

A Happy Accident: YA Lit and Me

TAR Editor 1984–1990

By chance, I discovered young adult literature as a first-year, 20-year-old high school English teacher in 1968. I was ready to give up on finding anything to motivate a classroom full of bored, rebellious high school freshmen until one day, I sat on the edge of my desk and began to read aloud S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*. For the first time that year, the students were actually quiet and listening to me. They were hooked, and so was I.

I had accidentally found a way to motivate youngsters who had been turned off by schooling and discouraged by life. I never turned back. The classics were certainly important in my curriculum, but young adult books became my students’ bridge to understanding the more complex themes and language of the adult tomes.

ALAN and the educators, authors, publishers, and researchers who were its active members provided my most important teacher education. Already a member of NCTE, I began attending ALAN meetings, subscribed to and read *The ALAN Review*, and learned as much as possible about authors and books for young adults. By the late 1970s, I was teaching adolescent literature to future teachers. As a young assistant professor, I saw ALAN as a way to increase my knowledge of the field that had found me. When Guy Ellis, my predecessor as editor of *The ALAN Review*, suggested that I consider becoming editor, I jumped at the opportunity. What better way could I find to learn about young adult books and their authors?

For me, the best part of editing *The ALAN Review* was getting to know the authors personally. Many of the young adult writers of the 1980s became my

professional colleagues and friends. Through a grant received for a young authors’ project I directed, I was able to bring authors such as Sue Ellen Bridgers, Paula Danzinger, Norma Fox and Harry Mazer, Madeleine L’Engle, Katherine Paterson, and many others to my campus and to the schools of the local community.

Adolescent literature was very much an emerging field in the 1980s. Many authors, like Katherine Paterson and Madeleine L’Engle, were first considered to be authors of children’s books. But books like S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* and Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*, dealt with issues and themes that were too “adult” for young children. Hence, publishers began to establish a new market—books for young adults.

During those early years, there were no “blockbusters” that went viral, like the Harry Potter series or the Twilight books of later years, but there were foundation books that created a new market for those that would follow. My students loved Lois Duncan’s *Killing Mr. Griffin*, Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia*, Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contender*, Robert Cormier’s *I Am the Cheese*, Isabelle Holland’s *The Man without a Face*, Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Sue Ellen Bridgers’s *Home before Dark*, Paul Zindel’s *The Pigman*, and so many more.

As much as my teacher education students loved these books and saw their value in the curriculum (and not only in the English curriculum), there were many others who thought the books did not belong in the classrooms or in the libraries of the day. Censorship was one of the biggest issues of the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, we devoted an entire issue of *The*

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ALAN Review to the topic of censorship in the spring of 1989. Young adult books did not have a place in the literary canon, and many sought to remove them from classroom reading lists and library shelves.

In that same issue of *The ALAN Review* (Spring, 1989), educator and scholar Donald Gallo reported

the results of a research study of “The Most Important YA Authors” of the day. Here, in order of number of first-place votes, are the top 33:

S. E. Hinton/Paul Zindel
Robert Cormier
Madeleine L’Engle/Richard Peck
Judy Blume/Sue Ellen Bridgers/Virginia Hamilton/
M.E. Kerr/Katherine Paterson
Robert Lipsyte
Ursula K. LeGuin/Norma Fox Mazer/Scott O’Dell/
Robert Newton Peck
Maureen Daly/Paula Danzinger/Norma Klein
Lloyd Alexander/Paula Fox/Harry Mazer/Zibby Oneal
Lois Duncan/Rosa Guy/Ouida Sebestyen/William
Sleater
Bette Greene
Mary Stolz/Laurence Yep
Robin F. Brancato/Isabelle Holland/Mildred D. Taylor/
Jane Yolen

It is important to note that the 1980s was also the decade when YA scholarship increased in reputation. Researchers and scholars such as Alleen Pace Nielsen, Kenneth L. Donelson, Robert C. Small, Jr., Jerry Weiss, Joan Kaywell, Hugh Agee, and many others brought credibility to a discipline that was still in its own adolescence. Related textbooks, anthologies, and literary biographies were finally being published, distributed, and utilized in university classrooms. It was a dynamic and exciting time to be in the field of young adult literature, and *ALAN* and *The ALAN Review* were critical players in the growth of the young adult book market and the depth of the literary and pedagogical scholarship.

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