



## From the Editors

**A**s editors of *The ALAN Review*, we readily acknowledge that we are not experts on all areas of young adult literature. In fact, as we begin our fifth volume of the journal, we are increasingly aware of what we don't know. We do, however, seem to be getting better at finding people who focus on areas that we see as important—poetry, fantasy, dystopias, science fiction, gender issues, and, in this issue, nonfiction. The specific call for this issue focused on young adult nonfiction literature. For the introduction, we recruited Chris Crowe.

Many readers of *The ALAN Review* know Chris as a past president of the organization. Others know him as the author of *Mississippi Trial, 1955* (2002) and its nonfiction companion piece *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmet Till Case* (2003). He claims to have been introduced to YA literature by his students as a high school English teacher in Arizona, but he certainly became immersed in it while studying with Ken Donelson and Alleen Nilsen at Arizona State. While writing a biography of Mildred Taylor (Crowe, 1999), he found that he enjoyed historical research and ever since, he has been hooked on the genre. A few years ago, he was a judge for the nonfiction category of the SCBWI's Golden Kite Award (<http://www.scbwi.org/Pages.aspx/Golden-Kite-Award>) and reviewed nearly 100 nonfiction books published for children and teens. We are pleased that Chris accepted our invitation to serve as the guest editor for this issue with an emphasis on nonfiction.

Before passing the introduction to the nonfiction pieces off to Chris, we want to comment on several

other contributions to this issue. As always, we look for submissions beyond a specific call. Alan Brown and Chris Crowe discuss how they have used YA fiction with a focus on a sport to connect with young readers. They show that it isn't always about the ball, but about the challenges the protagonist might be facing. Their piece is accompanied by Matt de la Peña's author column that discusses his own introduction to literature as a college athlete and his eventual career as a writer who just can't seem to stop using sports in his novels as he writes about something else.

Margaret Willey contributes another Author's Connection column. She discusses her immersion into the social problem of bullying as she prepared her most recent novel, *Four Secrets* (2012). The struggle to prevent bullying in our schools and in our society is an important issue that we will return to with a greater presence in our Winter 2014 issue—stay tuned. Finally, welcome Joe Milner's discussion of formal text complexity in YA literature. Certainly, the conversation about text complexity is at a new height as educators everywhere discuss, debate, and argue for or against issues raised by statements in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Milner reminds us that educators who use and promote YA literature have always been interested in quality and rigor. He provides some side-by-side discussions of classic texts and YA literature. So, as we consider the demands of CCSS, perhaps the old is new again.

Now, with that final connection to CCSS, we turn

to Chris’s introduction where we just might find that a focus on nonfiction and its relationship to CCSS is more timely than we imagined it would be four years ago when we outlined the foci of our issues.

## From Guest Editor Chris Crowe

Writing in the February 1976 issue of *The Horn Book*, Milton Meltzer lamented the fiction bias of the Newbery Medal. He pointed out that in 1922, the very first Newbery Medal was awarded to a work of *nonfiction*, Hendrik Van Loon’s *Story of Mankind*, but that only four more nonfiction books had won the medal in the next fifty-some years. In the time since Meltzer published his article, only one book, Russell Freedman’s *Lincoln: A Photobiography*, has captured the coveted literary prize, and that was 25 years ago.

In an attempt to remedy its nonfiction neglect, the American Library Association established the Robert F. Sibert Award in 2001 and the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults in 2010. Prestigious as these two awards are, they do not—and likely never will—reach the level of respect and notoriety of the Newbery Medal. Sadly, that surprises almost no one.

Nonfiction has rarely been considered “literature” by English teachers. The tradition in university English departments—and by trickle-down, the tradition in high school English departments—has been to define literature as fiction, poetry, and drama. Political documents, journals, and essays sometimes leaked into reading lists, but fiction has always been king of the English curriculum, with poetry and drama as crown princes. As many of the articles in this special issue point out, the Common Core State Standards seem designed to dethrone the traditional notion of literature, or at least to revise dramatically the reading content in English and other secondary courses.

This change will be a challenge for many English teachers, not because there’s a dearth of worthwhile nonfiction, but because as English majors, these teachers rarely if ever encountered book-length nonfiction texts. And even if they have gone out of their way to read nonfiction books since graduating from college, many of these teachers don’t know how to teach nonfiction texts; the teaching approach, logically, should be different from the methods of instruction used for novels, poems, and plays. So, in order to prepare to

meet the demands of CCSS and to be better teachers of literature broadly defined, secondary teachers need to know how to find suitable nonfiction texts, how to evaluate them, and how to teach them.

This issue of *The ALAN Review* will help, and Dawan Coombs’s article is a great place to begin thinking about teaching nonfiction. Coombs suggests quite reasonably that fiction and nonfiction can have a symbiotic, complementary relationship in the classroom, and she offers some practical, CCSS-worthy ways to integrate nonfiction into a literature curriculum. Nonfiction texts can provide helpful background knowledge that will enhance students’ reading of traditional literature. It can also, she points out, provide opportunities for authentic inquiry and for differentiated instruction.

For teachers looking for ways to talk about and study nonfiction texts, “The Role of Design in Nonfiction Books” by Terrell Young, Nancy Hadaway, and Barbara Ward provides some refreshing and interesting approaches to informational books. Rather than focus merely on the content of such books, they propose that teachers should also help students see nonfiction books as whole texts by considering the visual and design elements and access features of such books. Using winners of the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults as examples, the authors explain how teachers can help students understand the essential role nonprint aspects play in nonfiction books. Their discussion is enhanced by an interview with a book designer who explains some of the hows and whys of her work.

In the next article, high school English teacher Rachel Billings explains that she teaches nonfiction because she wants her students to develop a better sense of the past and of their abilities to make a difference in the future. For several years, she has used two nonfiction books that deal with civil rights history to engage her students in thinking and writing about America’s past and themselves. Lee A. Talley’s article, “Operation Pied Piper,” also focuses on history but in a much different way. Rather than relying solely on secondary sources to engage history, Talley shows how she has used primary sources, in this case letters written by English children displaced from their London homes during World War II, to provide insight into that segment of history. When paired with what he calls “evacuation fiction,” these primary sources

provide a much more nuanced understanding of what these children experienced.

Paul Binford's column connecting practices in the social studies classroom to the teaching of informational texts in the era of CCSS makes a long-overdue formal connection between the social studies and young adult literatures. He reminds us that this connection is easily made and promotes timely interdisciplinary discussions about pedagogy. While history and English are curricular cousins, and many of the fiction–nonfiction, cross-curricular connections take place in those classes, Kelly Byrne Bull and Juliann Dupuis discuss a more radical—and more exciting—cross-curricular pairing: English and biology. Citing the CCSS recommendation for a greater presence of nonfiction texts in all classes, these two teacher educators believe that YA nonfiction can be a useful and successful tool for interdisciplinary instruction.

In their article, “From Cave Art to Cryonics,” Lawrence Baines and Jane Fisher recommend some effective assignments that take advantage of the growing number of first-rate YA nonfiction books that deal with science, history, and a range of other topics. One of the assignments they describe, “How Long Will You Live?,” is certainly something that English teachers could use to develop an interdisciplinary assignment with a science or social science class. Brianna Burke takes nonfiction back into the realm of traditional literature by discussing how the novel *The Hunger Games* can be a vehicle for understanding the very real issues of social and environmental justice, issues that traditionally have been limited to social science courses. Issues raised in the novel provide opportunities for reading and discussing nonfiction texts that argue or explain contemporary social and environmental conditions.

*TAR*'s lineup of nonfiction articles concludes with Teri Lesesne's column, “Tell Me a (Real) Story: The Demand for Literary Nonfiction.” As most of the authors in this issue have done, she begins by citing the nonfiction mandate in the CCSS before tackling some of the essential questions this new mandate has raised for teachers and librarians. She reviews, for example, a range of definitions of “nonfiction” to show how the term means different things to different people, and then recommends that educators work together to develop a consistent and coherent definition of the term as it will be used by teachers and librarians. Readers who are still struggling to discover the wide range of YA nonfiction books that are available will appreciate her resources for finding high-quality nonfiction books. Of course, all of us will benefit from her suggestion to read more nonfiction and to find ways to integrate it into our courses.

I'm pleased to see that *TAR* has seen fit to devote an entire issue to YA nonfiction, and I hope the fine articles contained herein will lead to the kinds of discussion and consideration of these books that will help teachers meet the mandates of the CCSS and, more especially, the needs of their students. I also hope that this issue provokes more articles that focus on the dynamic and fascinating field of YA nonfiction.

## References

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