

# Once and Future ALAN: Where We've Been, Where We Might Go

Executive Secretary 2000–2011

**W**hen I took over the position of ALAN Executive Secretary from Ted Hipple in 2000, he pulled me aside before my selection was announced and, in an exclamation as bright as his shirts and suspenders, said, “Congratulations, Gary! You’ll be good at this.”

Of course, I had no such confidence. Ted Hipple was the heart and face of ALAN, its first and only chief administrator. One didn’t replace a Ted Hipple; one only hoped not to muck things up too badly.

What I hadn’t fully realized as I stepped into Ted’s position is that his faith might have not merely been in me. He had seen the organization grow from a small group of NCTE members interested in adolescent literature (the term “junior books” was also used at that time to describe these works written for and about young readers) into a stable, resilient presence in the field. His trust certainly came as much from the membership and leadership of the organization as from me serving as its new administrator. He had seen the commitment of presidents and board members over most of ALAN’s first quarter-century, and he had faith that the organization would survive and even thrive for years to come.

ALAN had a unique relationship with its parent



organization, the National Council of Teachers of English, in most of its formative years. One reason was that an early treasurer of our organization showed less-than-desirable skill in managing finances, the result of which was that ALAN fell into significant debt. At our board’s request, NCTE stepped in, and its then-treasurer Bill Subick became ALAN’s treasurer also; for many years, he ensured that ALAN remained solvent and fiscally healthy. Several years after my becoming Executive Secretary, NCTE informed us that it was time for the

organization to separate from them and survive on its own financially; with guidance—especially from our current treasurer Marge Ford—we have done just that.

I learned during my 10 years as Executive Secretary to trust Ted’s faith in our members and leaders. An extraordinary parade of presidents has served the organization, and board members have joined us whose interest in young people and their literature kept board meetings buzzing with ideas and new opportunities. The membership has grown, in part due to longtime membership secretary Joan Kaywell’s establishment of state representatives and other recruitment efforts, and that membership has become further engaged through a vibrant new ALAN website

(see [www.alan-ya.org](http://www.alan-ya.org)), professional-grade publications, and larger-than-ever attendance at the ALAN Workshop.

Let me pause just a moment on that last item. Ted Hipple himself would be startled at the evolution of the ALAN Workshop. For its first 30 years, it was

a stable and comfortable gathering of colleagues and friends, originally counted in the dozens, later never exceeding 200. The energy of ALAN presidents over the past 10 years or so has transformed it. Now its enrollment regularly approaches 500, and author appearances have gone from maybe 20 at an event

to 50. Publishers have helped in this growth by investing their faith and funds in ALAN to bring authors to the workshop and provide hundreds of new books for donation to attendees. If you've never been to an ALAN workshop, you must find a way to do so. I'm thrilled when I see new teachers and librarians raise their hands at an ALAN workshop as first-time participants, many helped by the Gallo Grants established by ALAN patriarch Don Gallo to support workshop attendance by new teachers.

I'm also impressed by a new generation of leadership in the organization, including Executive Director Teri Lesesne, who leads with force and insight. When a group turns 40, its creators have likely moved on and/or retired, so this can be a critical time in a group's survival as the "torch is passed." ALAN has done so smoothly by encouraging new educators and professionals to serve on committees and the ALAN Board; our future stability requires that this continue.

I'm particularly proud of two ALAN Board initiatives that further enhanced the organization during my service as Executive Secretary. First, when I learned of a bequest from the estate of the children's writer Amelia Elizabeth Walden to establish a prize for a life-affirming book in our field each year, I contacted the estate's attorney, and after some negotiations, ALAN was successful in its bid to sponsor the new Walden Award, a prize that continues to grow in prestige as publishers and professionals in the field learn about it. The second accomplishment has been

more under-the-radar. Because of ALAN's status as an Assembly of NCTE, its workshop operated as a segment of NCTE's Annual Convention, and any resulting proceeds, once bills were paid, went directly to NCTE. As our workshop attendance more than doubled in recent years, I was able to renegotiate that arrangement, the result of which is that NCTE now shares workshop income with us. This has brought thousands in additional income to our treasury, money that can enhance and expand our mission.

To be sure, like many educational organizations today, ALAN faces challenges. Some are clearly visible to us—the nationwide mania for standardization that reduces school curricula to rote work and limits reading choice; the massive decline in the number of publishers and booksellers in the field, with the result that gradually decreasing numbers of corporate conglomerates are controlling the publication and distribution of books. Other challenges are visible but less tangible. For example, what will the impact of e-readers and new media be on the field of young adult literature and on ALAN? Are we witnessing the death of the book as we know it, and if so, are we prepared to join in the search for its replacement? Some challenges are mostly invisible, and here I imagine those thousands of young people in our schools and communities who remain invisible. Some of them are nonreaders, and we still haven't found ways to reach them. How can ALAN make a difference not only to those already captivated by YA lit, but also to those who have never experienced it?

ALAN has been around for most of the maybe 50 years that we've had a discrete body of literature that we call "adolescent" or "young adult." Another challenge might be for us to take the lead in further defining a critical theory for our relatively new field. Of course, we must be cautious in doing so. In her famous essay "Against Interpretation," the philosopher Sontag (1961) warned against letting the aesthetics of literature become bogged down in the intellectualism of literary interpretation. Still, there is a place for literary analysis in that it can help us consider what matters to readers and what distinguishes texts. YAL would benefit from a speculative frame for thinking about literature for the young. We still don't fully agree on what defines our genre or what distinguishes the best works in our field. Check the book reviews in our major publications, including our own *ALAN*

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*Review.* We're not always looking at these texts in the same way, and though the point isn't to impose uniformity on our critical judgments, it might be that we're grown up enough now as a genre that we can begin to form sharpened perceptions about what makes young adult literature distinctive and what constitutes quality.

Yes, we face challenges today, but there is still good reason to choose optimism as ALAN heads into its next 40 years. Ted Hipple's 2000 compliment to me that "you'll be good at this" really belongs to all of us who lead and serve in the organization. While state and national testing and wrong-headed notions about both curriculum and students continue to push against our efforts to introduce young readers to the marvels and satisfactions of YA lit, more young adult novels,

encompassing broader territories than ever before, are being published and read each year.

Young adult literature, and ALAN, are healthy and vibrant. We continue to be "good at" making a difference in young people's educations and lives.

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### **Reference**

Sontag, S. (1961). *Against interpretation and other essays*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.