

Pushing Good Books:

Alleen Pace Nilsen, Winner of the 2006 Hipple Award

As Alleen Nilsen pushes her heavily laden book cart down the halls of the Language and Literature Building on her way to class at Arizona State University, she is often lovingly teased about a resemblance to the librarian in the *Shawshank Redemption* film. “That’s not such a bad image to have,” Alleen laughs. And truth be told, seldom do her fellow passengers on the elevator fail to skim the colorful and intriguing covers and ask about this book or that book, often even asking to borrow one. Quick with a two-minute summary/review, Alleen most often says “Sure. Just bring it back to LL 215 when you’re finished,” unless they are asking for the newest Harry Potter book or for one of Stephenie Myer’s vampire stories, books which could fly off the English education bookshelves before Alleen could show them to her students.

“Guardian of Young Adult Literature” might be a good title for Alleen as someone who has served the genre well for many years. Like the late Dr. Hipple, for whom the ALAN Service Award is named, she was one of the founders of ALAN and has been a constant nurturer to the organization from its inception. On her way from Arizona to the NCTE Convention in Philadelphia in 1973, Alleen stopped off at the University of Iowa just long enough



to defend her Ph.D. dissertation, which was on the subject of sexist language in school materials.

The newly graduated Dr. Nilsen then proceeded east to the NCTE meeting in Philadelphia 34 years ago, mainly to work with the Women’s Committee, but she happened to see a handmade sign inviting anyone inter-

ested in adolescent literature to attend an organizational meeting. She went to the meeting and, as Robert Frost said, “and that has made all the difference.” Only a dozen or so people attended that very first meeting, and there might never have been an Assembly on Literature for Adolescents since the rules for forming NCTE Assemblies required twenty members.

Alleen went to work. She signed up her new friend, fellow University of Iowa graduate and Arizona State University professor, Ken Donelson, and her old

friend and University of Iowa professor, Bob Carlsen, and paid their two-dollar membership fees. Soon she was out in the hallway, canvassing for members and lending a dollar here or there to reach the necessary 20 members. Because of such generosity, she was appointed to be the treasurer. By the next NCTE meeting held in New Orleans in 1974, there were enough members that Alleen was

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afraid she would get the money confused, and so she asked if she could do the newsletter instead. The group was thrilled to have a volunteer, and she immediately went home and asked Ken if he would be the co-editor so that they could use Arizona State University's bulk-rate postage permit.

Ken also saw the potential for great things for young adult literature, and between 1974 and 1978, they developed the *ALAN Newsletter*. A major contributor to ALAN's growth

at the time may have been that to use bulk-rate postage, a minimum of 200 copies had to be mailed. Once someone's name was on the list, they never took them off. Based on their work as ALAN co-editors, Ken and Alleen applied to be co-editors of the *English Journal*. When they got this job, they turned the newsletter over to Guy Ellis at the University of Georgia.

Inspired by the success of these two partnerships, Dr. Donelson proposed the duo write a scholarly book on young adult literature. He went to Scott-Foresman publishers, who were already well known for their

textbooks in children's literature, and *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, currently the bestselling textbook on young adult literature, was born. *LFTYA* was the first comprehensive textbook used in English Departments, Colleges of Education, and Schools of Library Science. The first edition came out in 1980 and cost \$10.95, about one-tenth of its present price. *LFTYA* will soon be in its eighth edition and has been used at colleges in every state in the union, as well as in England, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.

Alleen's contributions to ALAN and to the field of young adult literature have continued these 34 years. She was president of ALAN in 1978 and won the

ALAN Award in 1987. She was also recognized by the International Reading for lifetime contributions to reading and children with the Arbuthnot Award in 2005. Alleen has been a regular presenter at the ALAN Workshop, sometimes alone, sometimes with her husband, Don, and sometimes with ASU students. Dr. Nilsen recently authored a book on one of the most popular and most loved authors of young adult fiction, Joan Bauer, *Joan Bauer: Teen Reads, Student Companions to Young Adult* (Greenwood, 2007), but her most original contribution to YA studies may be an even more recent book, *Names and Naming in Young Adult Literature* (Scarecrow, 2007), coauthored with her husband, Don, Professor of Linguistics and also in the English Department at ASU. *Names* is the latest in Scarecrow Press's Studies in Young Adult Literature Series, edited by Patty Campbell. It illustrates how skilled writers use names for more than identification. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of naming ranging from having fun (M. E. Kerr, Gary Paulsen, Louis Sachar, and Polly Horvath) to establishing imagined settings (Yann Martel, Orson Scott Card, and Ursula K. Le Guin), and from building a dual audience (Daniel Handler and the Lemony Snicket books) to establishing tone and mode (Robert Cormier and Francesca Lia Block). What Alleen most wanted to establish in the book is that the best YA authors create their books with consummate skill and care.

This reflects Alleen's belief that the field of young adult literature is now so rich with both authors and scholars, that our next step should be to focus on establishing criteria for measuring quality and for working to advertise and promote the books that teachers can use to help students advance in their development of literary appreciation. She laughs at herself for sometimes being viewed as a "kiddie lit groupie," i.e. a cheerleader, rather than a "respected scholar," i.e., a critic. But all in all, she feels fortunate to be working and teaching in a field where it is possible to know authors who are *alive* in more than one sense of the word. She also loves working in a field that is so enjoyable that even when she's tired she can "Keep on Reading!"

Alleen Nilsen is very much loved by her students, undergraduate and graduate alike. In the state of Arizona, she and her husband, Don, recently received The Arizona English Teachers' Association Distinguished Service Award, and as a Ph.D. advisor in

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ASU's English Education program, she is always willing to read student articles and make suggestions. In the acknowledgements to his dissertation, recent ASU doctoral graduate Bryan Gillis, wrote: "I would not be a published author if it were not for the constant encouragement of Dr. Alleen Pace Nilsen. She is always available when I need advice on writing an article and will never let me submit my work until it exceeds even my own expectations . . . One of my goals . . . has to be to make Dr. Nilsen proud of my contributions to the ASU English education program." Alleen's former students now hold tenured and

tenure-track positions in institutions of higher learning including Arizona State University West, University of Louisiana at Monroe, University of Northern Colorado, Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, and Kennesaw State University in Georgia.

*Thanks to ASU doctoral student **Lisa Arter** for gathering information for this piece. Ms. Arter is a doctoral student and faculty associate in English Education at Arizona State University. Ms. Arter supervises student teachers and works in the ASU Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence.*