

Lighting the Fire:

ALAN Speech 1980

Thank you. I feel very privileged to be here today, to talk to you, because I think that the people who teach children to read are the real fire-givers of our time. To be able to read, intelligently, creatively, to be able to reach into the past for truths that have been obscured, to be able to let your mind loose, to imagine, to dream, is true liberation.

However, for me, someone who hides behind a typewriter in a basement all day long, the thought of standing up in front of all you Prometheans is sort of intimidating. The idea of giving a speech—my very first to an audience of teachers—makes my knees freeze and liver quiver.

So I've fallen back on an old journalist's trick to get me through without disaster—I'm going to interview myself. That way, I can be sure the questions are easy ones. Since they are also the questions that people tend to ask me, I hope they are the questions you might ask me: how I started writing young adult books, who I perceive as my audience, and exactly what I want to say to them.

My first book for young adults was a novel called *The Contender*. I like to think that it wasn't so much a young adult novel—people who package such things tend to make it into one word, like sugar-coated-cereal or made-for-TV-movie—but I like to think of *The Contender* as a novel that happened to find, for very intrinsic reasons, its most responsive audience among teenaged readers. I certainly hadn't consciously sat down to write for that audience. In fact, I hadn't consciously sat down to write at all.

Thirteen years ago, when I wrote *The Contender*, I was a reporter for *The New York Times*. Boxing was

my specialty that year; I was really a feature writer, but a very young man named Cassius Clay had just won the heavyweight title, and it was decided by *The Times* that he should be covered by a feature writer. At the time, I had written one book, Dick Gregory's autobiography, *Nigger*, and some magazine articles and short stories, but as much as I wanted to, I hadn't yet written a novel. The reason I hadn't written a novel was because I knew you couldn't write a novel unless you were enflamed. Unless the muse was holding a blowtorch to your toes. Unless you were absolutely engulfed in a passion that could only be expressed in complete sentences. I knew this because I had been an English major, because I had spent most of my life listening to reading teachers.

As a newspaper reporter, I got the usual vague letters that reporters, especially in New York, always get from book publishers:

Dear Sir or Madame: You should really write a novel some day, the same sort of thing you're doing for the paper, only with lots more sex.

I have even gotten a vague letter from the juvenile department of a publishing house:

Dear Sir: How about the same sort of thing you're doing for the paper, only with less sex?

But I was still waiting for that muse with a blowtorch. And then the fire got me.

In November of 1965, I was sent to Las Vegas to cover a heavyweight championship boxing match between Floyd Patterson and Muhammad Ali. The night before the fight, I took an old boxing manager

out to dinner. Once he had trained champions, but now he was down on his luck, going blind, shuffling through the scene. After dinner, we went back to the hotel where we were both staying. We sat by the pool. It was night, the pool was deserted except for us. In

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the distance, through the darkness, we could see the lights of the hotel casino, we could even hear the rattling of coins when slot-machine jackpots hit, we could hear the screams of the winners—but otherwise we were very alone in the night. And the old boxing manager began to reminisce about a gymnasium he once owned, many, many years ago.

This gym had been in a tough immigrant neighborhood, the lower east side of Manhattan. It was at the top of three dark, narrow, twisting flights of stairs, and the old manager told me that he used to sit in the dark at the top of those stairs listening for the young man who would surely arrive some day to become his new champion.

I was fascinated. I asked him what he would look for in such a boy. His height, his weight, his shoulders and legs . . . and the old man shook his head, No, those weren't as important as what was inside the boy. And what was inside the boy he would know long before he ever saw him.

I asked him what he meant.

He said that the boy he wanted, the boy he was waiting for, the boy who would have a shot at becoming a champion, a boy who would surely be a contender, would come up those steps *alone* . . . at night . . . and *scared* . . . but he would conquer his fear, he would use his fear, to climb to the top.

I asked him what he meant by the word contender. I knew it strictly as a boxing term, someone who is considered a challenger for the championship, but the old manager seemed to be using it in a larger sense. He said that a contender, to him, was the man coming up, the man who knows there's a good chance that he might not get to the top, but who's willing to sweat and to bleed and to try . . . a man who will come to understand that it's the climbing that makes

one special. Getting to the top is an extra reward.

I stayed up most of the rest of the night thinking about what the old manager had said. I couldn't get the dark narrow twisting stairs out of my mind. I wondered what kind of boy would come up those steps? What would he be like? What would be happening in his life that was scarier than the dark steps?

When I got back to New York after the fight, there was another vague letter waiting, this one was from the juvenile department of a publishing house, Harper & Row. Dear Sir . . . How about . . . ?

Well, I answered that letter with a vague letter of my own:

How would you like a novel about a boy and three flights of dark twisting stairs? All I know at the moment is that I'd like to call it *The Contender*, and there won't be much sex.

The answer came right back, TERRIFIC, and I realized that my toes were on fire.

The Contender could only have been a novel for teenaged readers. It was short, it was structurally stable, the plot was linear, the leading character was an adolescent, and the overwhelming concern of the book was *becoming*. That's the main concern of young people, *Becoming*. I've gotten letters from white, suburban girls who find no trouble identifying with a black, urban, male high school drop-out. She . . . as well as he . . . wants to become somebody.

A contender.

And so did I. So *do* I . . . want to become somebody, want to become a contender. I had no trouble identifying with the hero of the book. Later on, teachers asked me about the metaphorical symbolism of the dark stairs—had I created them at the typewriter as symbols of stages in a life's journey? Although I had to admit that they started as real-life stairs, while I was writing the book I not only wondered if I would run up three flights of dark stairs, alone, at night and scared, and what would make me do it, but I also wondered what in my life was comparable to those stairs, and what I would consider a championship, how I would know if I were a contender. A best-seller? A critically acclaimed book? Some encouraging response from readers?

Writers tend to overdo the parallels between themselves and boxers—Hemingway and Mailer are good examples—but you can understand the writer thinking about working hard, alone, and then going

up on a platform, half-naked, to be judged. Or to get their brains knocked out by their critics.

You can't go too far identifying with your lead character, of course, unless you want to end up writing about yourself. So the writer has to answer questions about the hero. While I was writing *The Contender*, I was principally a journalist, and I learned the differences between journalism and fiction: In journalism, you get other people to answer your questions; in fiction, you're on your own. In journalism, you worry about the facts: Are the facts accurate? Did so-and-so actually say these words? You're not so worried about whether so-and-so is telling the truth. In fiction, you're concerned less with the facts than with the truth—does it all add up?

In juvenile fiction, the responsibility to the truth is even greater than in general adult fiction, where you are presumably dealing with people who have as much informational and judgmental background as you do. In juvenile fiction, the writer, the teacher, the librarian are obligated to the truth, no matter how difficult this makes their work.

I found juvenile fiction a lot harder, physically harder work, than journalism. That year, I interviewed Muhammad Ali and Mickey Mantle and President Johnson and Senator Hart and some Soviet weightlifters in Moscow, and my main concern was getting the facts right—being accurate about what they said to me. If they were lying, that was something else. But in the make-believe world I was creating in *The Contender*, everything had to be truthful. I had to be able to swear that the circumstances I had created—in which a black high school drop-out trying to become somebody without becoming a ghetto criminal rushed up those three flights of stairs in Harlem toward a darkness he could not have known—were absolutely true.

Although as far as I know, they never happened that way. Except for the old manager in the book, who was modeled after the old man in Las Vegas, no one in *The Contender* was specifically modeled after a real person. And I even changed neighborhoods and years. And as much as I enjoyed writing *The Contender*—the act itself was a very happy time for me—I never really expected to be writing any more books for young adults. *The Contender* had broken my block about longer fiction; I had been enflamed without being consumed. I was nicely cooked and ready to serve. And

I know that the money, the glamour, the attention was—it still is—in novels and journalism and television and movies for Old Adults. In the next ten years, my novels and my journalism and my screenwriting were for Old Adults. *Dear Sir: Just what you're writing for the papers, only a little more sex.*

During that time, as I spoke to schoolchildren reading *The Contender* or read their letters, I realized I was missing something. When you write for a general adult audience, you can hope to entertain, to enlighten perhaps, maybe to provoke an appreciative or angry response, but very, very rarely to actually change a reader's mind. To open a window. To point out a new direction.

Writers, like teachers and librarians, secretly lust for the power to control minds. Writers and teachers and librarians who work with young people have the best chance to be successful. Of course, the odds against success are incredibly bad—television, parents, and other kids get first crack—but the chance, however slim, really does exist. One student a term, one reader per ten thousand, and you not only feel you've got The Force on your side, but that you are The Force.

And it's true, you are The Force. You have real power.

Some of the most satisfying professional moments in my life have come from that sense I would get—not often, but just enough to make me want to taste it again—of having been able to reach out and put my hand on someone's head, someone who said that something had happened to his or her way of looking at things because of something I wrote. It was always the younger reader.

With all that, it took ten years and a literary accident for me to write another novel for that precious reader. And this time, I knew it was going to be harder. I was no longer an innocent enflamed by a midnight story. I had had a successful book in the field. I didn't want to disgrace it with a loser—Lipsyte wasn't a contender, they'd say, he was a bum.

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I had to figure out the answer to that second question, *WHO am I writing for?*

The literary accident was this: In 1976, a friend of mine, the editor of a magazine called *Mother Jones*,

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It was me. Or was it I?

asked if I would write an article about books that had influenced me as a youngster. They were running a monthly feature about books and writers. I agreed, and I wrote the piece, and in the middle of a long sentence describing myself as a book-junkie at 14, there was the phrase “in the prison of my fat.” I couldn’t believe it when I saw it. Bells went off, sirens. I heard . . . The Click.

When I was 14 years old, I weighed more than 200 pounds. How much more than 200 pounds I don’t really know because whenever the number 200 rolled up on the bathroom scale, I bailed out. Two hundred was enough. My fourteenth summer, lying about my age, I got a job mowing the lawn of one of the worst human beings in the Western World. He got his kicks by cheating me out of my pay, by making me work extra for free, by finding new shades of meaning in the word *exploitation*. But in the end, I won—I lost—at least 45 pounds. How much I lost, of course, I’ll never know since I don’t know exactly what I weighed when I began that last fat summer.

I had a lot of adventures that summer (mostly in my head, of course) because I was in an incredible state of change. I was physically becoming something else, a new image to the world. By the end of that summer, I knew I wanted to write about it—I had already decided to become a writer—and one of the first pieces I did for English when I got back to school that fall was a poem, a parody of “Gunga Din,” all about my epic struggle with the lawn I was cutting, a heroic adventure about a boy armed only with a lawn mower against a sea of vicious chlorophyll. It was very fancy stuff, that poem, but nowhere did I mention the central issue of that summer—being fat.

That poem was the first of dozens of attempts to write about that summer in the next 24 years. Not one of those attempts dealt truthfully with the central issue—and if you think about it for a moment, why should they? After all, one of the main reasons I had decided early to become a writer was because I

was fat. If people laughed at you on the street, if you were too clumsy or slow to participate fully, if you hated the way you looked, what better way to become somebody than to put a typewriter between yourself and the world, hide behind the typewriter, use the typewriter as a weapon, control the destiny of the universe, create characters, kill them, involve them in love and hate and adventure, without ever having to expose yourself to ridicule?

Twenty-four years later, by accident or cosmic design or maybe just leakage, the phrase “in the prison of my fat” fell out on a page. Twenty-four years after I lost my weight in one summer, I was finally liberated from the prison of my fat. And two weeks later, I started writing *One Fat Summer*.

And I found out who my audience was.

It was me. Or was it I?

All the epic poems I had written about cutting grass and the science fiction about grass on Alpha Centauri and other planets, and the third-person narratives and adventure stories and fantasies had really been written for other people—for people who looked terrific when they were 14 years old, people who (I thought) didn’t have a care in the world. But this book was going to be for me. Not me at 38, of course, but me at 14.

I wanted to reach back through the years and put a hand on my own head and talk to myself. Somehow, I had the feeling that if I could do that, then I could talk to anybody, anywhere, *now*. And I think I was right. The nicest letter I’ve gotten so far on *One Fat Summer* was from a young woman who said she found the story positive yet painful; it touched her, she said, because at the age of 11 she was very, very skinny and nearly six feet tall.

Which brings me to the third question. Now that I’m writing books for teenaged readers, and now that I’ve zero’ed in on my audience, what is it . . . exactly . . . that I want to say?

I was afraid you’d ask . . . because I really don’t know.

I sense that young people today know far more answers than I did when I was fat, yet they still suffer from the basic problems—they don’t know the right questions. If I could reach back to put my hand on my own head at 14, it wouldn’t be to say, “Listen up, Bobby, this is good and this is bad, memorize and repeat after me. . . .” I’d want to say to myself, “. . .

Bobby, you've got to keep asking yourself, Is this good? Is this right? Do I really want to do it? Those are the good questions. As far as answers go, you're on your own."

And the books that help that process, help kids to start asking the right questions, are the books that present situations that are truthful, that present characters dealing with those situations in truthful ways. Such books become windows on the world, treasure chests of mind-blowing questions, bridges among divided people.

How do you find such books? They're out there, they're being written and published and distributed, but the problem is that they're being written and published and distributed in the same tonnage lots with books that deserve to be burned. And it's not so easy to separate the good books from the bad books—you've almost got to read them all . . .

And, believe it or not, you can't tell a book by its cover, especially, the current fad of sensational problem books—The Five Big D's, I call them—Death, Disease, Divorce, Dope, and Dee-sire. Such books often treat these very real, very important problems as superficially and sensationally as newspaper headlines. Often, a book that *seems* on the right track, that *seems* to be on the side of the angels, a book that from its cover and its blurb and its advance notices *seems* hip enough to grab those kids who don't read anything but *TV Guide*, may really be worse in this way than yet another seemingly dreary tale of a girl who spends her 16th summer on a dude ranch or two boys who find treasure in grandpa's backyard—old-timey books that might really have more insight and understanding, more believable characters, more truthful human confrontations than the latest chic of the week, this month's catalogue leader about a finger-snappin', disco-dancin', coke-snortin', foul-mouth lady who traces God to a UFO owned by Exxon, and in so doing, comes to terms with her parent's divorce.

Such books—clever, attractive, seductive—remind me of a birthday cake we once bought. It was for my son's fifth birthday. He was having a pile of 5-year-old boys over to help him celebrate, and we bought from a local bakery a very large, handsome cake with blue icing and the entire US Seventh Cavalry riding across the top. It was gorgeous. The five-year-olds were stunned. The most beautiful cake they had ever seen.

And probably the worst they had ever eaten. It

was stale. We were very angry because we realized what had happened. The bakery, figuring it was just a cake for five year olds, wasn't too concerned with the inside. Likewise, I'm afraid, in their rush to the market, many publishers have been churning out a lot of stale books for younger readers, books that look gorgeous but, in the long run, may turn them off reading for good.

Too often, for example, books dealing with sex fail to deal with the alternatives and the complications—like the choice of no sex, of gay sex, birth control, considerate sexual technique, abortions, and the possibility of loving relationships in which sex is an aspect rather than the critical center. Then there are books dealing with

dope that can create "a reefer madness" climate that kids laugh at; for every kid who has been led to stronger drugs or a ruined life by trying marijuana at a party, there are hundreds of kids for whom the experience was pleasant and not terribly significant—or at least not more significant than the Scotch overdose that once knocked out a 15-year-old former fat boy of my acquaintance.

One of the current themes in the Big D books is homosexuality, a long-time taboo that is finally being dealt with, often very well, with sensitivity and understanding. And just as often it's being presented as a stale cake, all flash and no substance. This happens to be an area I'm particularly interested in. When I was 14 years old, growing up in New York City in the 1950s, the killer word on the street was "fag." Call a boy a fag and he would have to fight or slink away. To avoid being called a fag, to avoid being considered less than a man—whatever that was—we talked tough and we practiced our spitting and we played sports (or at least paid fan lip-service to it). We talked about girls as objects, and we strategically denied those parts of our own nature that were sensitive and kind and compassionate.

In other words, not manly.

We allowed our psyches to be crippled because

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sports heroes, to movie stars, to singers, and to boys on the street who were better than we were at acting cool.

I guess things really haven't changed that much. Boys, more than ever, need books to help them find their way to manhood, to help them define that word, each for himself, just as girls must achieve womanhood, just as girls and boys must become persons, beyond any quick and easy labels or signs or handy-this-week-only-buy-200-and-get-your-teacher-guide-free-monogrammed-young-adult-novel-just-add-hot-blood-and-serve.

I think I'd like to reach back and tell myself that nothing in life is either as wonderful . . . or as terrible . . . as it seems at 14. But I know that I probably

we were scared—scared of not measuring up to someone else's standard (we were too young to have our own), scared of being left in the back of the pack, scared of not becoming a man, and scared because we had no idea of what it was that made you a man.

We looked for guidance to

wouldn't be believed. In a poem by Dylan Thomas, there's a line that goes:

The ball I threw while playing in the park
Has not yet reached the ground.

I think about these people we write for, we teach, these people that we feel we have so much to say to . . . but what, exactly? I think of them on the threshold of Personhood, poised, straining toward the sky, for that ball they hurled up.

Those of us who care about them, who are personally and professionally dedicated to them, can describe the shape and the size and the velocity of that ball, we can describe the dimensions of the park and the texture of the earth, we can relate the histories of centuries of other young people who have stood on this very spot. We should do this, it's our job to do this, and then to walk away, to stand in a shadow in the corner, hoping we have written well enough and taught well enough that the decision each reader . . . each student . . . each child will make—whether it is to run away or to catch the ball or just to stand there and do nothing—is the right decision . . . or at least good enough.

Thank you.