



## Celebrating the Past/Envisioning the Future:

### The Next 40 Years of ALAN

“Developing students’ hearts, I believe, is what educators are called to do. Each and every small act of honesty, service, responsibility, and compassion that teachers and administrators encourage daily in their students—and model consistently in their own lives—helps create moral and civic habits of the heart that instill in students the courage to care.”

—Charles Haynes (2009), p. 6

“As Edith Wharton said, “The greatest books ever written are worth to each reader only what he can get out of them.”

—Catherine S. Ross, Lynne E. F. McKechnie, & Paulette M. Rothbauer (2006), p. 53

**A**s your next ALAN President (2012–2013), I have the distinct pleasure of hosting ALAN’s 40th Anniversary Year-long Celebration, culminating with our ALAN Workshop at NCTE in Boston (November 25–26, 2013). Imagine that! We are 40 years old. It seems like only yesterday (I am beginning to sound like someone’s grandparent) when ALAN—the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents—was just in its infancy. In 1973, a small group of dedicated young adult literature enthusiasts banded together to form an organization whose mission is to share the joy of reading young adult literature. And now look at us! After 40 years, we are not only still going strong, we are thriving. In fact, we

are now—among many things—the great driving force behind the dissemination of young adult literature, not only within the National Council of Teachers of English, but in the country and possibly the world.

Most impressive. And most sobering.

For many, young adult literature (or books for teens) has always remained a pleasant afterthought in the conversation of literature among serious and not-so-serious adult teachers and scholars. “Oh, you are reading that? Have you tried *The Great Gatsby*? Much more sophisticated for someone your age.” “Reading this? Couldn’t find anything better?” snips another. Such remarks are often heard or, if

not heard, they are at least implied, reflecting the opinion of those who regard teen novels as suitable for reluctant or non-readers, but not for serious people. After all, there is reading and there is reading . . .

And yet, young adult literature is still there.

In fact, good books for teens are not only present in our lives, but thriving.

Just like ALAN.

And the reason?

Simple.

Kids love drama. Kids love to read books that are filled with the stuff of their own lives. Yes, they recognize the characters and settings and plots as something familiar and true, but they often see young people—such as them-

selves—caught in ordinary and/or extraordinary situations that are somewhat similar to their own, and in that light, these books are just the tonic they need to contemplate their own realities.

If art is the selected exaggeration of reality, than young adult literature is the epitome of great art. For often, in the compact complexities of any books for teens, lies the inherent contradiction of so many of our lives: “Who should I love and why?” “What should I do with my life and why?” “Why does the world make so little sense?” Complex questions? Yes. Easy to find answers? No. And where do I go to start? Young adult books.

### **ALAN and Young Adult Literature—Our Past**

We started from humble beginnings—educators 40 years ago who assembled at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention and decided to form a group to study and publicize good books for teens. Now we have grown to an organization of authors, publishers, and educators whose reach extends far beyond our grasp. Today, we attract a diverse group of readers, teachers, and scholars alike who come to us from everywhere—either in person, in our journal, and/or on the Web—and who are bound by the common goal of sharing good books for teens. Ah, what a gift.

And this gift of reading sustains us. It is what keeps us coming back and back, year after year, as we ask ourselves, “What did you read this year that was really good?” That book that made you say, “I have to buy this, I have to share this, I

have to give this to a kid who likes to read, or maybe one who might not like reading, but is having a problem similar to a character in this book, and thus can easily relate.” Or “How can I get this book into the hands of teenagers, and perhaps change their lives?” “What can I do to get one more kid to read?”

This has been the driving force behind our organization. It is the reason we have sustained our presence and continue to engage new members. It is the reason that ALAN makes a difference in the lives of so many—authors, editors, publishers, teachers, academics, librarians, media specialists, parents, teens, etc.—and the reason we ask ourselves, “What can we do to improve who we are and what we have become?”

Forty years ago, we started with a hope, a prayer, and a stapled newsletter. Today, we have a journal, a newsletter, a website, and a two-day workshop.

Forty years ago, we had coffee, tea, and cookies. Today, we have an author’s reception, a breakfast celebration, and a distinct presence in the National Council Teachers of English.

Forty years ago, we began with a handful of people asking themselves, “Do you think anyone cares about these books besides us?” to “Where did all these people come from?”

Forty years ago, we asked ourselves, “Are we going to end up repeating ourselves—talking about the same books over and over again (*The Catcher in the Rye*; *The Outsiders*; *Go Ask Alice*; *A Day No Pigs Would Die*; *The Contender*; *The Chocolate War*; *The Pigman*; *Are*

*You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, etc.). Now we enjoy an endless discussion of all the new books that populate young adult bookshelves and find second homes in popular culture.

### **ALAN and Young Adult Literature—Our Present**

Today, ALAN has a strong and viable presence in the lives of so many. Young adult authors—people who write both fiction and nonfiction books specifically for teenage audiences—look to us to share their good works at our workshop, on our website, and in our journal. They want to remain a visible force in our organization because they know that ALAN represents the very best in edifying teachers and books lovers alike about what is good and relevant for all readers. They know that our audience—the folks who love to read and, more importantly, share great reads with great teens—are just the people that they must connect with to make sure their books reach the hands of adolescents.

Publishers also know that we are the place to turn to publicize their authors. They know that at our workshops, in our journal, and in our gatherings, they can find more than a friendly ear to share their latest “hot read,” “author to watch,” and possibly even “juicy gossip.” Publishers know that we matter because we bring their books to eager readers.

Educators from grade school to graduate school flock to our programs and get-togethers, our journal and website, our ancillary materials and full-length books. Their goal? To secure the latest

reads and insights on what make young adult literature an increasingly popular genre. They read and scour and digest what the leading scholars in our field mean when they say “reading saves lives” and explore how best to make this happen in our classrooms.

Librarians and media specialists look to us—to ALAN and its many leaders—as a “liaison for change.” They see us as one long interconnected chain that melds the imaginary divide between separate lives—the author, the publisher, the educator—into one seamless thread of sharing. We make reading happen because we share what we know.

As many of us know all too well, if young people do not read as teenagers, they are less likely to read as adults. If all they know as high school students are books that “they were asked to read, but didn’t want to read,” then more than likely, they will never read.

For this and this alone, we must honor the legacy of ALAN and preserve what we have accomplished, so we can realize our future. And what a future it is.

## **ALAN and Young Adult Literature—Our Future**

When I came to ALAN, I stood in awe of the many people I met so casually—the many authors, publishers, and educators who I read about and discussed so diligently in my graduate education classes. With the encouragement of the late Ted Hipple, one of the founders of ALAN and my mentor, I had no choice, but it didn’t matter—I was eager to become actively involved in ALAN. More than anything, I

wanted to connect with “the movers and shakers” of young adult literature and become more familiar with how their work—both commercially and academically—was making a significant difference in the lives of so many. I wanted to become like “them” so that I, too, could influence others.

And as I became more and more involved in ALAN—the Clip and File Book Review Editor, the Research Connections Editor, an ALAN Board Member, and now President—I asked myself, “How can ‘our reach far extend our grasp?’ I know that we do good work, and I know that what we say and do matters—to everyone—but how can we reach even further than we already do? How can we make ourselves matter to those who don’t know us, or maybe don’t know us as well as they should?

My contemplation of ALAN’s future has led me to discuss with our ALAN Executive Board, and now you, some thoughts and ideas for future initiatives that will help ALAN extend our reach further than it already does. Let me indulge . . .

**ALAN 40th Anniversary:** Our ALAN 40th Anniversary is a cause for celebration, and celebrate, we will. In our newsletter, our journal, our website, and our workshop, we will honor those who have come before us and those who will set the groundwork for our future endeavors. We will share our memories, our stories, our funny moments and poignant recollections, all in a deep and abiding desire to say to all that what we do not only matters, but has lasting significance far beyond any one individual or book.

**ALAN 2013 Workshop:** The ALAN 2013 Workshop will be where we will celebrate our past and discuss our future. There, we will reminisce, remember, and contemplate all that we have accomplished—both in person and in Powerpoint, in testimonials and in presentations—allowing all who have contributed to our success to share their memories and bring to us a sense of who we are, what we have accomplished, and where we are going. My hope is that the ALAN 2013 Workshop in Boston will be the place where we catch our breath and say what a great ride this has been—and let’s keep going.

**ALAN Website:** Forty years ago, technology was a microphone and an overhead projector. Our first journal was a stapled, mimeographed packet. Today, we not only have a well-respected, peer-reviewed journal, but an active website. And what was once science fiction has now become science fact—we can talk to each other instantly and share knowledge and articles at the flick of a mouse (or does anyone still use a mouse?). What’s next? I propose that ALAN seriously consider convening a committee of interested members to contemplate how we can best serve our members on-line.

To some extent, of course, we do that now, but with a centralized webmaster—someone whose duties and responsibilities are solely to maintain our ALAN website. We can do so much more. We can make our ALAN website the place to visit for the latest and greatest in the study of young adult literature. Let’s take advantage of our Facebook presence, our vibrant tweet-

ers, an active NCTE Ning, and the monthly ALAN Picks where we review the latest young adult books. If we put these, and more, under one ALAN heading, our potential for growth and reach is unlimited.

**ALAN Webinars:** If you are as old as I am, you remember when it was considered magic to have a phone conversation with two people in different places simultaneously—the conference call. Now, through the magic of technology, we can have instant communication with everyone—or practically everyone—so why not continue to expand ALAN’s presence by conducting webinars and book talks and Skyped convention seminars for our members and nonmembers alike? Why not make ALAN a force for the study and dissemination of young adult literature in cyberspace, thus expanding our services, our membership, and our impact?

**ALAN Journal:** *The ALAN Review* is a wonderful publication. We recognize that everyone—authors, publishers, educators, researchers, and just plain book lovers—can contribute valuable understandings and perceptions about the field of young adult literature. Published in Winter, Summer, and Fall, this publication highlights great reads and sharp insights about young adult novels and critical pedagogy. Yet, we are often not listed with peer-reviewed journals in academic circles.

How can we enhance our visibility? How can we become the journal mentioned in EBSCO-HOST—the journal citation index used at most colleges and universities to recognize journals of significance? How can we make our excellent publication the place

to secure scholarship and practical ideas for not only ALAN members, but for nonmembers as well? We have taken a number of significant steps in this direction. *The ALAN Review* is listed in the Digital Library and Archives of Virginia Tech University, but can’t we do more? And if so, what? We need to convene a committee to discuss this important consideration for our journal’s future.

**ALAN Book Reviews:** When reading young adult book covers, one often finds quotes praising books from *The School Library Journal*, *The Children’s Book Review Service*, *The Horn Book*, *Booklist*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and others, but rarely from *The ALAN Review*. Why not? Do publishers want reviews from more “prestigious” organizations? If so, how do we get there? How do we get the ALAN name on the covers of books that we have reviewed? I would like to see our book reviewers play a prominent role in supporting good young adult books by recognizing their endorsement on the book jackets of young adult novels, just like other prominent and recognized book reviewers.

**ALAN College Student Groups:** An organization that I admire and serve as a Chapter Counselor is Kappa Delta Pi, the international honor society in the field of education. I often thought that this organization should be the model for ALAN. They serve a wide constituency, from college students majoring in education to current elementary and secondary teachers to teacher educators and academic scholars. They hold conferences, webinars, and regional workshops, and they publish practi-

cal and academic journals. Most important, they have active college organizations where preservice teachers form clubs for the purpose of engaging in social and academic activities that promote teaching and learning at their respective colleges and universities, as well as in their surrounding communities.

Why can’t ALAN do the same? NCTE already has the policies and procedures in place for starting student groups at colleges and universities? Why not encourage our members—particularly those teaching future teachers—to start their own ALAN groups? In turn, those preservice teachers can help their local middle and high schools promote young adult literature. Many colleges and universities already have such groups in place. What can we do to encourage these groups? How can we develop more of them and then recognize them at our ALAN Workshop and throughout the year?

**ALAN and New Young Adult Authors:** Everyone comes to ALAN for different reasons—some to meet their favorite authors, some to rub elbows with noted publishers, and others to enjoy the company of good friends and colleagues. But all of us come for the love of good books and to learn how best to get those books into the hands of teens everywhere. And let us not forget those who come with the simple desire to write young adult books of their own, for doesn’t everyone have a story to tell?

Can we be doing more to help people become published young adult authors? Can we provide seminars? Tips on how to submit manuscripts or how to find a literary agent? In fact, just get started?

Wouldn't this be a great way to reach new members or those interested in trying their hand as a young adult author? Perhaps a webinar. A part of our workshop. A separate workshop. Let's hear some ideas.

**ALAN and Censorship:** ALAN has always played an important role in helping teachers and librarians deal with challenged books. We have stood tall and proud, answering questions, writing rationales, and recognizing individuals who have been at the forefront of controversies and challenges about books for teens, fending off threats to students' right to read.

Today, we have an actively engaged ALAN Committee on Censorship. Their task is to disseminate information on dealing with challenged materials and to help those authors and educators who are facing difficulty in having their works read by teens in public places. What we need to do next, though, is to make sure everyone knows this. We need to make the ALAN Committee on Censorship the committee to turn to when books are challenged, when educators are questioned, and when authors are pilloried. When books are thought of as things to keep young eyes away from, instead of as works of art to be discussed and reviewed, we need to be in the forefront of this prominent and important discussion.

**ALAN and the International Community:** Finally, now that technology has made the world smaller,

faster, and more inclusive, what can ALAN be doing to increase its international presence? What can we do to bring to the foreground books and stories and plays and poems that are written by international authors, playwrights, and poets who appeal to young adults? Should we have a separate journal for international young adult literature? Separate conference? Separate workshops? Webinars? Separate awards? Can we have an ALAN conference overseas? Maybe England? Eastern Europe? Africa? And can we participate virtually?

Granted, these are big ideas, and 40 years ago, they might have seemed prohibitively expensive and out of reach, but today, technology—especially Skype, YouTube, twitter, even simple email—has made the world of young adult literature more accessible, more individualized, and more inclusive. Let us push forward and see what we can do next.

## ALAN Workshop 2013—Boston

In Boston, we will celebrate 40 years of ALAN and the anticipation of at least 40 more. Long after we are all gone, ALAN will remain a presence in the lives of so many, helping to connect good books with teen readers.

Our ALAN Workshop 2013 theme is “40 Years of ALAN Celebrating Great Books for Young Adults.” We will honor our past, our present, and our future. We

will share what we know, what we want to know, and what we hope to know more about in the world of young adult literature. We will carry the torch to a new generation of readers, authors, publishers, and lovers of good books for teens as we proclaim loud and clear, “Books save lives—one youngster at a time.” I look forward to seeing you there.

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