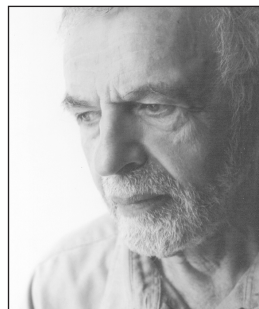


"A Sea of Stories"

A Conversation with 2003 ALAN Award Winners Norma Fox Mazer and Harry Mazer

Since 1974 the ALAN Award has recognized outstanding contributions to adolescent literature by a publisher, author, librarian, scholar, editor, or anyone whose gift to the ALAN community calls out for recognition. For 2003 the ALAN Award co-winners are wife and husband, Norma Fox Mazer and Harry Mazer. Together or individually, the Mazers have published well over 50 noteworthy titles, mostly for young people. Lori Atkins Goodson spoke with the co-winners (who chose to answer separately) by email:



Many young people who have said, "I've never read a book I liked" changed their attitudes about reading when they read their first book by Norma Fox Mazer or Harry Mazer. Why do you think that is?

Norma: I don't know. I'm very glad about it, though. Actually, I think boys respond to Harry's books on one level because he's so in touch with the boy in himself and is able to put that out in a story. Okay, maybe the same can be said of the girl in me.

Harry: I write because I'm excited about something, a feeling or an idea about things that I'm trying to express. I write about troubled characters trying to find their way in a world they barely know. I write survival stories. In my lexicon, what story is not a

survival story? Those are the stories that, once they have engaged the reader, can't easily be put aside.

Your collective well of good stories never seems to go dry. How do you explain that?

Norma: Luck? Work? Genetics? All of the above?

Harry: We live, all of us, in a sea of stories. Stories we're being told. Stories we tell ourselves. Every day - so many moving, touching, god-awful stories. Norma and I toss stories back and forth all the time, at the table, out on the street, in bed at night. Is this one for Norma? For me? For the two of us? We live in those stories. To live without stories, for us, is not to be alive.

Does censorship of YA lit continue to be a problem or is the situation improving?

Norma: Improving? I doubt it. Without being pessimistic, I think there will always be that core of people who long to press us all into their own small, confined world, and there will always be those of us who resist.

Harry: The censors are always out there. I don't know that they will ever go away or even should. It's good to know that there are people who take

books so seriously they want to burn them. Resisting censorship is part of the territory for all book lovers, be they publishers, writers, parents, teachers or librarians. We need to stand our ground. There are more of us than there are of them.

You have written roughly 60 books separately and three or four together. How would you characterize the difference between writing together and writing separately?

Norma: When we're writing together, I can't get as lost in the created world as when I'm alone. The dreaming is done more efficiently, if that's not a completely impossible and oxymoronic idea. So that's a loss. But to balance it, there's the fun of working together, although when we were writing our first book together, we snapped and bickered and disagreed a whole lot, and I was exasperated enough at the end to tell at least half a dozen people, "I will never write a book with that man again!" Ten years later, when our second collaboration appeared, those half dozen remembered exactly what I'd said.

Harry: Writing for me is a very mixed experience. I love the idea of the story. It's there, bubbling in my head. I love the voice of a character, but then language fails me. The words don't flow easily. I resist writing the words. Are they right? Are they good enough? Rub it out, erase. Start again. Language ensnares me. The words flow or they don't flow. I don't write enough. I write too much. I can't believe I'll ever get the whole thing down on paper. I get it done, but it's not easy.

When I write with Norma, little of this happens. The process is different. We talk through the book, the characters, even some of the scenes. Then I write the draft and Norma revises it. The best part is when we sit down together to revise again. Sometimes, as it does when I'm working alone, the words are roiling around in my head, and Norma has to encourage me. A little slap on the back, an elbow, and the dam breaks, and I spit out the words, come what may, and she writes them down. The work gets done without the blocks, the hesitations and doubts. In a word, working alone is hell. Collaboration is a joy.

Past ALAN Award Recipients

1974	Stephen Tchudi & G. Robert Carlsen
1975	Margaret Edwards
1976	Margaret McElderry & M. Jerry Weiss
1977	Marguerite Archer
1978	Mary Sucher
1979	Gerri LaRocque
1980	Dwight Burton
1981	Sheila Schwartz
1982	Robert Cormier
1983	Ken Donelson
1984	Louise Rosenblatt
1985	Sue Ellen Bridgers
1986	Madeleine L'Engle
1987	Katherine Paterson & Allene Pace Nilsen
1988	Ted Hipple
1989	Cynthia Voigt
1990	Richard Peck
1991	Gary Paulsen
1992	Don Gallo
1993	Chris Crutcher
1994	Walter Dean Myers
1995	Robert C. Small, Jr
1996	Bill Morris
1997	Mildred Taylor
1998	S.E. Hinton
1999	Robert Lipsyte
2000	M.E. Kerr
2001	Patty Campbell
2002	Paul Zindel
2003	Norma Fox Mazer; Harry Mazer (co-winners)