie’s class on Life and Literature of the Southwest, Don proved himself a beloved and brilliant teacher, winning the Chancellor’s Council Outstanding Teaching Award in 2006 and the Tom Cable Award for Upper Division Teaching in 2011. In 2013, he was awarded the UT system-wide Regents’ Outstanding Teaching Award, and *Alcalde* named him one of the “Top Ten Professors Ever” in 2014. A number of his former students have gone on to become noted literary figures themselves. Jake Silverstein, editor of the *New York Times Magazine* and formerly editor of *Texas Monthly*, had been a student of Graham’s at the Michener Center and believes that Don’s sometimes lacerating critical judgments reflected a lifelong reader’s love of good books rather than an ornery temperament: “he was demanding of Texas literature, and Texas literature is the better for it.” More than a few fine writers took inspiration from Professor’s Graham’s courses, including novelists Dominic Smith and Philipp Meyer. Meyer credits Don as the primary inspiration for his much-praised novel *The Son*: “There’s no question that if I hadn’t met him, my life would look nothing like it does today” (quoted in *Texas Monthly*).

In addition to being a stellar scholar, teacher, critic, and cultural commentator, Don Graham was a great raconteur, a connoisseur of cocktails, a snappy dresser, and a rather good pool player. He is survived by his wife of some thirty years, the inimitable Betsy Berry, his brother Bill, legions of grateful former students, bereaved colleagues, two beloved cats—Tom and Vi—and other

relatives. Various tributes and obituaries have appeared, notably in the *Austin American Statesman*, the *Dallas Morning News*, and *Texas Monthly*.



Gregory L. Fenves, President
The University of Texas at Austin



Alan W. Friedman, Secretary
The General Faculty

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors John Rumrich (Chair), Neville Hoad, and David Wevill.