

# Reminiscing: One Perspective on ALAN's Beginnings

TAR Coeditor (with Ken Donelson) 1974–1979

**M**y application back in 1974 to edit what we then called *The ALAN Newsletter* was not nearly as demanding as it was for later editors. It consisted of my showing up at the second organizational meeting of ALAN in New Orleans and confessing that I couldn't even keep my own checking account in order and so I wanted to resign as treasurer, but I would be happy to do something else—maybe edit the newsletter. When everyone agreed that this seemed like a fair trade, I went home to Arizona and asked Ken Donelson if he would be coeditor. I knew he was really smart, but also since I did not yet have a “real” job at ASU (I had gone there as a “trailing spouse”), I thought we needed a connection to a tenured professor so that we could take advantage of the university's printing facilities, along with its bulk mailing permit.

I had been appointed treasurer at the first organizational meeting held in Philadelphia when I followed the directions on a handwritten sign to come and talk about forming an NCTE Assembly. The idea of Council assemblies was fairly new, and the main obstacle we faced was that we needed 25 members. There weren't that many of us at the meeting, but since on my way to the convention, I had stopped at the University of Iowa and successfully defended my doctoral dissertation, I was in a celebratory mood and grandly pulled out money to pay the \$2.00 dues for people I knew would want to be involved. Such generosity resulted in my being appointed treasurer.

ALAN started out very much like a Women's

Club. At the ALAN breakfast where we installed the second set of officers, the outgoing officers solemnly handed lit candles to their successors. The few men in the audience—who apparently had never belonged to a sorority—were genuinely surprised, and did not carry on the “tradition.” And because we were such “nice ladies,” we operated under the adage that “If you can't say something nice about someone (or something, including a book), don't say anything at all.” This meant that from the beginning, we were more of a fan club of supporters and cheerleaders than we were a scholarly association of critics.

But to understand this mindset, you need to know that at the time, respected people were saying terrible things about adolescent literature. For example, a writer for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* quoted by Steven Dunning in the December 1964 *English Journal* described books for teens as “Flabby in content, mediocre in style, narrowly directed at the most trivial of adolescent interests, they pander to a vast debilitation of tastes, to intolerance for the demanding, rewarding and ennobling exercise which serious reading can be” (p. 702). In 1965, J. Donald Adams, editor of the “Speaking of Books” page in *The New York Times*, wrote in his *Speaking of Books—and Life* that teenage novels were “a phenomenon which belongs properly only to a society of morons” (p. 252). He had great respect for the writers of good books for children because their books can be “read with equal delight by their elders. But what person of mature years and reasonably mature understanding (for there is often a

wide disparity) can read without impatience a book written for adolescents?”

With statements like these being more common than any of us would wish, and with most of our fellow teachers strongly believing that everyone’s job was to immerse students in the “great stream of the English classics,” it is no wonder that those who joined ALAN wanted to praise, rather than condemn, YA books. But still, I sometimes wish that we had started out to be a little more critical and that, during our annual conferences, we had devoted as much time for our own members to develop and display their professional knowledge and skills as we did to showcasing new authors.

I realize that we are in a partnership with the publishers; without their help, ALAN would not have developed as it has. The popularity of our two-day post-conference workshops depends at least partially on the generosity of the publishers who send participants home with more books than they can carry—much less read and ponder. But even though publishers are our benefactors, we also have an obligation to our young readers.

When ALAN was founded in 1973, the book that came closest to being a YA phenomenon was *Go Ask Alice*, published by Prentice Hall in 1971. It was never as famous as today’s Harry Potter, Twilight, and Hunger Games series, but it was nevertheless *the* book that teens wanted to read and that adults wanted to censor. It was translated into 16 different languages and made into the ABC Movie of the Week, first broadcast January 24, 1973, with William Shatner starring as the girl’s father. Librarians told me that every time it was going to be shown (once or maybe twice a year), they would order 20 extra copies of the book because the follow-up demand would be so high.

Today, Simon and Schuster describes *Go Ask Alice* as “a contemporary classic” with “more than 5 million copies sold.” It was supposedly the diary of a 15-year-old girl from a “perfect” family who was tricked into becoming a “druggie.” Because of the circumstances, we “book critics” essentially gave it a free pass because we did not want to say anything negative about the dead. However, this was not true of censors, who felt the book did more to glorify sex and drugs than to frighten kids away from them. Even in the fourth decade after its publication, *Go Ask Alice*

was number 18 on the American Library Association’s list of most challenged books between 2000 and 2009.

In 1978, a previously unknown author named Beatrice Sparks brought out a new book entitled *Jay’s Journal*, which was advertised as a “shocking companion diary” brought to you by the author “who brought you *Go Ask Alice*.” Based on the success of the *Alice* book, Sparks went on to write several other books (*It Happened to Nancy*; *Treacherous Love*; *Annie’s Baby*; *Almost Lost*; *Kim, Empty Inside*; and *Finding Katie*) supposedly based on teens’ journals. None of these books captured readers as did *Go Ask Alice*, nor in my opinion did they contribute to the richness of YA literature, although at Sparks’s funeral in Provo, Utah (she died at age 95 in May of 2012), family members claimed that the books had kept many young readers from making poor life choices, which was Sparks’s purpose.

As the years have gone by, more and more thoughtful readers believe that Sparks, with help from others, “faked” Alice’s story. In 1998, when Linda Glovach published a new book, *Beauty Queen*, about a girl on drugs, she identified herself as “coauthor of

### Recommended Online Reading about *Go Ask Alice*

Lina Goldberg, “Curiouser and Curiouser”: Fact, Fiction, and the Anonymous Author of *Go Ask Alice*. <http://www.linagoldberg.com/goaskalice.html>

Alleen Pace Nilsen, “The House That Alice Built: An Interview with the Author Who Brought You *Go Ask Alice*.” *School Library Journal*, 26(2) (Oct. 1979), pp. 109–112. Available for reading on Scribd; also, most libraries have archived copies of *SLJ*.

Mark Oppenheimer, “Just Say ‘Uh-Oh’: Two New Anti-Drug Novels and the Book That Established the Genre.” *The New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1998.

Snopes.com Rumor Has It. “*Go Ask Alice* Claim: The Book *Go Ask Alice* Was the Real-Life Diary of a Teenage Girl. Status: False” <http://www.snopes.com/language/literary/askalice.asp>

*Go Ask Alice.*” In Sparks’s book, the girl wasn’t even named Alice. The title, which did much to promote the book, was taken from a line in the popular “White Rabbit” song penned by Grace Slick and performed by Jefferson Airplane. Since the title clashes with incidents in the story, it was most likely added by someone in the publishing house who hadn’t carefully read the book. Other observations are that the book is filled with inconsistent “facts” and sentences that no 15-year-old, especially a girl on drugs, would have written in a private journal.

I feel sorry that we let kids down by not looking seriously at this book in the beginning. When famous “memoirs” written for adults have been found to be less than what was promised, as with James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (Random House, 2003) and Greg Mortenson’s *Three Cups of Tea* (Viking Penguin, 2006), the news was made public and readers were alerted that they were reading fiction rather than fact. But when a book that is supposedly written for the purpose of educating young readers so that they can make sound moral judgments is found to be lacking in honesty, we haven’t been there to warn the readers or lead them to ask the kinds of questions that might help them see the difference between fact and fiction.

It is ironic that at first *Go Ask Alice* was exempt from our criticism because we did not want to say anything negative about the “dearly departed.” Now the book is exempt from critical reading and discussion because we teachers have time to read and ponder only what we are teaching. And because we don’t want to risk being challenged by censors, few of us would bring *Go Ask Alice* in for full-class readings.

My reasons for disliking the book are not the same as those of the censors, but it takes careful thinking to distinguish between the two. If I were still teaching young adult literature and assigning group projects, I would ask a group to make a careful study of *Go Ask Alice*, along with the criticism that is now available (see the list below), and to compare their judgment of the book’s honesty with the reasons censors give for banning the book. I think such an assignment would be good training for a new generation of YA lit scholars interested in not only promoting, but also evaluating, good books for young readers.

*Alleen Pace Nilsen became “of the feminist persuasion” when she and her husband Don, a linguist earning his*

*PhD at the University of Michigan, took their three young children with them to work (as part of Don’s training) as USAID teachers in Afghanistan between 1967 and 1969. After seeing how women were treated in that country, Alleen decided that as soon as they got home and Don finished his degree, she too would earn a PhD. Her goal was to hold a valued place in society after her children were raised. When Don graduated from Michigan in 1971, he took a job at the University of Northern Iowa, and Alleen applied to the PhD program at the University of Iowa. She considers it one of the great good fortunes of her life that G. Robert Carlsen happened to be assigned as her advisor, and that a few years later, when Don took a job at Arizona State University, his office happened to be across the hall from Ken Donelson’s, another of Robert Carlsen’s students. These lucky coincidences led to her specializing in young adult literature and to working with Ken Donelson, first as coeditor of The ALAN Newsletter, which later became The ALAN Review, then as coeditor of English Journal, and finally as coauthor with Donelson of the first comprehensive college textbook in the field of young adult literature, published in 1980 by Scott Foresman. It is now in its ninth edition, published with Pearson. Because of Alleen’s conversion to feminism while living in Afghanistan, she convinced Ken Donelson that they should take turns on whose name came first on each of their projects. Alleen retired from ASU in May of 2011, but she and her husband, Don, remain an active part of the university through a newly founded Emeritus College.*

## References

- Adams, J. D. (1965). *Speaking of books—and life*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Dunning, S. (1964). Junior book roundup. *English Journal*, 53(8), 702–703.
- Frey, J. (2003). *A million little pieces*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Glovach, L. (1998). *Beauty queen*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Mortenson, G. (2006). *Three cups of tea*. New York, NY: Viking Penguin.
- Sparks, B. (1998/2005). *Annie’s baby: The diary of Anonymous, a pregnant teenager*. New York, NY: Avon Books.
- Sparks, B. (1996). *Almost lost: The true story of an anonymous teenager’s life on the streets*. New York, NY: Avon Flare.
- Sparks, B. (2002). *Kim, empty inside: The diary of an anonymous teenager*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Sparks, B. (2005). *Finding Katie: The diary of Anonymous, a teenager in foster care*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Sparks, B. (1979/ 1989). *Jay’s journal*. New York, NY: Pocket Books.
- Sparks, B. (1971). *Go ask Alice*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.