

Flash Back—Forge Ahead:

Dynamism and Transformation in Young Adult Literature

“Here’s to all the places we went. And all the places we’ll go.”

—John Green, *An Abundance of Katherines*, p. 6.

When contemplating the selection of a theme for the 2011 ALAN Workshop, I was reminded of the roots and branches that structure our field and organization and was inspired by the ways in which both have successfully shifted and swayed with time and changing elements, while maintaining a core commitment to young people and the books written for them. The process of flashing back and forging ahead implies a dynamism, a dedication to honoring what has come before and a willingness to proceed into the lesser known, to grow and reach and expand—and thus avoid stagnation. This back and forth generates the necessary knowledge and momentum to adapt and survive and is evidenced in the books that define us, the readers who read them, and the advocates who believe in the value of both.

The Books That Define Us The Topics

The field of young adult literature boasts a cadre of authors who, from the start, tackled matters of

consequence— addiction, family dynamics, war, pressures to conform, gender and sexual identities and preferences, among others. These writers trusted in their readers’ abilities to grapple with complexity and willingness to lose and find themselves in stories. When Robert Cormier wrote *After the First Death* (1979), for example, he posed difficult questions of morality and understood that readers were capable of considering multiple perspectives, even those that might challenge their understandings of themselves and others. Similarly, in *The Pigman* (1968), Paul Zindel expected readers to consider the consequences of their actions and the fragility of life. M. E. Kerr exposed them to a critique of adult-child relationships and the seeming do-gooder parents in *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!* (1972). And, in *Annie on My Mind* (1982), Nancy Garden traced the romantic relationship of two 17-year-old girls, engaging readers in a topic so emotional that it led to the burning of the book in Kansas City.

Over time and amidst a chang-

ing world, the field embraced new topics and reconsidered established ones in novel ways—without losing faith in readers and what they are capable of contemplating. Cris Beam’s transgender protagonist in *I Am J* (2011) encourages readers to reimagine gender as they know it, to wonder if how it has been is how it should stay. In *The Realm of Possibility* (2004), David Levithan extends this reimagining by describing a community in which being gay, straight, or otherwise is simply a part of being. In the world that Levithan describes, there is hope, as the realm of possibility is “always expanding, it is never what you think / it is. Everything around us was once deemed / impossible. . . . Most of the limits / are of our own world’s devising. And yet, / each day we each do so many things / that were once impossible to us” (p. 198).

The Voices

Given the contemporary nature of young adult literature, new voices continually enter and enrich the field, often bringing perspectives

that have been historically ignored, marginalized, or silenced. As a result, the field calls into question assumptions of culture, race, language, and economics. The resulting stories offer counternarrative representations of characters that defy stereotypical and over-generalized depictions—depictions that, by their very nature, lead to inaccurate representations and encourage behaviors that reify and perpetuate negative beliefs.

Christopher Paul Curtis's *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (1995) describes a road trip that blends the fictional experiences of a black family with nonfictional violence, highlighting the ways in which individuals were circumscribed by the realities in which they lived. Alice Childress's *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* (1973) centers on the social and psychological circumstances that contextualize how Benjie Johnson becomes a 13-year-old heroin addict. More recently, Jacqueline Woodson's *After Tupac and D Foster* (2008) describes a richly realized example of everyday life that features young people of color making sense of their world and their place in it, revealing the ways in which we are all products of the sociocultural and sociopolitical norms that govern our lives. And Matt de la Peña's *Mexican WhiteBoy* (2008) encourages readers to connect with characters across lines of difference and reconsider how they see the seeming "other."

The Forms

Young adult literature contains numerous examples of authors employing cutting edge, innovative forms to convey function, another

example of the ways in which the field has embraced change and transformed over time. In *Monster* (1999), Walter Dean Myers experimented with screenplay. Although the resulting text is written in third person, it centers on the protagonist's perceptions and is crafted through his interpretation of events. As such, the form both provides intimacy into his character and raises questions about his reliability as a narrator, thus highlighting tensions between innocence and guilt, motive and circumstance. Similarly, Ellen Wittlinger infused zines (personal magazines containing poems, narratives, images, etc. created by each character) into her novel, *Hard Love* (1999). The resulting effect is a wonderfully complicated, multigenre glimpse into the myriad layers of identity and expression held by her characters. With new technologies, of course, come new forms, and YA authors increasingly honor the rapidly changing means and modes of communication valued by teen readers. Lauren Myracle's *tyl* (2004), for example, was the first novel written fully in the form of instant messaging. As a collective, young adult authors have not only successfully kept pace with change, but forged new means of expression.

The Readers Who Read Them

The best young adult authors have always recognized the complexity of the adolescent experience. Virginia Euwer Wolff's exploration of socioeconomics and the cycle of poverty, Judy Blume's frank discussions of sexuality, Cynthia Voigt's reconfigured definitions of family,

and Rosa Guy's analysis of friendship all demonstrate these authors' keen understandings of the multiple forces that act upon adolescents in the process of transitioning into adulthood. While today's readers navigate similar realities, they do so in a world of more significant extremes; this is particularly evident in the increased diversity, global expansion, and rapidly changing technologies that influence their daily lives. Today's authors for young adults address these changing times by providing stories that guide and challenge.

Given changing demographics, young people increasingly encounter diverse perspectives and ways of knowing and doing that don't necessarily align with their own understandings and assumptions. Titles like Patricia McCormick's *Sold* (2006), Padma Venkatraman's *Climbing the Stairs* (2008), Ben Mikaelson's *Tree Girl* (2004), Coe Booth's *Tyrell* (2007), and Siobhan Dowd's *Bog Child* (2008) expose readers to cultures and lifestyles they may not have encountered, reminding them that the world is larger than their bedrooms, schools, neighborhoods, towns, and nations. These authors both educate readers about unfamiliar people and places and, through the development of sincere and candid characters, highlight the connections we all share. These connections inspire empathy and encourage critical consideration of the social and economic inequities that permeate our world. Such texts might help readers realize the obligation to recognize their own privilege and find ways to use it to fight for social justice within borders and beyond.

Given the current pace of tech-

nological change, today's readers must be aware and critical of new means and modes of communication that have come to define the way of life for many. Young adult authors have refused to ignore this development and instead use it to tell compelling tales that both reflect the world in the moment and stop that moment to afford readers the distance and objectivity necessary to evaluate life within and beyond the text. M. T. Anderson's satirical novel *Feed* (2002) asks readers to consider the implications of a society overly dependent upon technology at the expense of independent thought. Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* (2008) examines the tension between freedom and privacy in our information age. And Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls* (2009) reminds readers to evaluate carefully the credibility of those they trust, given easy access to online communities that pose risks.

In response to each of these titles, readers can look more objectively, more contemplatively, at the implications of the technological realities that shape their fast-paced lives. These readers might also look to fiction to flash back to times less extreme, to use story as a means to learn about the past and potential alternatives for the future. Richard Peck, Karen Hesse, Markus Zusak, and Jennifer Donnelly are among the many YA authors who provide such glimpses into what was and inspire consideration of what could (or shouldn't) be.

The Advocates for These Books and Their Readers

Throughout our history, young adult readers have been fortu-

nate to have publishers who take chances on books that challenge, librarians who stock these books on their shelves, and teachers who bring them into classrooms and curricula. These shareholders have all worked toward a common goal of inspiring young people to engage in reading for reasons personal and profound, even as the pendulum of politics and policies swings from extreme to extreme.

This same tradition of faith and advocacy continues within our professional organization—a group defined by these very publishers, librarians, and teachers—and is evidenced by multiple initiatives that have been completed this year or are currently underway. I offer the following in the spirit of celebrating the ways in which our organization has flashed back and forged ahead.

Public Relations Committee: Ensuring our organization's adaptation to life in a technology-oriented world, we have created an Ad Hoc Public Relations Committee designed to increase ALAN's presence on several social networks. David Gill chairs the committee, and Bucky Carter and Ricki Ginsberg serve as members. Check out our Facebook and Twitter pages at: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Assembly-on-Literature-for-Adolescents-ALAN/187671031252280>) and <http://twitter.com/#!/ALANorg>.

Presidents Advisory Council (PAC). The recent creation of the ALAN Presidents Advisory Council (PAC) intimates our organization's deference to and recognition of leaders who offer expertise and institutional memory. Committee members Virginia Monseau (Chair), Jim Blasingame, c. j. Bott, Michael Cart, Lois Stover, and Connie

Zitlow invited all former ALAN Presidents to participate in the PAC in order to provide support and guidance to the ALAN President and Board in decisions important to the organization. Twenty-two members whose terms as ALAN President date back to 1974 (that would be M. Jerry Weiss) agreed to serve. The Council has an elected Chair (Virginia Monseau) and a Representative to the ALAN Board (Sissi Carroll), each serving a two-year staggered term. The first charge of the PAC is to help support the creation of a policy manual that describes the general operating procedures of our organization, including items relative to elections, the make-up and roles of standing committees, etc.

Constitution Review. To ensure both continuity and necessary change, a committee has been convened to review the ALAN Constitution. The group has been busy generating a list of constitutional items that are outdated, unnecessary, and in need of revision, as well as identifying new items for potential inclusion. This list will be brought to the Board for review and discussion. Proposed changes will then be decided upon by a vote of the full membership. Thanks to Gary Salvner (Chair), C. J. Bott, Jennifer Buehler, Pam Cole, Shannon Collins, and Walter Mayes for their work on this endeavor.

Nilsen-Donelson Award. Indicative of their long-standing commitment to the organization, Drs. Alleen and Don Nilsen have generously donated \$10,000 to ALAN for the establishment of a Nilsen-Donelson Award. The award will honor Alleen Nilsen and Ken Donelson for their work as the

original editors of *The ALAN Review* and be given at the Workshop to the authors of the best article published in the journal each year. Teri Lesesne, Steve Bickmore, and Chris Crowe collaborated to create the selection criteria; Steve Bickmore (Chair), Mary Arnold, Mark Letcher, and Cleo Rahmy serve on the inaugural award committee. The 2011 recipient(s) will be announced on Tuesday morning of the ALAN Workshop.

Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award (AEWA). Reflecting ALAN's increasing presence in the larger field of young adult literature, the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award continues in its third year. Established in 2008 to honor the wishes of young adult author Amelia Elizabeth Walden, the award allows for the sum of \$5,000 to be presented annually to the author of a young adult title selected by the ALAN Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award Committee as demonstrating a positive approach to life, widespread teen appeal, and literary merit. This year's selection committee members include: Teri Lesesne (Chair), Carolyn Angus, Jean Boreen, Lois Buckman, Ricki Ginsberg, Jeff Harr, Jeff Kaplan, Daria Plumb, Diane Tuccillo, Jennifer Walsh, and Barbara Ward. The 2011 award winner (Francisco X. Stork) and finalists (Kristen Chandler, Matt de la Peña, Matthew Quick, and Jordan Sonnenblick) will be honored at the AEWA reception on Monday evening of the 2011 ALAN Workshop.

Mission Statement. To capture the core values of our organization, an Ad Hoc committee was created to draft a mission statement for ALAN. Committee members included: Virginia Monseau, Past

President, 1993; Lois Stover, Past President, 1997; Connie Zitlow, Past President, 1999, and Committee Chair; Michael Cart, Past President, 2003; James Blasingame, Past President, 2009; and c. j. Bott, President Elect, 2011. The efforts of this esteemed group resulted in the statement below:

The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English:

- **Defines** young adult literature as works in a wide variety of genres and forms, including multimedia formats, with topics relevant to the interests and needs of young people in middle and high school.
- **Promotes** the inclusion of young adult literature as a bridge to other curricular works and as a stand-alone curricular selection in both the English language arts program and across the curriculum.
- **Supports** educators and librarians in their use of the literature, **advocates** the right to read the literature, and **defends** freedom of choice for independent reading, inclusion in classrooms, presence in library collections, and in book clubs.
- **Provides** opportunities for teachers, librarians, teacher educators, and others involved in the use of young adult literature to enhance their practice and **teaches** the educational community and general public about the value of this literature.
- **Celebrates** the ever-changing nature of the field and welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking by authors, publishers, and others involved

in the creation of young adult literature.

- **Evaluates** young adult literature on its individual merits and in the context of larger bodies of literature as appropriate and **engages** in ongoing rethinking of the literary canon.
- **Cooperates** with other organizations that advocate similar goals and objectives.

Faith in Our Future Given Our Past

"This is what happens when you try to run from the past. It just doesn't catch up, it overtakes . . . blotting out the future"

—Sarah Dessen, *Just Listen*, p. 340

It sometimes seems as though we inhabit a world seemingly dead set on *flashing forward* and then scrambling to *forge a way back*, moving ahead so quickly that the foundation begins to crumble before we realize what we've lost. Always looking ahead to the next great gadget or time-saving method or entertaining distraction, we are blind to what we're missing as we engage in the pursuit. Given our foundational past and ability to change with the future, it is clear, however, that our field and organization are prepared to withstand the winds of change, to flash back and forge ahead. Our authors, past and present, and advocates, longstanding and new, hold a shared belief in the power of story to keep us grounded as we wonder—and shape—what's around the bend.

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Kylene Beers—2011 CEL Exemplary Leader Award Recipient

Kylene Beers is the Senior Reading Advisor to Secondary Schools for the Reading and Writing Project at Teachers College, Columbia University. Through her books, workshops, summer institute presentations, consultations, and numerous publications, she has influenced an incredible number of teachers of reading. She has helped teachers of other disciplines understand that they must help students learn to read if they are to succeed in their subject. Dr. Beers's book *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do: A Guide for Teachers 6–12* is the capstone of contributions she has made through her writing. She has been the senior author or contributing author for numerous national textbooks for public schools, including *Elements of Literature, Grades 6–12*. She was coeditor of *Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise into Practice/A Handbook for Teachers, Principals, and Policy Makers*, a book that serves as the guide for teacher learning communities. Beers was two-term chair of the National Adolescent Literacy Coalition, a coalition of over 60 national organizations working together to solve issues of adolescent literacy. She has served NCTE in varied capacities, including as editor of *Voices from the Middle* for seven years and as President of NCTE 2008-2009. Dr. Beers has served the Council, the profession, and students of all ages with energy, commitment, and distinction throughout her career.
