

2006 ALAN Award Winners:

Virginia Monseau and Marc Aronson

J Jim Blasingame had the opportunity to visit with both 2006 ALAN Award winners by email. Here, those interviews give us insights into the philosophies and motivations behind two careers that have impacted our thinking and our profession.

Virginia Monseau

JB: You have made so very many contributions to English education (and so, also, to young people, teachers, schools, authors, librarians and parents). You were the editor of *English Journal*, president of ALAN, and editor or author of so many important books, such as *Missing Chapters: Ten Pioneering Women in NCTE and English Education*, *Reading Their World*, *Responding to Young Adult Literature*, *A Curriculum of Peace: Selected Essays from English Journal*, *Presenting Ouida Sebestyen*, and *A Complete Guide to Young Adult Literature: Over 1000 Critiques and Synopsis from the ALAN Review*. Which of these many contributions did you find especially rewarding?

VM: Wow, that's a difficult question, Jim. Each one of those projects has been special to me in a different way, so if you'll bear with me, I'll address each one briefly. *Missing Chapters* was my first "big" contribution to the field, and coediting the book with my friend Jeanne Gerlach was a wonderful adventure

in collaborative writing. As early members of NCTE's Women's Committee (as it was called then), we wrote together at the sentence level, meeting at each other's homes, enjoying/struggling with the pleasures and pains of writing and editing. It was truly a bonding experience. *Reading Their*

World, another collaborative effort, gave me a chance to publish a book with my longtime colleague and friend, Gary Salvner, whose teaching I have always admired.

Presenting Ouida Sebestyen was my first solo effort, and the joy of traveling to Colorado and spending time with Ouida Sebestyen is one of my fondest memories. I interviewed her as we walked among the flora and fauna of the foothills near Boulder, and we rode there in an old Volkswagen bus driven by her son Corbin. What an experience!

Doing the research for and writing of *Responding to Young Adult Literature* gave me a chance to go back to my dissertation roots by returning to the ninth-grade classroom and working with students and teachers there. It also allowed me to draw on my experience with an adult YA literature book club in which I participated with some of my Youngstown State University colleagues and local high school teachers. *A Curriculum of Peace* was a labor of love, giving me the opportunity to share with teachers the many fine articles on teaching for peace that had been published over the years in the *English Journal*.



Becoming president of ALAN, of course, was a dream come true. I remember sitting in the audience at the ALAN Workshops and watching with awe as former presidents so effortlessly (it seemed) presided over the proceedings. I never dreamed then that I would some day be one of them.

Finally, I must say that becoming editor of the *English Journal* was the highlight of my career—the most challenging and rewarding professional experience of my life! Again, I had been so much in awe of previous *EJ* editors that I never could even countenance having that coveted position. I feel so fortunate to have had the opportunity. It really did change my life.

JB: If you were to characterize the evolution of ALAN over the years, how would you do so?

VM: I'm so proud of the way ALAN has evolved from a tiny organization with a mimeographed newsletter to the polished, influential force it has become today. I believe that the publication of such books as S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* helped ALAN to be taken seriously as a viable professional organization with important things to say about literature for young people—views that were not being voiced by any other organization at the time. And ALAN is *still* the only professional organization devoted exclusively to young adult literature, its teaching, and its criticism. Seeing the attendance at the ALAN Workshop each year is evidence of how much teachers need and value this wonderful organization.

JB: What are your strongest memories of ALAN and the ALAN Workshop? What humorous moments and what emotionally moving moments stand out in your memory?

VM: My strongest memories involve listening to authors like Robert Cormier, Will Hobbs, and Chris Crutcher speak—especially in the early years. I remember sitting behind Will Hobbs at a workshop in Seattle, when Betty Poe was president, and not knowing who he was until he got up and took the stage to speak. I immediately went out and bought two of his books—and I've been buying them ever since. And Bob Cormier—the first time he autographed a book for me, I kept reading the

inscription over and over on the plane ride home. Little did I know then that he would later become a valued friend.

JB: When you think of young adult literature, where it has been and where it is now, what work do you see as needed for the future? What are your hopes for the genre and/or for ALAN?

VM: One of the criticisms of YA literature over the years has been that it lacks a strong “critical base,” that teachers and YA scholars focus almost exclusively on the pedagogical and sociological value of the books rather than examining them critically as pieces of literature. I know that's not completely true—there are plenty of thoughtful, insightful publications that delve deeply into the literature and its place in the literary world—but I would like to see more of that, both in the journals and at the ALAN Workshop. I would also like to see more YA authors take risks with the literature—break the mold, so to speak. I think more and more authors are doing that these days, and I see that as a positive force for the genre.

JB: As are all your books, *Teaching the Selected Works of Robert Cormier*, is a valuable resource. What can you tell us about the writing of that book and/or your relationship with Robert Cormier?

VM: Oh, this is one of my favorite topics. I have been an admirer of Robert Cormier's work since I first read *The Chocolate War* and *I Am the Cheese* as a high school teacher in the late '70s. I think I had been building up to writing a book like *Teaching the Selected Works of Robert Cormier* for many years. I was devastated by his untimely death, and I wanted somehow to help keep his work alive for teachers and students. As I mention in my introduction to the book, the idea came to fruition when I was teaching a graduate class I called “A Little Touch of Cormier in the Night.” So many of the teachers in the class expressed a need for a rationale to bring to their school districts and a desire for ideas on how to approach the books with their students. As we well know, Cormier's books have generated much controversy over the years, and I realized that there were probably many more teachers out there who wished to read his books

with their students but were fearful of censorship attempts. I really wish I could have addressed all of his works in my book, but that would have been quite a tome, so I came up with the idea of addressing just his later works, which perhaps some teachers are not as familiar with. Then I thought how great it would be to publish a series of these short books on teaching the works of various YA authors, which I proposed to Heinemann. They loved the idea, and here we are. I must say, too, how touched I was to receive a letter from Connie Cormier, Robert Cormier's wife, complimenting the book and thanking me for writing it.

JB: Youngstown State University has been such an important institution in the growth of the genre of young adult literature and its increasing presence in schools and libraries. What has it been like working there?

VM: I loved working at Youngstown State. Not only did it give me the opportunity to do English education work with my colleagues Gary Salvner and Hugh McCracken, it also gave me the chance to teach graduate and undergraduate classes in young adult literature. In addition, I did many summer workshops and institutes with area teachers, introducing them to various YA books and authors. YSU's English Department was a wonderful place to be for an English educator. All disciplines within English are valued there—English ed., professional writing, journalism, composition, and literature. We all worked with and learned from each other. In fact, even though I “retired” in 2005, I'm back teaching during the fall semester this year. The classroom still has a strong pull for me.

JB: What does winning the ALAN Award mean to you?

VM: This is another honor that I never dreamed I'd receive. All those years at the ALAN Breakfast, watching that impressive parade of honorees, I never thought it would be me joining them. When David Gill called to tell me I had been selected, I was speechless for several seconds. When it turned out that I couldn't attend to accept the award in person, I was devastated. My one chance to thank ALAN for all it had given me over the years was lost. I couldn't help but shed some tears. That

beautiful award occupies a place of honor in my living room.

JB: If you could pretend for a moment that accepting the ALAN Award is like accepting an Oscar from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and list all the people whom you would like to thank, who might be on that list?

VM: Oh, my! If I do a list, I'm afraid I'll forget someone important. But I'll try. First, I must thank my husband, Paul, who has encouraged me from the beginning to pursue my goals and interests. He changed many a diaper and gave many a bath to our two little daughters, while I went to classes, wrote papers, and studied for tests—and he never once complained. He still continues to support me in everything I do. I would also thank Gary Salvner, who encouraged me to pursue a Ph.D. in the English Education Program at the University of Michigan, the program from which he graduated. And there are several people who have passed away to whom I owe a debt of gratitude: Carol Gay, my YA literature professor during my master's work, who encouraged me to pursue the genre as a field of study when very few doctoral students were doing so; Stephen Dunning, my program chair at Michigan, for agreeing to let me do a dissertation in a field of study that no student at the University of Michigan had ever approached; and Ted Hipple, who somehow saw potential in me during my early ALAN years and encouraged me to run for the ALAN Board of Directors. Bob Small also deserves my thanks, as it was he who first suggested that I run for ALAN president. And there are many others I could thank if we had the space here, but I don't want to go on and on.

JB: What are you up to these days and what projects are on your horizon?

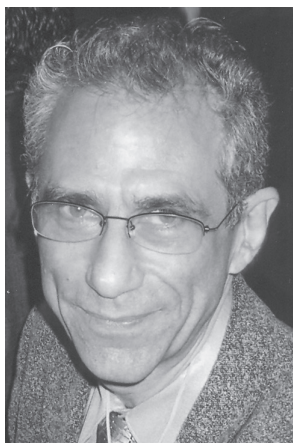
VM: I'm working as the series editor for Heinemann's Young Adult Literature in the Classroom Series, as I mentioned earlier, and I really enjoy that work. Along with Chris Crowe's *Teaching the Selected Works of Mildred Taylor*, which was published along with my Cormier book, we are releasing this fall *Teaching the Selected Works of Katherine Paterson*, by Lois Stover, and *Teaching the Selected*

Works of Walter Dean Myers, by Connie Zitlow. These will be followed by books on Chris Crutcher and Gary Paulsen in the near future.

I'm also working on promoting young adult literature in the area where I live in Central Florida. I hope to be doing a book signing at the local Barnes and Noble after the first of the year, where I can promote the books in the Heinemann series, as well as the works by the authors we're featuring.

Marc Aronson

JB: What are your views on world citizenship? In what ways can we be preparing our young people to make a better world?



Marc: When I was a kid, world citizenship was a choice—we took our orange UNICEF box with us when we went trick or treating; I joined the model UN in high school (we were Mongolia one year, not exactly a highly sought-after country). Today, world citizenship is not an option; it is a fact. American high school

kids are competing with kids in other countries for future jobs, and they are affected by the politics, culture, ideas of other lands—whether directly in the music, clothing, or causes they favor, or indirectly through the games and products they buy. Teenagers in Finland invented text messaging, which is why American teenagers can do it.

The first step is just to recognize the obvious: we are all global citizens. Once we do that, we can look at how, for example, we teach history, or read fiction; do we show kids the same connections in the past that they are experiencing today?

JB: You continue to make school visits even though your success as an author has made that an optional activity. Why do you still get out there and talk with young people?

Marc: Two reasons: I enjoy meeting kids—they ask tough questions, and they are, or can be, very responsive. But also, since I am not a teacher and my boys are quite young, I do not have a great deal of contact with my readers. Going out and meeting them helps me to envision them. I also like sending out early drafts of my books to teenagers—to learn from them what they are or are not finding interesting.

JB: Your regular column on nonfiction for young readers, “Consider the Source,” in *School Library Journal* is one of our favorites. What is it like coming up with something new each month?

Marc: Thanks, glad you like it. It is great fun to have a soapbox, and I have never had trouble thinking of things to say. But now I also have a blog on the *School Library Journal* site called “Nonfiction Matters.” I am a bit worried that I’ll use up my column ideas in the blog. We’ll see.

JB: What did winning the 2006 ALAN Award mean to you?

Marc: It was a thrill, and for a special reason. I started out working in books for younger readers in the late '80s. By the '90s people often said, “YA is dead.” I never believed that, just as I always thought there should be an award for books too old for the Newbery Medal, and that teenagers should be invited to BBYA (American Library Association’s Best Books for Young Adults) meetings. It has been so gratifying to see YA flourish—the ALAN Award felt like someone patting me on the head and saying, “Yup, we’ve been through the hard times together, now let’s look back and celebrate together.”

JB: What is the value of nonfiction, especially historical or sociological, in young adult literature?

Marc: I don’t think there is just one value—there can be many. Nonfiction should challenge you, invite

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you, to think. Teenagers, more than people at any other age, have epiphanies, moments when a truth (positive or negative) can strike them with life-shaping power. Nonfiction can provide those moments. But nonfiction is also a form of narrative, a way of organizing thought and telling a story. In that way, it can be a model not only for a teenager's school work but also for the kind of writing, and thinking, he or she will have to do in college, and as an adult. Thinking specifically in terms of history, social studies, or sociology, nonfiction can introduce teenagers to people, to events, to ways of thinking they did not know.

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I often hear people say that kids won't care about that. Perhaps. But I think there is a kind of adult miserliness behind that seeming bow to teenage interests. We are hoarding the past, hoarding our knowledge, we are refusing to share what we know with teenagers. History books for teenagers should be, can be, an act of generosity—we who have a sense of the past feel teenagers

are important enough to be given that knowledge. Like elders in some native community, we are inducting young people into a sense of their past, their place in the world. Refusing to do that under the cover of teenagers' busy and preoccupied lives is silly. Of course, teenagers are self-involved, that is what teenage is. Our job is to find a way to break into that world and bring wider knowledge, bring learning, so a teenager can grow.

Finally, not every teenager prefers fiction. Shaping thoughtful history books with teenagers in mind is saying that a teenager need not only love novels to be a reader. Why should fiction readers have all the fun? Every kind of teenager deserves a good book: the one who wants to read about teenage life, and the one who has no interest in that, and wants to know about battles, or presidents, or scientists.

JB: What might be people be surprised to know about you?

Marc: I love sports. This Father's Day my wife and older son planned to whisk me off to a chamber music concert being held in a beautiful part of central park. I am a classical music fan and would have enjoyed that. But I had bought an adjustable basketball hoop for my boys (who were 6 and 2 at the time) and me. It took my wife and me (and a helpful neighbor) all day to figure out the instructions and assemble it. We missed the concert, but I was thrilled. I grew up in New York playing ball on public courts, and I had never had a hoop of my own. Seeing that hoop in our driveway made me very, very happy. Someday I'll tell you the story about how Bruce Brooks beat me playing horse—and to whet your interest, we were playing in a court in a home once owned by a famous college basketball coach.

Virginia Monseau is Professor Emeritus at Youngstown State University, where she taught courses in English methods, young adult and children's literature, and composition. She is past-president of ALAN and former editor of English Journal. Among her many works are Missing Chapters: Ten Pioneering Women in NCTE and English Education, Reading Their World: The Young Adult Novel in the Classroom, Responding to Young Adult Literature, A Curriculum of Peace: Selected Essays from English Journal, Presenting Ouida Sebestyen, and A Complete Guide to Young Adult Literature: Over 1000 Critiques and Synopses from The ALAN Review. She is the series editor of Boynton/Cook's Young Adult Literature Series and wrote the first book in the series, Teaching the Selected Works of Robert Cormier.

Marc Aronson, winner of the 2006 ALAN Award, is an author, editor, publisher, speaker, and historian who believes that young people, especially pre-teens and teenagers, are smart, passionate, and capable of engaging with interesting ideas in interesting ways. As a spokesman for YA literature, he was directly involved in creating the Printz Award, the LA Times YA fiction Prize, and the revived young readers' National Book Award. Among his most recent books are Sir Walter Raleigh and the Quest for El Dorado, winner of the ALA's first Robert L. Sibert Information Book Award for nonfiction and the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award; Race: A History Beyond Black and White (Ginee Seo Books); and, For Boys Only (Feiwei and Friends) [co-authored with HP Newquist]. Marc writes frequently on YA topics and appears both in a monthly column for School Library Journal and in a daily blog on their website.