



## The Caring Community of Young Adult Literature

*Donald R. Gallo was kind enough to let us print his keynote address, delivered at the ALAN Workshop held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on November 21, 2005*

Good morning!

I'm going to be mentioning the names of a number of people during my presentation, but there isn't going to be enough time to note everyone who deserves to be included. So if you are someone important whom I fail to note, please try not to be offended. I mean no disrespect. And if you are one of those people whose name I mention, please do not stand up and wave your arms in the air and *woooo* at the top of your voice. I'm just going to mention individuals as examples, and your name may just be one of the many. But if you somehow feel especially honored to be mentioned, feel free to invite me to lunch later. I won't mind.

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[Holding up half-full glass of water:] My wife, whom many of you know, would say this glass is half full. She'd be right, of course. She would also tell you that *I* see it as a glass half empty. And she's probably right about that, too. Not only that, but I'm the kind of person who lies awake at night wondering why the glass hadn't been filled, trying to determine who was responsible for filling it, getting ticked off about how irresponsible some people are, and attempting to figure out what has to be done to get it filled. "Hey! Can we get some more water over here!?"

[Filling glass from nearby water pitcher:] Aah, thank you. That was easy!

There is much in education today that I could complain about: inadequate budgets, far too much emphasis on testing, too many incompetent administrators and under-trained colleagues, lack of time to prepare adequately, hostile or disinterested students, uninvolved parents, overly involved parents, religious fanatics who push their narrow agendas and bully school administrators to remove dozens of books from our classrooms and libraries.

Ooooh, there are lots of worthy targets I could take my lance to this morning. But Patty Campbell expects me to be positive, to be upbeat, to talk about "The Caring Community of Young Adult Literature," the theme of this year's ALAN workshop, to celebrate what's *in* the glass and not fret over what's *not*.

That's not easy for me to do, because I'm normally more of a gadfly than a cheerleader. But this morning I intend to be a cheerleader, albeit without a short, pleated skirt and pompoms. I'm going to do this because I love young adult literature. It's been a field I've valued and championed for nearly 40 years. Beginning with the publication of *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, *The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte, and *Mr and Mrs Bo Jo Jones* by Ann Head in the late 1960s, my career has grown alongside that of contemporary young adult books. Helping to nourish young adult literature in a variety of ways has given me a very productive and satisfying life. I love what I do:

- reading dozens of excellent books each year—like Chris Lynch’s National Book Award Finalist, *Inexcusable*
- writing articles and reviews about books and teaching, as I do in my *English Journal* column, “Bold Books for Teenagers”
- editing anthologies of brand new short stories about and for teenagers (you have a copy of my next one in your packet—titled *What Are You Afraid Of?*)

Young adult literature nurtures my daily life as I

- read professional journals like *VOYA* and *The ALAN Review*
- conduct workshops for teachers and librarians across the country
- interview and correspond with dozens of fascinating authors—such as Joan Bauer, Walter Dean Myers, Nancy Garden, Laurie Halse Anderson, Alex Flinn, Graham Salisbury, Tamora Pierce, and other authors you will hear from today and tomorrow
- interact with like-minded colleagues in middle schools, high schools, colleges, and libraries—like Patty Campbell, Sarah Herz, Teri Lesesne, Walter Mayes, Mary Arnold, Patrick Jones, Michael Cart, and others whom you will have the opportunity to meet here.

I value the talks I’ve had with talented editors and creative publishers. I am thankful for the many congenial marketing and publicity people who send me books, and with Amazon and other wholesalers, paperback distributors, and salespeople in bookstores who make those books available for purchase.

I cherish my talks with teenagers during school visits, and meeting readers at book-signings.

I can envision no better life for myself.

And this event—this annual, two-day ALAN workshop that I have attended almost every year since the first one 31 years ago—is always the high point of my professional year. I expect it will be the high point of your professional year, too, because this is the largest gathering of authors who write for teenagers, and of educators who support young adult literature, that you will find anywhere on the planet! So I am extremely happy to be a part of this extravaganza with you all this morning.

How many of you have never attended an ALAN Workshop before? Raise your hands way up high.

How many of you have attended a whole lot of ALAN Workshops, maybe ten or more? Stand up, please. Are those first-timers going to have a good time here? [YES?]

I **guarantee** we will all have a fantastic time here today and tomorrow—once I get off this platform. You already have received the largest package of free books anyone has ever handed you, and if you had to leave Pittsburgh this minute, you would still be a happy reader with all those books. Books are wonderful things to own; free books are even better. You can thank the publishers and their authors for contributing those.

“The Caring Community of Young Adult Literature.” Just who are the members of this community? Who is it that cares?

Well, **we** care. You and I—all of us in this room. We care about books, and we care about teenagers. We tend to take those two things for granted, don’t we? ***We care about books, and we care about teenagers.*** Not all adults share that feeling or that perspective, as you well know. We know that a lot of adults don’t read any kind of books, no less books featuring teenage characters. I’m sure you know a few colleagues—even English teachers—who haven’t read a book since they graduated from college. Many of us also have colleagues in our English departments who, though they are generally readers, refuse to read a YA novel. I’ve met too many of them. That’s certainly a half-empty glass!

So let’s look at this in a positive way. Let’s acknowledge that those of us who read books, especially books about teenagers, are a special breed. ***You and I are a special breed.*** And it’s such a pleasure that we have each other, isn’t it? Even though many of us in this room are strangers to one another.

We can change that easily. Let’s take just a minute to make ourselves a little less strange to those around us. When I give the word, please lean forward, or twist sideways, or turn around and introduce yourself to someone you don’t know. Name, place where you work, and what you do. Go! [People are given a minute or two to talk, then are called back to attention.]

If you came here alone, you now know somebody you can go to lunch with later.

As much as we care about books, I believe most of us care about teenagers even more. Many adults do

**not** care about teenagers—or even **like** teenagers. A lot of adults even **fear** teenagers, look **down** on them, **shun** them in public, don't **value** their interests, don't **understand** their needs and attitudes, and don't **care** to. And while none of us can honestly claim to **really** understand today's teenagers (heck, they can't even understand themselves most of the time!), we still care about them and welcome them into our conversations.

Because we care about teenagers, we care about finding the right books for them, as Teri Lesesne says in her book *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time*, because we know how important books can be for understanding ourselves and understanding the wider world. That's where you and I differ from those adults who spend a great deal of their time trying to keep certain books out of the hands of teenagers. Those people and their organizations do not want teenagers to understand the wider world, do not want them to think for themselves or express themselves. They do not trust or respect teenagers. Nor do they respect us professional educators and librarians or our informed judgments about books. We see value in expanding students' minds and experiences; they want to keep children's minds as narrow as their own limited worldview. I greatly admire you educators and librarians who fight for these books and put your jobs on the line when certain adults want to keep all kinds of books out of the hands of teenagers who need them. And I am delighted and encouraged by the courageous stance of publishers of young adult books who refuse to give in to pressure from censors, and who continue to publish controversial books—books that have realistic teenage language (including the f-word sometimes), and characters who have sexual thoughts (and sometimes actions), and characters who are gay, and that deal with some of the harsher realities of life. Teenagers **want** to know, **need** to

know these things, and books are often their only way to find out.

As members of this community, we care about books because they contain not just information, but more importantly, they transmit stories of our lives. When I say "**our** lives," I mean that in the broadest sense of **human** lives. That is, the stories are not just about **my** insular life, or life as I wish it would be, but they are about the lives of characters that cover a broad spectrum, from today to the distant past, to possible futures and imagined other worlds, from wealthy suburban communities to crime-ridden city neighborhoods, to bucolic farm communities, to teenagers in other countries, to . . . well, you get the point. Contemporary teenage books tell the stories of all kinds of lives.

Author Susan Cheever, speaking at a Writers Guild forum in New York City during the fall of 2004, said:

storytelling is the thing that unites all genres [. . .]. Nonfiction, column writing, biography, whatever, it's all storytelling [. . .]. It's the way we understand our own lives [. . .].

There's something "healing" about this process of telling stories and the way that we understand our lives through telling stories [. . .]. I think human understanding comes through storytelling. [*The Bulletin*, Winter 2005, p. 23.]

Those of us who are classroom teachers often forget about that when we are preoccupied with keeping order in our classrooms, are under pressure to teach lists of vocabulary words and prepare students to pass standardized tests, are trying to be accountable. And of course, those who demand that we give those standardized tests and those who construct those tests have **no** understanding that literature is about telling stories about our lives.

Those of us who are librarians often forget about that when we are concerned with cataloging, shelf space, overdue books, and slashed budgets.

Those of us in publishing often forget about that when we are

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concerned with contract wording, sales figures, and promoting celebrity authors.

**It's all about story.** English teachers would have little to teach if it weren't for stories. Librarians wouldn't have anything on their shelves if it weren't for stories. Publishers wouldn't have jobs if it weren't for stories.

And so our "caring community" depends upon storytellers—on fiction writers who create unforgettable characters—like Ponyboy Curtis, Wetzie Bat, Stargirl, Nightjohn, Jerry Renault, Jenna Boller, Sarah Byrnes, and of course, Harry Potter. Our community depends on storytellers who place characters in situations that reflect and illuminate important truths about Life; on nonfiction writers like Russell Freedman, Jim Murphy, Elizabeth Partridge, Susan Campbell Bartoletti, Marc Aronson, and Chris Crowe who research and assemble information that informs us as well as entertains us; on poets like Helen Frost, Eireann Corrigan, Jaime Adoff, and Marilyn Nelson, who play with rhythms and rhymes to make language sing to us; and on cartoonists like Craig Thompson, Chris Ware, Jeff Smith, Marjane Satrapi, and a host of Japanese manga artists who present stories in graphic form, making them more appealing to reluctant readers.

During the rest of today and all day tomorrow you will hear authors talk about their craft, their experiences, and their intentions as they attempt to communicate with teen readers. You will find that they write for teenagers because they care about teenagers. In fact, you will likely hear a couple of authors quote from letters they receive from student readers who have been touched by their work, and others may tell you how comments and questions from readers motivated them to write a particular novel or a whole series of them.

These authors, as they will tell you, also value teachers and librarians who bring kids and books together. They value all of us so much that they sometimes even work for free. In fact, all of the authors here at this workshop have come without remuneration. Our publishers—mine being Candlewick Press—provide our travel, lodging, and meals, and have, as I said earlier, contributed copies of our books for all registrants. They also were responsible for last evening's delightful wine and cheese reception that most of you attended. Talk about a

caring community! Together, that's tens of thousands of dollars worth of caring!

All that's expected in return is that you go home and purchase millions of copies of our books. Or maybe hundreds. More likely, a class set. In truth, we'll all be very happy if you go home and share these books and experiences with your students and your colleagues.

Because they care about their teenage audience, these writers, unlike writers of generations before S.E. Hinton, are incredibly honest with teen readers. Which is the primary reason that teens love these books, and why so many contemporary YA writers get into trouble with certain parents, and why teachers and librarians who try to use these books in our schools and communities get challenged so often. These books deal candidly with issues of significance to teenagers, and, perhaps more importantly, they deal with human feelings. Author Terry Davis suggests that this is why some parents are so afraid to have their kids read this kind of literature—it's the only thing in their school lives that involves emotions! There are no human emotions to deal with in an algebra class or a calculus class. History classes tend to focus more on the facts and issues than on the emotions of our past. The subject of science is designed to keep emotions out of investigations. And the only emotions that students in an English class express when studying grammar are frustration and boredom.

In all good literature there is an intimacy—especially when there's a first-person teenage narrator, as occurs in so much of young adult literature—an intimacy that draws the reader in, making him or her a willing confidant, if not an active accomplice, of the main character. So readers struggle with the characters' problems, feel the pain, experience the anger, laugh and cringe and cry, and celebrate the protagonist's accomplishments with him or her. It is that involvement, and its accompanying pleasure, that makes teenage readers want more.

Most bookstores—even the largest chains—these days seem to be doing their part to provide teenagers with access to all sorts of books, but a lot of schools and libraries could do more. (That half-empty glass again. Sorry.) But that fact is that not a lot of kids are reading much on their own. A Harris Poll reported earlier this year of kids in grades 3 through 12 conducted in a random selection of schools in October

2003 indicates that more than half the students had done no personal reading on the day prior to the survey. **More than half—no personal reading!** To the question: *Thinking only about yesterday, how much time did you spend reading a book that was for your own enjoyment (not a homework assignment)?* only seven percent of the kids said they had spent between 30 minutes and an hour reading, and none of the 2,032 students said they read for more than an hour. None. (Reported in the Cleveland, Ohio, *Plain Dealer*, March 26, 2005, p. B11)

From what I've gathered from teenagers, an awful lot of them have no idea that books like those you have by your feet this morning exist. They have never heard of Kathleen Jeffrie Johnson or Han Nolan or Pete Hautman or Pam Munoz Ryan or Laurie Halse Anderson or even Robert Cormier. How could they? Television commercials do not advertise them. These authors and their books are not mentioned in the music teens listen to on their iPods. Many of their parents never had access to these books and authors, so parents can't recommend them. Most of the old textbooks they have to read for English classes don't include these works. Even some librarians and English teachers are unfamiliar with these authors and the marvelous stories they have to tell.

At a Barnes & Noble book-signing a couple of weeks ago in Ohio, I met a middle school librarian who picked up a copy of my short story anthology *Destination Unexpected* and looked at the list of the contributing authors noted on the back cover. She did not recognize a single name. Not Alex Flinn, or Kimberly Willis Holt, or Ron Koertge, or Richard Peck, or Graham Salisbury, or Ellen Wittlinger. What was worse, this was part of the store's Teacher Appreciation Week, and I was one of ten authors who were signing copies of our books. Or I should say had HOPED to sign copies of our books. Not a single middle school or high school English teacher showed up. (That's not just a half-empty glass; that's a nearly drained glass! And it's very depressing.)

How **will** teenagers learn about these excellent books, these talented and dedicated authors? The main source of information about these books and authors is [**spread arms wide**]*—us!* As a believer in young adult literature, I've often felt like I imagine members of the early Christian church felt—trying to spread the Gospel one person at a time, often alone in an ignorant and hostile world. That's another reason

why this gathering today is so important to me. **We**—this caring community—are the ones who must spread the good word about young adult literature. **We** are the ones who must talk about these books in our classrooms, display these books in our libraries, let teenagers know they exist. Because we care.

Our classrooms and those of our teaching colleagues can be enlivened by the use of more books like these. The circulation of our libraries can improve if more teenagers learn about these books. There are teenagers out there who need these books, whose reading lives can be changed. Indeed, whose emotional lives might be improved as a result of what they read. Teenagers are often desperate to find others like themselves, and if they can't find caring companions in real life, they can surely find kids like themselves in contemporary novels. Whether they are emotionally confused, physically abused, suffering from peer pressure, struggling through conflicts with parents, agonizing over moral issues, or questioning their sexual identity, there is a book waiting for them, if only they knew it is available.

**We** are the ones who can share these books, who can reach these teens—because we care, because we are the caring community of believers in the value of young adult literature.

You may say "Amen" to that. Amen! Yes.

Now, as I turn this podium over to Joan Bauer, who will surely make you laugh and maybe even cry, and to Mary Arnold who will introduce her [Holding up glass of water], I wish you an unprecedented two days of invigorating experiences and a lifetime of reading pleasures. Fill your glass!

*Don Gallo has been a force of nature in the promotion of young adult literature. In addition, to mentoring and assisting everyone from authors and editors, to librarians and teachers, to young readers themselves, he has been president of ALAN, has been the recipient of both the ALAN Award and the Ted Hipple Award, served in numerous positions for NCTE, ALAN, and other organizations, and continues to provide wonderful short story collections on a regular basis. He is Professor Emeritus of Central Connecticut State University, and continues as adjunct faculty at Cleveland State University. His website [www.Authors4Teens.com](http://www.Authors4Teens.com) is a wonderful resource. Dubbed "the Godfather of young adult short stories," Don's column, "Bold Books for Bold Times," has appeared in English Journal for the past two years. In 2003 Don established a grant to help new teachers attend the ALAN Workshop for the first time.*