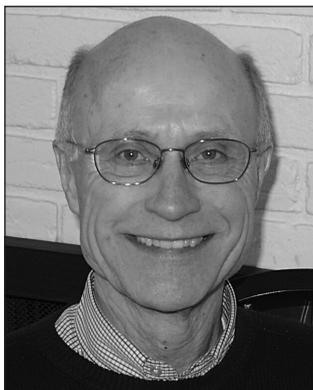


Michael **Cart**



## Eavesdropping on the Hearts of Others

One of the many reasons to attend the annual ALAN conference is the ALAN Breakfast, where the ALAN Award is announced. Almost from its inception, ALAN's Executive Board has given the award to honor those who have made outstanding contributions to the field of adolescent literature. The recipient may be a publisher, author, librarian, scholar, editor, or servant to the organization. Then, at the Saturday ALAN breakfast during the NCTE convention, we get to meet and hear from the year's honoree.

The 2018 ALAN Award recipient was Michael Cart, a nationally recognized expert in YA literature. He is the former director of the Beverly Hills (California) Public Library and a past president of both the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) and ALAN. He is the author or editor of 20 books, including the coming-of-age novel *My Father's Scar*, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults; *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature*; and—with Christine A. Jenkins—*The Heart Has Its Reasons*, a critical history of young adult literature with gay/lesbian/queer content. His many anthologies include *Love and Sex: Ten Stories of Truth*, *Necessary Noise: Stories about Our Families as They Really Are*, and *How Beautiful the Ordinary: Twelve Stories of Identity*. He also appointed and chaired the Task Force that created the Michael L. Printz Award, and he subsequently chaired the 2006 Printz Committee.

We are honored to include Michael Cart's ALAN Award Acceptance speech in our inaugural issue. Michael Cart, as always, reminds us that reading

provides us the very necessary ability to “experience empathy and sympathy and the ability thereby to eavesdrop on the hearts of others.”



Receiving this award is not only gratifying but offers me a bully pulpit as well, so forgive me if I use it to preach to you, the choir, for a few minutes. Let me start my “homily” by saying that, unfortunately, we live in . . . *interesting* times. The great poet William Butler Yeats eloquently described similar troubled times in his classic poem *The Second Coming*. Since it seems particularly relevant to today, let me quote these lines from it:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world;  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Passionate intensity? I take that to describe a time when xenophobia, racism, misogyny, and bullying are rampant; when truth is an endangered concept; and when a free press is vilified as being the enemy of the people.

The center will not hold? Unfortunately, there is no longer a center, only a fiercely partisan divide, which seems impossible to bridge. Small wonder, then, that there are days when I worry that civilization itself is at risk.

How have all these . . . *interesting* things come to be? A root cause is, I think, a failure of empathy, of

identifying with and understanding another's situation, feelings, and actions. We seem no longer able to walk the proverbial mile in another's shoes or even to *imagine* such a salutary thing as sympathy. Not only does this seem to be true on the part of too many adults but, more ominously, on the part of young adults as well.

Empathy's absence impacts every aspect of young lives, but is arguably most obviously felt in the ongoing pandemic of bullying and cyberbullying that continue to plague America's schools, parks, playgrounds, neighborhoods, and, yes, public life as well. Consider that 28% of students in grades 6–12 experience bullying, while 30% admit to having themselves bullied. And a total of 71% of young people say they have seen bullying in their schools.

These statistics increase dramatically when applied to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender teens, a group close to my heart. A total of 74% of them were verbally harassed last year, 36% were physically harassed, and 17% were physically assaulted. Tellingly, LGBT students are two to five times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers. Cause and effect? I think so.

But *why* do teens bully? Some recent scientific studies suggest it may be due to teen's brains not being *wired* for empathy. While this seems to be an oversimplification, it is true that we now know that the brain's prefrontal cortex is often not fully developed until age 25. And this is the region of the brain that governs impulse control and judgment *and* where *cognitive* empathy originates. Yet other studies demonstrate that empathy can be learned. And one way of learning is surely, *surely* through reading. The great gift that literature can give its readers is the experience of empathy and sympathy and the ability thereby to eavesdrop on the hearts of others. Books can take their readers into the interior lives of characters, showing not only what is happening to them, but also powerfully conveying how what is happening *feels*. The heart has its reasons that the mind cannot know, according to the French philosopher Pascal. I take that to mean we come to understanding others not only through our heads, but also through our hearts, and it is fiction that offers essential opportunities for cultivating empathy, for feeling sympathy, and for experiencing emotional engagement with others.

"Others?" Oh, that word. Too many teens are

still cast in the role of the "other" because of their race, color, ethnicity, culture, religion, place of origin, sexual orientation, and more. We do not celebrate our diversity these days but, instead, denigrate it. If literature is the remedy for this, the sad fact is that we still do not have enough of it to invite empathy for the "others." And I talk now of multicultural literature, the literature of diversity. Why the lack of this essential literature?

Well, there are many reasons, but the ones that are most commonly offered are, first, the paucity of editors of color. A 2014 *Publishers Weekly* industry-wide survey revealed the dispiriting reality that the profession is overwhelmingly white: in fact, 90% of the survey's respondents identified as white, 3% identified as Asian, 3% as Latino, and 1% as African American. Then, second, there is the lack of authors—and illustrators—of color. "We are limited," an editor friend of mine recently told me, "by what people are writing and by what's being offered to us." Third, there is the perceived lack of demand, though, happily, that is changing rapidly—in part because of the work being done by organizations like We Need Diverse Books, a grassroots group of children's and young adult book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry.

WNDB's aim is to help produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people, including LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, people with fluid gender identity, people with disabilities, and those belonging to ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities.

Of these, the category evidencing the greatest growth is, arguably, that of LGBTQIA literature, which is, I believe, in terms of numbers alone, in its first

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Golden Age. Consider that this year, to date, 95 books with gay content have been published compared with 64 for all of last year and 78 for the entire decade of the 1990s. Not only is quantity notable, so is quality. Two of the last four Printz Award winners have had gay content, an extraordinary advance for a literature that, in its earlier years, consisted too often of single-issue problem novels. But no more. Art has entered the field and it's about time!

Awards are important, of course, because they acknowledge and, thus, encourage the publication of excellent books. I'm talking about awards like the Printz and, of course, ALAN's own Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award, which will be presented at the forthcoming ALAN workshop. And speaking of ALAN reminds me to observe that the organization of which we're proud members is exemplary in its promotion of good books, both through its annual workshop and, of equal importance, through the daily work of its mem-

bers in bringing young adults and good books together to foster that essential empathy. It is, as someone once observed to me, God's work.

Well, I'm out of time, but in closing, let me simply say that books are important, yes, but only if reading is important. And reading is only important if civilization is important. I vote for civilization and take comfort in knowing that you do, too.

Thank you.

*Michael Cart, columnist and reviewer for the American Library Association's Booklist magazine, is the author or editor of 23 books including his critical history of young adult literature *From Romance to Realism* and the coming of age novel *My Father's Scar*, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults. He is a past president of both ALAN and the Young Adult Library Services Association. The recipient of the 2019 ALAN Award, he is also the 2000 recipient of the Grolier Foundation Award and the first recipient of the YALSA/Greenwood Press Distinguished Service Award. He lives in Columbus, Indiana, surrounded by books.*