



## The Professional Resource Connection

with Richard F. Abrahamson, Terry C. Ley,  
Alleen Pace Nilsen, Ken Donelson, Ben F. Nelms

# Assembly on Literature for Adolescents Loses a Pioneer

*This column is a tribute to a person whose life and career have been foundational professional resources in the field of Adolescent Literature and English Education, Dr. G. Robert Carlsen. Because I enrolled in the University of Iowa in 1968 and graduated for a third time in 1996, and am now a column editor for this journal, I was, so to speak, in the right places at the right times to help organize this memorial column. I took an M.A. seminar from Dr. Carlsen in 1975. The editors of The ALAN Review asked Richard F. Abrahamson to write the anchor piece and invited several of Dr. Carlsen's other doctoral students to contribute additional comments. My thanks to my fellow Iowa alums who contribute below.*

Bill Broz  
University of Northern Iowa  
Ph.D. University of Iowa, 1996

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Dr. G. Robert Carlsen

### An Educator Who Changed Lives

by Richard F. Abrahamson  
University of Houston  
Ph.D. University of Iowa, 1977

Dr. G. Robert Carlsen died on December 13, 2003. Born in Bozeman, Montana, in 1917, Bob received his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota where he did his doctoral work with legendary English educator Dora V. Smith. In 1982 Carlsen retired after twenty-five years as professor of English and education at the University of Iowa.

Bob's scholarly work in the reading interests of young adults and adolescent literature form the underpinnings for much of today's thinking on reading stages, reading interests, individual response to literature, and the important role books for young adults can play in the creation of lifetime readers.

*Books and the Teen-age Reader* (Harper, 1967) melded Carlsen's theories with his real-world experiences teaching young adults. The result was a very popular book read by parents, teachers, and librarians. *Books and the Teen-age Reader* went into three editions and cemented Carlsen's stature in the field of English education.

In his role as English department chair at the University of Iowa high school, Carlsen pioneered one of the first English elective programs. His successful implementation of free reading classes at the school caused such individualized reading programs to pop up throughout Iowa and across the United States.

Carlsen served as president of the National Council of Teachers of English from 1961 to 1962 and was an early supporter in the creation of

the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents. For his work in the profession, Bob won the NCTE Distinguished Service Award and the ALAN Award for outstanding contributions to the field of adolescent literature. But Bob Carlsen did so much more. He changed lives.

I made the trek from the woods of Maine to Iowa City and the University of Iowa because of Bob Carlsen's *Books and the Teen-age*

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**One weekend I stopped at the University of Maine bookstore and happened to pick up a copy of *Books and the Teen-age Reader*. I read it with the excitement of a desperate English teacher who feared he had chosen the wrong profession. In that book someone spoke to me for the first time about adolescents as real people with specific reading interests.**

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*Reader*. A native New Englander, I started teaching high school in the northern woods of Maine armed with an M.A. in English, a thesis on Steinbeck, and the certain knowledge that high school seniors would sign up in droves for my senior seminar on Chaucer. The first book

I was told to teach to sophomores was Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Imagine my sense of panic when I went to the local pharmacy (there was no bookstore) to try to buy a copy of the Monarch or Cliff's Notes for Conrad's book and found out they didn't sell them. For several weeks I stumbled through teaching that book. The students didn't like it, and neither did I. I was too new a teacher to know that this was the wrong book for the wrong students at the wrong time. I muddled through with more confidence than my students because left for me in the file drawer of my desk was the one-hundred-item multiple-choice test on Conrad's novel published by a company in Iowa. Those first few weeks of teaching I bluffed my students, and they bluffed me.

One weekend I stopped at the University of Maine bookstore and happened to pick up a copy of *Books and the Teen-age Reader*. I read it with the excitement of a desperate English teacher who feared he had chosen the wrong profession. In that book someone spoke to me for the first time about adolescents as real people with specific reading interests. These students weren't just empty vessels to be filled. Here was information for me about Havighurst and developmental tasks, subliterate, and adolescent literature. I ordered some young adult novels from one of the teen book clubs, put Conrad and his friends on the shelf, and started teaching with books the class agreed on. It was exciting. Students perked up, read more, and discussed more; I knew I had chosen the right profession.

My B.A. in English from the

College of William and Mary and my M.A. in English from the University of Maine hadn't taught me anything about teaching English to adolescents. I just needed to know more. After a couple of telephone calls to Iowa, I was enrolled in Bob Carlsen's correspondence course on adolescent literature. I was hooked from the first assignment of writing my reading autobiography to submitting the fifty book cards. Toward the end of the course Bob wrote something on one of my papers asking if I'd ever thought about a doctorate. Three months later my wife and I rolled into Iowa City in our Volkswagen Beetle packed with everything we owned. It is fair to say, I went to Iowa because of Bob, *Books and the Teen-age Reader*, and adolescent literature. Bob Carlsen did for me what Dora V. Smith did for him: He was my mentor and my inspiration. He changed my life.

In the end, it seems only right that I should give Bob the last word. In the final professional article he wrote, Bob summed up his fifty years of teaching this way.

I have been fairly consistent in my point of view throughout my fifty years in teaching. I always favored the teenage book over the literary canon, speech over writing, expression over grammar, intensive exploration over close reading, process over product, and what literature does over how it is constructed. One summer, it must have been about 1950, while I was teaching a course at the University of Colorado, a New England teacher in my class said, 'You just can't be right or we would have heard about it in Massachusetts.' Still, I have held the faith in my beliefs about teaching English although sometimes, just sometimes, I speculate whether New Englanders have yet heard the message.

“Conclusions from Fifty Years of Teaching English,” in *Literature Is: Collected Essays* by G. Robert Carlsen, edited by Anne Sherrill and Terry C. Ley, Sabre Printers, Johnson City, TN, 1994, p. 272)

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## The Teaching Goes On

by Terry C. Ley  
Auburn University, Emeritus  
Ph.D. University of Iowa, 1974

I recently bought a copy of Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays with Morrie* to give to Josh, a college-aged friend, for Christmas. At home, I reread portions of the book before wrapping it. Reflecting on how Morrie Schwartz, Mitch’s college philosophy professor twenty years earlier, affected Mitch’s adult perspective on life through the series of meetings that they had just before Morrie’s death, I thought about my own mentors. Those who have shaped my life by detecting my potential as a teacher and challenging me to become the best teacher I could become are a group very dear to me! Prominent among those mentors is Bob Carlsen.

Dr. Carlsen was my advisor and major professor for my master’s and doctoral work in English Education at the University of Iowa. While working under his guidance to redesign English language arts curricula for Cedar Rapids (Iowa) secondary schools, where I taught, I admired his leadership style, how he led diverse and sometimes recalcitrant teachers through negotiations that resulted in innovative curricula of which we could be proud. Watching him operate successfully on my home turf, with teachers I knew, kindled

my desire to become a teacher educator, specifically, an English teacher educator. On campus, watching Carlsen function as a professor, researcher, advisor, and national leader in our field helped me to shape my perception of what I might do as a professor of English education.

When I began my graduate work with him, Dr. Carlsen helped me to assess my academic and professional strengths and to fill gaps of knowledge and practice that I wanted to fill. The relationship between doctoral student and major professor generally becomes a very close one, especially throughout the dissertation process. Doctoral students pray that their major professors will be helpful and benevolent. Surely I did, and Dr. Carlsen was the ideal person to help me deal with my initial reservations about myself as researcher. We explored research topics together, settling on one that intrigued both of us; after I gathered my data, we solved problems about data analysis together; he read and responded kindly to several drafts of each chapter. With his help, I gained confidence in myself as a researcher, a professional role that I knew I must play if I wished to pursue a career in teacher education. Products of Dr. Carlsen’s scholarship were both abundant and influential. Concepts that he taught me, especially about integrative language arts curricula, young adult literature, and directed individualized reading (a precursor to Sustained Silent Reading and Nancie Atwell’s reading workshops) became keystones of my own teaching and scholarship, ideas upon which I built my own career.

At the end of his account, Albom wrote, “Have you ever really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? If you are lucky enough to find your way to such teachers, you will always find your way back. The teaching goes on.” Effective mentors also inspire their protégées to move beyond their mentors’ circles and, in doing so, to affect the future in profound ways.

Through his students and, now, their students as well, Bob Carlsen’s teaching will continue.

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## The Extra Mile

by Alleen Pace Nilsen  
Arizona State University  
Ph.D. University of Iowa, 1973

Lucky stars were shining on me in 1971 when I applied for graduate admission to the University of Iowa. My husband had finished his Ph.D. at the University of Michigan and had taken his first “real” job at UNI in Cedar Falls. We always said it would be “my turn,” when Don finished, but now we were going to a school located more than ninety miles from the nearest doctoral program, plus we had three young children (one a diabetic) to worry about. The whole thing looked impossible, but I decided to apply anyway. I knew nothing about Bob, nor about adolescent literature, although I had been teaching children’s literature as a faculty associate at Eastern Michigan in Ypsilanti. When I was deciding whether or not to apply, I remember thinking that if I were one of

Richard Nixon's "White House" daughters, someone would figure out how I could do this. That someone turned out to be Bob Carlsen. He let me work as a grad assistant while still living in Cedar Falls, and before I ever took a "live" class at the University of Iowa, I took adolescent literature from Bob via correspondence. This was when I learned how hard people in Iowa work and that I, too, could write more than a page a day. But no matter how fast or how much I wrote, Bob would get it back to me within a couple of days. Sometimes he wrote more than I did, and for years I cherished the lesson on which he had casually noted, "Someday I think you will write a book on adolescent literature." Whenever I find myself frustrated by the expectations of my own doctoral students or the need for more work on their dissertations, I think back to Bob and Ruth and remember how they picked me up at the airport and let me stay at their house when I flew in from Arizona to defend my dissertation. This kindness was only one more indication of their unselfishness and their willingness to go the extra mile for those of us fortunate enough to have been his students.

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## Opening Career Doors

by Ken Donelson  
Arizona State University, Emeritus  
Ph.D. University of Iowa, 1963

My first encounter with Bob Carlsen was hardly auspicious. He had been invited by someone important—so I gathered—to talk

to us English teachers at Thomas Jefferson High School in Cedar Rapids and to help us improve our teaching. Since the English faculty was deservedly proud of our reputation, locally and otherwise, and since Thoreau had taught me to doubt anyone who deliberately came to do me good, Bob faced a cynical and slightly hostile audience of me—and several of my friends.

My second encounter took place a few months later. My school required that all its teachers pile up a set number of university hours after we had taught five years, and it was my turn. Since Bob was teaching an adolescent literature course, I bet my closest friend on our faculty that I could get an "A" in his course. I got the grades, but I got much more. He challenged me, I learned, and I became a better teacher, all to my amazement.

By the end of the second week that summer, I had become a Carlsen convert. Equally surprising, we planned when I was taking time off for my doctoral work, we decided what courses I would take, we worked out what my dissertation was going to be, and we deviated little from all these grand plans in the years that followed. How Bob managed all this still puzzles me, but he brought me into a life that, for 37 years, has given me professional satisfaction and personal joy, and for that I am eternally grateful to Bob Carlsen.

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## Memories of G. Robert Carlsen

by Ben F. Nelms

University of Florida  
Ph.D. University of Iowa, 1966

When I first presented myself to Bob Carlsen, I had taught Algebra II and English IV. As a college instructor, I had taught freshman composition and the British Literature survey, creative writing, and remedial writing (a la Ken Macrorie). I thought I was an experienced and competent teacher. I didn't know from nothin'. Four years at University High in Iowa City remade me as a teacher and changed me as a person.

Bob took me under his professional guardianship early on, before he had any clear idea who I was. I had been accepted into a doctoral program at Iowa as well as four or five other universities. But Iowa was the only one where I had received no financial award (because, I was later to learn, they had misfiled my GRE scores under Helms instead of Nelms.)

So I had accepted an appointment elsewhere. But somehow it just didn't seem right. I couldn't get Iowa and G. Robert Carlsen out of my mind. The *English Journal* in February of 1963 led off with his presidential address, "The Way of the Spirit and the Way of the Mind." It had spoken to my spirit, to my mind, and to my heart. I could not forget it. Finally, early one Saturday morning, while I was driving somewhere in Abilene, Texas, I decided I just couldn't give up that easily. It was pouring down rain, but I stopped the car and jumped into a telephone booth, getting Carlsen's home phone number from information in Iowa City. He answered and was gracious, to someone he had never



heard of, even early on a Saturday morning. I can't imagine that I had such chutzpa, and I still am in wonder that he responded with such grace. I explained my situation and told him a little bit about myself. "Well, yes," he said, "I think we will be able to find you a place as a part-time teacher in the University School." He made the offer on the phone; I accepted on the phone. What a risk he was taking. I hung up, and the rain stopped.

How well I remember the first day in his adolescent literature class. We met in the library of University High. We checked out books all summer from that library, from the Curriculum Library in East Hall, and from the Iowa City public library. I began my collection of adolescent novels, mostly Bantam books to share with my students, as I remember.

Bob's first "lecture," if you could ever call one of his talks a lecture, began with one of those apt analogies that characterized his professional thinking. He was NCTE president, a university professor, and a frequent contributor to *EJ*, but he began by saying,

When my daughter was about fifteen, she came home one evening and precipitated a family crisis. She had been asked to her first formal dance. After the excitement of the invitation had worn off, we got to the crux of the matter: "I haven't got a thing to wear."

Her little-girlish Sunday school dresses, of course, would not do. Neither would one of her mother's formals. He told the story with gusto, humor, and detail. Finally, they had given in and bought her "yards and yards of pink nylon net gathered at the waist," a frock that

would have looked ludicrous on her mother or her little sister. He concluded, "For everything there is a season, and a time for everything under heaven." The same is true, he concluded, of teenagers' reading: neither children's books nor sophisticated adult fare would suit them.

The analogy eventually made its way into a speech to the American Library Association, later published as a widely read and cited article in *Top of the News* ("For Everything There Is a Season," Jan. 1965, 41.2: 103-110).

Bob's first assignment in that adolescent literature class was for us to write our own reading autobiography. Regrettably, I did not keep a copy of my response. When he and Anne Sherrill published their scholarly analysis of years and years worth of those autobiographies in *Voices of Readers* (NCTE, 1988), I kept scanning the book to see if I might recognize anything I had said. I found quotations in every chapter, on almost every page, that could have been me. He knew me before he knew me, before I knew myself, which was the point, of course. The growth of readers through adolescence tends to follow a pattern.

What a guide and mentor Bob Carlsen became for me. Within two or three years, he had me teaching that same adolescent literature class one summer in that same University High library. He had me making speeches at NCTE and writing my first *EJ* article about my eighth-grade readers. Shy as I was, at my first NCTE convention he made sure I talked with Dora V. Smith, Wilbur Hatfield, and Lou LaBrant, his professional Big Three.

He fostered and encouraged my interest in poetry for adolescents, which has never waned. He let me review books for him and help with booklists for the first edition of *Books and the Teen-age Reader*. For the next twenty years or so, he kept springing new books and authors on me every time we talked. I still have the letter he wrote me on March 4, 1995, comparing his experience upon leaving the presidency of NCTE with my lethargy upon giving up the *EJ* editorship: "You are everything, and then nothing. No longer do you have mail arriving in batches every day. It is almost like having the catalogues quitting the week after Christmas." Once again Bob was there with an apt analogy. After all, for everything there is a season, and a time for everything. Christmas has come and gone again.

How much I will miss him.

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G. Robert Carlsen, 1917-2003

**Bill Broz** is Assistant Professor of English in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Northern Iowa. His recent publications include *Teaching Writing Teachers of High School and First-Year Composition*, edited with Robert Tremmel, Heinemann, 2002, and articles on grammar and censorship in *Voices from the Middle and the Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. He was the 2002 recipient of NCTE's Edwin M. Hopkins Award for his 2001 English Journal article, "Hope and Irony: Annie on My Mind." He can be reached most at bill.broz@uni.edu or 102 Baker Hall, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls IA, 50614-0502.