

## Reminiscing about Ken Donelson:

TAR Coeditor (with Alleen Pace Nilsen) 1974–1979

I knew of Ken Donelson long before I ever met the man.

As a brand new high school English teacher in Tempe, Arizona, I had read some of his work in the *Arizona English Bulletin* and *English Journal*. In fact, one of his *English Journal* articles appeared in the September 1977 issue, right when I started my teaching career in Arizona. That article, “Some Responsibilities for English Teachers Who Already Face an Impossible Job,” made clear not just that he understood the myriad challenges my colleagues and I faced, but also that he was incredibly well read and that he had high expectations for everyone who taught secondary English.

That article concluded with this:

English teachers have an absolutely impossible job. I've spent twenty-five years as an English teacher, the first thirteen teaching in Iowa high schools, the last twelve working with young people who want to be English teachers, and my own experience teaching high school English and training promising young English teachers proves to me daily that the job we want to do and must do is impossible. . . .

It's a frustrating and tiring life, but it's a life we must live if we care about literature, language, writing, non-print media, education, and above all the kids we face. Why do we stay in this impossible job? Simple answer—because we're English teachers and that's what our racket consists of. There isn't any other answer. (p. 32)

I admired his honest yet uncompromising take on our responsibilities as English teachers, and I was secretly happy that I wasn't a student of his. Based on what he had written, I assumed that his university courses would be overwhelmingly difficult if not impossible.

In addition to reading Dr. Donelson's work in professional journals during those first years, I also heard a lot about the famous professor over at ASU, the guy who had a national reputation in English education and especially in adolescent literature. He was also well known for being tough on graduate students and even tougher on censors.

My first encounters with him were distant and safe: I heard him speak a couple of times at the annual Arizona English Teachers Association convention, and from my seat in the audience, he appeared to be smart, well read, blunt, opinionated, and to a green high school English teacher like me, intimidating. When I started my career, Donelson was already a coeditor of *The ALAN Newsletter* with Alleen Pace Nilsen, and by the end of my second year of teaching, he and Alleen had handed off those duties to W. Geiger Ellis, the first editor of the new *ALAN Review* in 1978.

That was the year I started taking graduate courses at ASU, and for my first few years in the master's program there, I didn't have to take any classes from Donelson, and I have to admit I was kind of relieved. In fact, I managed to complete my master's at ASU without ever taking a class from him. When I graduated in 1980, he and Alleen published their first edition of *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, a textbook an *English Journal* reviewer called “a work whose stature so overshadows these ‘good’ [professional] books that to not read it is to be seriously uninformed” (Ellis, p. 79). My high school librarian acquired the book right away, and I was impressed—and stunned—by the depth and breadth of the work that had gone into

the book. At that point, I decided that if I were going to take an adolescent literature course in graduate school, I would take it from Donelson—and hope that somehow I'd be able to survive the crushing workload the gruff taskmaster would surely dump on me.

So there I was one evening in the spring semester of 1982, sitting in a classroom at ASU, waiting for English 591, Seminar in Literature and Adolescents, to begin. Donelson entered a few minutes early pushing a cart full of YA books, topped with a stack of mimeographed syllabi. His beard masked his expression, so I couldn't tell how he felt about teaching a night class; I just hoped that he had been in a good mood when he'd put together the reading and assignment list for our class.

After a brief introduction that included plugs for membership in NCTE and ALAN, he distributed the syllabi. I still have my copy, and I still remember the sinking feeling I had when I read it:

You'll read and write a hell of a lot. That doesn't just come with the territory. That *is* the territory. . . . The reading and the papers (weekly) may seem onerous, yea verily impossible. But others have survived and some have even enjoyed the work. So, I imagine, will you. But if you don't like to read and you don't read much, what are you doing in graduate school?

As I said, most of what you read will be aimed at young adults, and some books you select (or I select for you) *may* strike you as childish (some young adults are, you know) and immature (some adults are too, you know). You may be tempted to pontificate about the greatness of great literature and thus prove your snobbery. Don't. I've worked too long as an English teacher (and you have, too) to believe that all young people love to read and that all young adults would love to read the great books, preferably only the classics. . . .

Remember as you read old YA and new YA books that the audience was/is young people. That doesn't mean that I'll

expect you to play teenagers, only that you will need to remember that you're gauging the books from a somewhat different standard than you are most literature. That doesn't make your job more difficult, but it does make it different.

And so we began. Donelson's passion for literature was clear, as was the depth of reading he'd done in adolescent literature. I admired his blunt, honest approach to literature and reading, his keen awareness of the realities of the classroom, and his extensive knowledge of the field. I still dreaded the workload and the likely chance that he'd shred my shoddy work, but I started feeling excited for the class—and for the chance to learn more about books

for teenagers. Class went on, and it wasn't long before his sense of humor began to show. And it wasn't long after that that it became clear that he cared for his students just as much as he did for books.

He kept the promise he had made in his syllabus: we read and wrote a hell of a lot, and I haven't stopped since.

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## References

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- Ellis, W. G. (1980). Here's help. *English Journal*, 69(5), 79.

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