



## MASTER CLASS IN YAL

Mark **Letcher**

# An Idea Whose Time Has Come:

Neal Shusterman's ALAN Master Class

*As the new editors of The ALAN Review, we are excited to introduce a column that will be featured in each issue of the journal: "Master Class in YAL." Here, Mark Letcher, a former ALAN President, explains the motivations for and some history behind the "Master Class" session at the ALAN conference, and describes our first featured YA author in this column, Neal Shusterman.*

**A**nyone who has attended the annual ALAN workshop can share what a unique experience it is. We enjoy almost two full days of young adult authors, editors, publishers, and scholars discussing their work and how YA speaks to young readers; it can often be a highlight of the year for ALAN members. As a former President of ALAN, it has been my privilege to organize and present the 2018 workshop to our attendees. We know that the ALAN workshop can provide an experience that few other conferences can match, including the generous donation of books, the peeks into authors' writing processes, and the association with other YA advocates in the same ballroom.

In recent years, however, the ALAN Executive Board has explored other opportunities to put YA authors in conversation with teachers and students. Many of us already strive to do this by taking our students to author events in our area and bringing authors into our classrooms, either face-to-face or through Skype or other technological means. But when we, as an organization, have access to a large number of teachers, as we do during the NCTE conference and ALAN workshop, it seems that we can, and should, do more.

With that in mind, former ALAN President Laura Renzi initiated the idea of an ALAN "Master Class" session in 2017. The session was proposed for that year's NCTE conference in St. Louis, which would ideally make it available to both NCTE and ALAN attendees. Most important, the session was proposed to be an extended 75-minute conversation with one well-known voice in YA literature. The author would be free to discuss her/his work in detail, the experience of writing for young readers, or any other aspect of the field that they wanted to talk about. We, as an organization, were excited about this chance to give conference attendees a more intimate and in-depth session with an author. If the session were to be accepted, each ALAN president could then propose the same session format in the ensuing years, with different authors speaking each year.

The first ALAN Master Class session was presented at the 2017 NCTE conference. Even though it was late in the day on Saturday, the room was packed to hear the featured speaker, Laurie Halse Anderson, author of *Speak*, *The Impossible Knife of Memory*, and *Shout*, among many others. Laurie is a longtime friend of ALAN; she's spoken at many workshops, and she received the 2008 ALAN Award, given to those who have made outstanding contributions to the field of YA literature. During Laurie's Master Class, she touched on a number of topics: her close, symbiotic relationship with her readers, her fierce defense of students' right to read books of their own choosing, and the way her novels have affected her, as she's written and looked back on them. The 75 minutes went by far too quickly, and it was apparent that Laurie could

have continued talking for much longer. Her passion for her work, and her readers, was clearly evident during her session.

With such a successful inaugural session, it was an easy decision to propose another Master Class for the 2018 NCTE conference to be held in Houston. This time around, the responsibility for the proposal was mine, as I was the current president and in the midst of planning that year's ALAN workshop. I wanted to invite an author who was well known and would draw attendees, but I also wanted an author with a large and varied body of work, as well as someone who would be an engaging speaker. Laurie had set a high bar the previous year, and I wanted the 2018 Master Class to be just as interesting and invigorating for attendees as the 2017 session had been. I submitted the session proposal to NCTE in January 2018 without a firm idea of who the featured author would be, but I had my preference.

My choice was Neal Shusterman, the author of books popular with younger and older adolescent readers, including *Bruiser*, the Skinjacker trilogy, the Antsy Bonano books, the Unwind series, and *Challenger Deep*. In 2017, he was also the ALAN Award recipient. As such, he was granted an automatic invitation to speak at the 2018 ALAN workshop. I had been in conversation with his publisher about this and knew that he would be talking to ALAN about his upcoming work, *Dry*. While that would be an excellent topic for the ALAN workshop attendees, my hope was that by also inviting him to lead the Master Class session, he would feel free to talk about other works, as well. Given that the ALAN workshop speaking slots are significantly shorter than a Master Class session, Neal could not only speak longer, but also reach a different audience during the NCTE conference. At least, this was how I pitched the idea to his publisher. After a few negotiations over time slots, I was told that Neal was in. Through his publisher, I was told that he planned to use the Master Class as an opportunity to give attendees "something they've never seen or heard before." I was intrigued and felt confident that others would be, too.

On the evening of the Master Class, I briefly introduced Neal and let him have the room. As he opened his laptop, he again stressed how he wanted this session to be unlike others he had done. His idea, it turned out, was to use the session to share drafts, fragments, and pieces of past work that had never seen the light of day.

He described these as stories he "couldn't find a fit for" in his other works, and "the projects that never were." I could see attendees eagerly leaning forward, anxious to hear what would follow.

As he read his stories to the audience, Neal explained the genesis of the ideas and how they did, or did not, fit into larger projects. Some of the stories remained just that: stories that would not be expanded further. But others, he pointed out, led to other ideas, or contributed in some significant ways to his novels. One story, for example, was a kernel that eventually (years later) would lead to his conception of the Unwind series. Neal mentioned that he never deletes these old files; he never knows when an older story may inspire him, so he likes to keep them available. He also shared some insider knowledge on potential movie projects based on his works. Attendees I spoke with were thrilled that they had gained such an intimate look at an author's process and were overjoyed that they now had additional background knowledge about some of their favorite Shusterman books.

Given the success of the past two sessions, we have proposed another Master Class for the 2019 NCTE conference in Baltimore. I am pleased to announce that A. S. King (*Dig*, *Glory O'Brien's History of the Future*, *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*, among many other titles) has agreed to be the featured author for this year. I know she'll be an eagerly anticipated author, just as Laurie and Neal were, and that she will engage her audience as only she can. The Master Class has provided exactly what we had hoped: a different forum for authors and a vibrant session for those who may attend NCTE and/or ALAN. I look forward to this session format continuing in the years to come.

**Mark Letcher** is an Assistant Professor of English Education at Lewis University, where he also directs the English Language Arts Teaching program. At Lewis, Mark teaches courses in young adult literature, writing pedagogy, and first-year composition, among others.

Mark has been an active member of ALAN since 2004, serving on the Board of Directors, as chair of the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award committee, and in 2018, as President of ALAN. He is very pleased to see the Master Class become an established part of the NCTE conference program.



Photo credit: Noah Schaffer