

Learning from Those Who Came Before Us: An Interview with Chris Crowe

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This extensive interview by Leilya Pitre with Chris Crowe is the first installment of a new feature in Study & Scrutiny, “Conversations with ALAN Elders,” which will appear in every other issue. In this far-ranging conversation, Crowe recounts his experiences as a student of Ken Donelson, one of the founders of the Assembly of Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) in 1974, his relationships with other early leaders of the organization, and with his own students. He also speaks to the purpose of this section: Keeping the roots of teaching and scholarship of young adult literature in the light. As Crowe is wont to do, he offers a metaphor to make his point: “There is a science-fiction/time-travel novel, called Timeline by Michael Crichton (1999), in which one character, a historian, says that people who don’t know history don’t know anything. It’s like being a leaf that doesn’t know it’s part of a tree. The tree of young adult literature has lots of interesting roots and branches.” This interview project led by Leilya Pitre, Terri Suico, and Crag Hill intends to surface the connections between the roots and each season’s fresh leaves.

The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN) draws attention of everyone who has an interest in adolescent literature. From my first encounter with this exceptional community that promotes communication, collaboration, and engagement among teachers, librarians, educators, writers, and publishers, I wanted to learn more about it. ALAN has just celebrated its 50th anniversary of excellence and commitment to young adult literature in Columbus, OH, during its annual workshop following NCTE Convention, which is a crucial milestone in its history. Fortunately for me, my initial interactions with many of the distinguished ALAN contributors happened during my internship as an assistant editor of *The ALAN Review*, the leading voice of the assembly. It is at that time I “met” and often communicated via email with Don Gallo, Jeffrey Kaplan, Terri Lesesne, Patricia Kelly, Chris Crowe, Jim Blasingame, cj Botts, and many, many other extraordinary people who followed the footsteps of the ALAN founders.

Inviting Chris Crowe to this conversation, I hoped to elicit some interesting snippets of ALAN’s story woven into his responses. The interview resulted in much more—names, people, places, and new trends. Chris led ALAN in 2001 during the most tragic and vulnerable time for our

country. It was a year of 9/11, when the world suddenly appeared to be too fragile, but the November 2001 ALAN Workshop was successful and brought in some changes that are still in place.

Let me briefly introduce Chris Crowe, whose devotion to young adult literature, writing, and teaching is admirable. After the graduate studies at Arizona University, he taught high school, and then worked at the universities in Japan and Hawaii before returning to his alma-mater, Brigham Young University in Provo, UT. Chris Crowe is known for his fiction and nonfiction YA books, essays, and articles expanding and enriching the field of YA literature beyond his leading role as ALAN's President and editor of the YA Literature Column for the *English Journal* for five years. Among numerous honors and awards Dr. Crowe earned throughout his professional journey, the 2010 Ted Hipple Award by the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents is, probably, one of the most remarkable as it recognizes his substantial contributions to the organization.

This interview was recorded on January 11, 2023 via Zoom. I am grateful to Chris Crowe for generously responding to my invitation and teaching me so much about ALAN.

INTRODUCTION TO ALAN AND WORK WITH ITS FOUNDERS

Leilya Pitre (Leilya): Thank you so much for your time and meeting with me today. As I shared with you in the email, the goal of this project is to trace the history of ALAN. As one of the ALAN's Presidents, you made a huge impact on the organization, and I would like to talk to you about ALAN and your presidency. Can you, please, introduce yourself? What are you doing now, and where are you working?

Chris Crowe (Chris): Sure. My name is Chris Crowe. I teach English at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. My specialty is young adult literature and creative writing. I was a president of ALAN in 2001, right after the Trade Towers got bombed. We were nervous in Atlanta thinking the people wouldn't come to the workshop, and some authors were afraid to fly. Eventually, the things calmed down, but it was a dubious time.

Anyway, I was a high school teacher in Arizona where I taught for ten years. I went to a graduate school at Arizona State University. That's where Ken Donelson was the chair of my dissertation committee, and I had a graduate young adult (YA) literature course with him, and that's where it formalized for me to study young adult lit. He and Alleen (Alleen Pace Nilsen) were the editors of the *English Journal* at that time, and they often focused on young adult lit. I had an

introduction to YA books from my students, and Ken showed me how to make it an academic pursuit. He was a tireless writer. He always had some projects going on, and he encouraged me to write for publication when I still was a high school teacher.

I think my first ALAN was in 1989 when I was teaching at BYU-Hawaii, but I remember I had joined ALAN a few years before that. Donelson might have made us join ☺. I can't remember now, but he encouraged us to join around that time I had a class with him. It was around 1983 or 1984.

Leilya: It's interesting because you are just heading toward my first question here. I wanted to mention that we all have stories of being brought to ALAN—how we discovered and experienced it. I, myself have a story of coming to ALAN. As you know, Steve Bickmore was my major professor, and he formally introduced me to the young adult literature, NCTE, and ALAN. We presented at the NCTE 2013 together, and since then, it had been eleven years of my ALAN membership. You have already begun talking about it, but tell me more. How did ALAN happen to you? What is your initial ALAN story?

Chris: Well, from Ken Donelson, from that young adult class. It might not be in the 1983; it might have been in the 1980 or '81. It was a night class that met once a week. We read tons, and he talked a lot about NCTE and ALAN. He really believed that teachers should be professionals, and encouraged us to be active by joining, volunteering, and writing. I think I presented at the Arizona affiliate of the NCTE one year on young adult lit or something, and I joined ALAN because Donelson encouraged and because, back then it was a bargain. Actually, I think my high school may have paid for the subscription of *The ALAN Review* because they saw it as professional materials, but in my early days as an ALAN member, I wasn't able to go to the ALAN Workshop. I didn't have the financial support to go or the motivation, I guess. So it wasn't until I was teaching at the university in Hawaii at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, when I first went to the ALAN Workshop. I don't remember who the speakers were back then, but it was a great experience, and I wanted to keep going.

Leilya: That sounds as wonderful as I remember my first ALAN! It is amazing to hear your story because when you say "Ken Donelson," for me, he is that historic figure who stood at the roots of

the organization. I was fortunate to see him and Alleen Nilsen at one of the receptions before the ALAN Workshop. We had a brief exchange about young adult literature, and I mentioned their textbook, of course. Did you know or work with some of the ALAN founders? Who were they? Can you tell more about them?

Chris: Jerry Weiss and I would correspond. Even after he retired, he was still interested in what was happening in the field. I think after he retired, he still wrote a column for *The ALAN Review*. I think he wrote for a couple of years at least. Sometimes, he would just send me a new book from somebody he thought I should know or an email telling me how he was doing. In his last year, he didn't do much because of his health, but he always had a passion for ALAN, for books, for teachers and getting kids to read. He was remarkable in that way. I don't think he had any support for travelling, but he and his wife Helen made an effort to go ALAN and do things, anyway. They published a couple of short story anthologies similar to those that Don Gallo did. So they were very active and influential in our field.

I worked with Donelson, of course, and Alleen. I never had a class with Alleen, but she was a graduate coordinator at Arizona State when I was a grad student. I participated in local conferences, and she was always there promoting stuff. She and Ken were the editors of *English Journal* at the time, and I'd submitted a number of articles to them. I knew Alleen in another way too. I taught in Japan for a few years, and she had a daughter who was doing some kind of secondary school teaching or something there in a city we lived in, so we got together with her a few times for dinner to help her get settled in Japan. When we moved, we left her some of our things, so years later, Alleen loved to remind me: "You gave my daughter a good kitchen table." ☺ Anyway, we gave her some other stuff too that we couldn't take with us, and she never forgot about it. She was always very friendly.

Long after I graduated, I'd sometimes see Alleen and her husband, Don, in Provo, Utah. We have a conference on Young Adult and Children's literature in July, a two-day conference, and she would attend.

Don Gallo, of course, was another foundational ALAN member. I knew about him long before I ever attended the ALAN Workshop, and in my first few workshops, I was also kind of afraid to approach him. We eventually became friends, so I know he still has a real love for ALAN, and still has passion for its history. He was one of those guys who came to young adult lit totally on his own. He didn't have a mentor or colleague to nudge him to the organization.

You know, Don, Alleen, and Ken are among the people with whom I worked. There was also Dick Abrahamson, a guy from University of Houston? He was Teri Lesesne's mentor.

Leilya: I know that Robert Small was also somewhere at the beginning of ALAN. Have you known him?

Chris: Yes, Robert Small and Richard Abrahamson were early and prominent members of ALAN. Many of ALAN people I know went to graduate school and had a mentor, like Ken Donelson or Robert Small, who got them in the field. Don didn't; he was there by himself at Central Connecticut. Somehow he had learned about young adult books and started following it on his own. He was one of the independent founders who came to ALAN because of his own interest, not because someone led him there.

Alleen has written a short history of the founding of ALAN. I think it's in that book called *Two Decades of The ALAN Review*. I don't recall all the details, but I do know that she and Ken started by writing and publishing a newsletter first, and that later evolved into *The ALAN Review*.

Leilya: That is interesting, but not surprising at all. Since I entered the ALAN community, I noticed that people are just so generous and sharing, and it comes as their second nature. I remember classes with Steve Bickmore, and every semester at the end of the term, he would bring dozens of books to give away to us. You know it's contagious—I do the same now for my students.

Chris: It started with Dora Smith in the 1930s, you know. She would do that when Robert Carlsen was her graduate student. She would bring the books, and students would take them. Ken Donelson was Carlsen's graduate student. I didn't realize any of this connection until a few years after I'd had Donelson's graduate YA lit class; I was amazed how much he had inherited from Smith through Carlsen. I remember, for our night class, Donelson would wheel in the cart with books and tell us to take books, read them, and write about them. He always had books for us to read, the newest books, and encouraged us to write about what we were reading. I didn't know at that time, that what I heard from Ken, and he heard it from Carlsen, who heard it from Smith. So it's kind of a wonderful tradition our field has; we've learned about YA literature, how to teach it, how to study it, from those

who came before us. Those people showed us what it was like to be living around books and making these books central to what we do.

Leilya: Yes, this is an amazing tradition. I was just rereading Robert Carlsen's article where he writes about Dora Smith and the class he took with her. He shares his approach to teaching YA continuing Smith's tradition. Carlsen mentions Dora's work toward separating children's literature from young adult. I have also read an article about a historical perspective of literature for adolescents written by Lawrence Fuller in 1980. In this piece, Fuller writes about the beginning of the teachers' awareness about young adult literature at the turn of the XX century. He made a case that even at that time, in 1913, 1915, and 1923, students were not interested in the literature that was far removed from their lives, but were attracted to the materials on radio, television, and periodicals that were directly connected to their surroundings and experiences. When we think that discussions about the benefits and use of YA lit are relatively recent, Fuller's article proves us wrong.

FROM THE PAST ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO ESTABLISHING NEW GOALS AND TASKS

Leilya: Let's move on to the next question, please. From the first few issues of the newsletter that has grown into *The ALAN Review*, the organization has promoted YA authors, fostered curriculum to support teachers' use of this literature in secondary classrooms, and has been a source for activism in terms of advocating for teaching of social issues. What has this work accomplished? What still needs to be done?

Chris: I think a couple of things happen that were a little bit later. When Michael Cart and Patty Campbell joined the ALAN, they started to bring librarians to join us. Before that, we rarely had librarians attend our workshop. It seemed odd that we had almost the same mission but weren't working together. Michael Cart led the ALAN Workshop in 2003, and Patty Campbell presided in 2004. They helped bring ALAN and YALSA together. We still didn't have a lot of librarians, but I think our shared mission of getting books into the hands of kids and having access to all kinds of books certainly was reinforced by librarians who served on the Board and served as ALAN presidents.

I think I saw, as a high school teacher, how much librarians helped me as a new teacher. I learned that it's good and wise to have the literary canon, but canonical books don't appeal to a lot

of students. Kids need to become readers first before they begin reading more complex literature. I feel like ALAN has always been there supporting teachers who wanted to turn students into readers, who wanted to find a way to get their kids to become readers first and then scholars of literature second. I'm lucky here at BYU because many English departments that offer a BA in English don't have space for young adult literature. Students in a traditional English major admire their literature professors, and often they end up with an unintentional—or intentional—bias against YAL. When they become teachers, it's natural for them to teach what they were taught at the university and bring this literature to their English classes in secondary schools without thinking about the audience, without realizing that their students will never become English majors, 99% of them won't anyway, and a good number of them won't even go to college.

I feel like ALAN has always been there advocating for authentic books for readers. Take, for example, Teri Lesesne's book *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time* (2003). That book sums up a lot of what ALAN does, helping teachers to make these matches for kids giving them the right books and to give teachers the ammunition for how to approach their colleagues, parents, and administrators to make room for young adult literature in the school curriculum. I don't think ALAN has ever promoted the notion that we shouldn't read the classics; instead we believe that good YA books can complement the classics.

Donelson, early on, probably produced more articles about censorship than anything else. Early in his career, he was alarmed by efforts to ban young adult books because they were authentic or realistic, or depressing, or whatever the issue might be. Ken Donelson wrote about censorship in all kinds of journals, not just journals the English teachers would read, but across the disciplines. He was a historical scholar and had a great vision of our field in its entirety. I think that tradition of resisting censors was started by Donelson and certainly perpetuated by ALAN. As an organization, ALAN was always a defender of the faith, defender of the right to read, defender of books, defender of libraries and teachers' rights. This mission has only magnified in the last few years, especially as things got thornier with censorship.

Leilya: Yes, that's right. Bringing in the librarians and making books available were always at the center of ALAN. I also agree that we, as ALAN members, don't reject the canon in the English classrooms; we just want our students to grow up to that canon, to be readers first, as you say, and then enjoy the more challenging literature.

Moving on our conversation, you have mentioned in your introduction that your presidency fell on the events of 9/11, a tremendous tragedy for this country. So you have already responded partially to this group of questions: What was the focus of ALAN when you were leading it as a president? What events surrounded your presidency, and how were they reflected in the work of the organization? Can you tell me more about that time?

Chris: So I followed Teri Lesesne; she was brilliant and tireless, and she was a real support. I think, and I might be mistaken, but I think during my presidency we first started the autographing of books. It hadn't been done before. I don't know why, perhaps, it was NCTE with its heavy hand of what ALAN could or couldn't do. It just made sense: you've got all these authors, and you've got their books. Why not let them sign? In time, that became a curse and a blessing too because it created a distraction during the workshop, but I think authors never minded it, and teachers surely love getting a signature and a chance to talk for a minute with their favorite author. That's one thing we did.

Also, it was during Teri's presidency or mine, NCTE wouldn't let ALAN Workshop to start before 9:00 o'clock. I don't know why. They didn't have a reason. We discussed it in our Board meeting: teachers are used to getting up early; you know school starts at 8:00 or 7:30, so waiting till 9:00 o'clock didn't make sense, and it limited our time for what we wanted to do in our program. We wanted more breakout sessions and authors' talks. So, I think, the Executive Secretary, I can't remember for sure, but I think it was Ted Hipple, Ted pushed ALAN, or I don't know what he did, but he got us permission to start at 8:00 a.m., and it stayed like that ever since. That extra hour has been a good thing for ALAN. The year after I was president, I can't remember who the president (maybe Bill Mollineaux) was, but with Connie Zitlow, who was the president in 1999, we created a Ted Hipple Award, and I got to meet with Ted to tell him about it. We met privately before the ALAN workshop. We ordered this beautiful glass, or crystal, book for him, and we actually gave him a clock too, I think. I got to do the design and order that stuff for Ted. He was a great guy.

I would say, after Ken Donelson, Ted Hipple was probably the most important, or as important as anyone in the early ALAN years, person in promoting things. He had such a presence at the workshop, so I leaned a lot on him planning the workshop and how the things should go.

I think back then, you know, our goal was just to get the best authors we could and as many as we could giving them a plenty of time. Of course, there were things that we just didn't know. For example, M.T. Anderson spoke at my ALAN Workshop, and up till then all I knew about him was

his book *Burger Wuss* (1999) and a vampire novel called *Thirsty* (1997), and they were good and clever, but they weren't great. His publisher, however, was pushing and saying: "You have to put M. T. Anderson on a panel," and I was like, "I don't want to put *Burger Wuss* on a panel." They said: "Well, if you do this, we will do that for you." I agreed, and by then *Feed* (2002) had come out and it was the 2002 National Book Award finalist for Young People's Literature.

When I was putting the program together, I said we'll let Anderson speak, but he only has seven and a half minutes, not a second more. He took exactly that time; he was thoroughly prepared. His talk was on Marxism; it was brilliant, and I felt really foolish that I didn't recognize this guy's talent. *Feed* had come out after we locked up the program, but I am glad he was there. I think I was on the ALAN Award Committee a year or two before or after my presidency, so Mildred Taylor, whose work I love, got an award around that time. We talked at the Board meetings about the other awards we could establish, and there were a few more since then, like the Cart-Campbell Award and Nilsen and Donelson Award.

Leilya: Thank you, Chris! These are great accomplishments, and as a newer ALAN member, I see these things and take it for granted without realizing that someone had to put work and efforts to what I enjoy by simply attending the workshop every year. I joined ALAN with a very low membership price as a student. I think it was 10 dollars at the time, not counting the fee for the ALAN Workshop, of course, which was 100 dollars, but getting a box of books was worth it.

If we had time, I would love to hear more stories about your presidency. Sometimes things come up to mind when we begin digging into the past. I have to move onto another question though. Based on your experiences and knowledge with ALAN, what do you see as being the main goals of the organization? How have these changed over your tenure with the organization? You have already discussed some of these earlier. You mentioned some of the goals: to get more authors, to get more books, and to promote young adult literature. What can you add to these goals?

Chris: I think those things, for sure, and maybe to really support teachers. The ALAN Workshop in my days was administered by university people because we had the time to do that kind of stuff and the encouragement to do it, but it served teachers, so the audience was mostly teachers. The breakout sessions weren't theoretical, but they were pedagogical, designed for teachers. I think that's all still there, but ALAN is expanding. *The ALAN Review*, for example, had become much more academic, less teacher friendly than it used to be. That's good for academics, but not so good for

teachers. It seems that it was always at center of ALAN to be there for teachers, to get them the books, to get them inspired about what to teach, and just know what's out there. They don't have time to read like academics do, so it's good for them to be able to know about the books through ALAN, or they wouldn't know about them otherwise.

Leilya: Yes, exactly! I think because we are talking about young adult literature that needs to get into the hands of adolescents, the students, we need those conductors – the teachers who would bring these books.

Chris: Right! We need to support people who directly bring those books to adolescents.

THE “BOOKS WIN” STORIES

Leilya: Since we talk about YA books, what more can the journal, *The ALAN Review*, and the organization do to promote YA literature in secondary, undergraduate, and graduate classrooms?

Chris: If we talk about the journal, *The ALAN Review*, we need to make sure that gives voice to teachers and pedagogical concerns instead of empirical studies. Maybe, not excluding the empirical studies, but contributors should remember that their audience is primarily, and in fact most of the ALAN membership, is mostly teachers, secondary teachers and some librarians. We need to make sure that we don't talk over their heads or have articles that aren't as relevant to them as they might be to academics in university positions.

Furthermore, I want to repeat again, the organization has to be more about teachers and librarians. It has to provide teachers with practical approaches to bring in and teach young adult novels in the classrooms. The ALAN Workshop and breakout sessions do that, so if we can bring in more teachers, then it is going to be even better. I don't quite know what the numbers are, but it seems we have around 2500 ALAN members.

Leilya: That's about the right number.

Chris: There is a great discount, a student discount for the ALAN, as you mentioned earlier, so if they keep it that way, it will be easier to get the journal in the hands of teachers. The ALAN membership prices are so low, and I hope they'll keep doing that.

I really think ALAN should always remember why it was originally established, which is more about the literature and less about politics or political movements. Yes, any literature reflects the society and its issues that are present and might be critical, but those issues have to be embedded in the stories, which are the primary concerns of books.

Leilya: Thank you, Chris! I am with you here. When I spoke to Gae Polisner, the author of *The Memory of Things*, a YA novel about adolescent experiences in the aftermath of 9/11, she also said that as a writer the story was always the driving force of her novels, not the political or ideological agenda. No writer should sit down and think: "I am going to write a novel about social injustice." They just have to tell the story, and readers will decide what kind of story it is.

Let's switch gears to continue our conversation. At the beginning of this history of ALAN project and my first interviews, I talked to Don Gallo, and he shared some emails and notes with me. Rereading the email correspondence between Alleen Nilsen and Donald Gallo, I found a story about the ALAN beginnings. Alleen Pace Nilsen writes:

We needed 25 to start an Assembly. There were not 25 people at the meeting. I was feeling generous and happy because of successfully defending my dissertation with Bob Carlsen, and the dues were only \$1.00. I chipped in a dollar for Bob Carlsen (from Iowa) and a \$1.00 for my husband, and also for Ken Donelson from Arizona State, who I had gotten acquainted with as fellow graduates of Carlsen. I was so generous that Marguerite Archer appointed me Membership Chair. The next year, I offered to do a newsletter if someone else would handle the membership because those large sums of money confused me. (From the personal correspondence between Alleen Nilsen and Don Gallo)

That's so simple and interesting, and yet, it is priceless because it is the story of the great beginning.

Chris: That's a great story. They were committed, weren't they?

Leilya: They definitely were, and just their enthusiasm and desire to do something are so astonishing. Since those first days, in what ways has ALAN grown? What core beliefs and practices continue going strong?

Chris: Over the years, ALAN has grown and expanded to include librarians, thanks to Patty

Campbell and Michael Cart. Not that we have tons of librarians, but I know we have some now while in the past it was very few. So that was a big deal. I think they still try to recruit teachers who care about reading, who care about books for kids, and, obviously, care about the kids. I do think it has attracted more scholars to ALAN and certainly to *The ALAN Review*. I think the focus on getting books into the hands of kids based on Teri Lesesne's book and her lifelong mission. That seems to be the real purpose of ALAN to me—to help promote young adult literature in as many ways as possible.

Leilya: I agree. Seeing the right books in the right hands, using them in the classrooms, and observing students connecting with these books on personal levels are so crucial. Is there a story about ALAN that you want the incoming members to know?

Chris: The story that you told about Alleen Nilsen, I think, is a good one of how simple it was to get launched and how loosely organized it seemed, maybe, to start with four people who wanted to do something. It's encouraging to know that you can do new things, such as establishing an organization like ALAN that will make a big difference in the lives of teachers and students.

I think that teacher stories about students being resistant to reading are also helpful to share. Early in my high school teaching career, I had a ninth-grade student, Chris, who told me he had never read a book. Well, I took that as a challenge, and I thought, dang it, I'm going to get you to read a book before you escape my class this year. I pitched books to Chris constantly throughout that year, but they bounced off him. He'd look at the cover, flip through the pages, skim a paragraph, and sigh: "No, thanks." I had to admit defeat at the end of the year. Fate put him in my sophomore English class the next year, and I decided he wasn't going to get away this time. I talked to other students for recommendations, used our librarian's suggestions, and relied on tried and true YA books, but Chris was Teflon. Nothing would stick; nothing could crack his determination to remain a closed book. One night I was talking about Chris to my wife (who's a fierce reader of all kinds of books), and she recommended a book she had just finished, Ralph Moody's 1950 memoir titled *Little Britches* about growing up on the Colorado frontier. I couldn't imagine a more unlikely title for a book that might appeal to a hardened reluctant reader, but I was desperate. I took it to school the next day, dropped it on Chris' desk and told him to give it a try. For some inexplicable reason, he gave it more than a try: he read the whole thing! And when he was finished he asked, a little

awkwardly, “So, does this Moody guy have any more books?” Turns out Moody had published seven sequels to that memoir, and Chris ended up reading several of them by the end of the year.

A few years ago, out of the blue, Chris messaged me on Facebook. After updating me on his life in the 30+ since graduating from high school, he added, “And I still remember that stupid book you got me to read!” I *love* teacher success stories like that, and I wish we had a systematic way to share them more often.

Leilya: Oh, and I, too, have students like this. Actually this summer I got an email from my student, Ke Ron. When he first came into my “Introduction to Literary Analysis” course as a sophomore, he said: “I don’t like to read books. I will read all the things you assign because I want to succeed, but reading fiction and all them books is not my kind of thing to do.” After another class with me, which was the YAL course, he wrote: “In our last class this last spring, you let us grab a book to read for the summer. I chose “Piecing Me Together” by Renee Watson. It’s the first of my summer read list, and yes, it’s crazy, I am actually reading for fun, something I never thought I’d ever do, EVER! I am moving onto another book about teen pregnancy that someone from our class suggested, I don’t remember her name though. But thank you, Dr. Pitre, before taking your classes, I have never known the power of reading books.”

This is the best reward any teacher can get.

Chris: Right! It’s such a happy accident when kids and books magically match up, and they become readers. It’d be cool if ALAN could find a way of sharing those kinds of “books win!” stories. I am still convinced that ALAN as an organization is committed to the literature for young adults and really should focus on classroom stuff more and how books can work to help students and teachers in the classroom to accomplish their goals.

Leilya: I agree, teachers need more applicable activities, strategies, and approaches of how to read these books, how to talk about them, and, as you said earlier, maybe we should go back more to literature and less to societal issues.

Chris: That’s right! I agree with it totally.

YA AUTHORS AND RESEARCHERS WE SHOULD KEEP ALIVE

Leilya: What authors, once prominent in *The ALAN Review* and in the world of young adult literature, deserve a retrospective?

Chris: Robert Cormier is certainly one of those authors. Ted Hipple used to regularly survey university YA lit teachers to ask them who they considered the best/most important YA authors, and Cormier was in the top ten every survey. I remember one of your Facebook posts a few years ago asking people about their ten top YA authors, and Cormier wasn't even mentioned. That blew me away! Of course, I understand that it's good to be focused on the new and now, but that new and now wouldn't exist without the past. Robert Cormier was a groundbreaking writer who made people like Chris Crutcher and Jeff Zentner possible, and add to this list Laurie Halse Anderson. It's important to look back at these foundational authors and to understand their contributions to YA lit. Another forgotten author is Sue Ellen Bridgers, a southern writer, whose work was read and written about a lot, especially in *The ALAN Review*. Her work often featured in the ALAN presentations, she gave a Workshop keynote, and I think she won the ALAN Award. But she's dropped off the radar, and I don't exactly know why. Bruce Brooks is another notable author who wrote sophisticated YA books that really connected with smart kids.

I think there are many other foundational or 'legacy' authors that *The ALAN Review* or the Workshop could feature or devote one section, one speaker, or one panel with the purpose to look back at some of these authors and some of their important books. It would establish a tradition of valuing and recognizing our roots.

Leilya: You probably know Sarah Dessen too. She has many prominent YA books, and not to forget Judy Blume with her incredible novels. I like your idea of having a certain space devoted to those writers in *The ALAN Review* and during the Workshop. It would help us all to remember where the YAL started. We need to bring it to the Executive Board maybe.

As for the scholarly books on YAL, would you like to see some of the updated editions of the textbooks? Do we need more of these books?

Chris: As for the scholarly books about YAL, we might be in the middle of a golden era for such books. Steve Bickmore has co-authored or co-edited many such books in the last few years, but of

course, there are others out there because the scholarship on young adult literature has exploded in the last decade or so. Maybe, in a decade, we will have to go back and reread some of these books that are published now.

Leilya: I think so too. These past years have been marked by the books, we call supplemental textbooks, which have ready-to-go activities, strategies, and even suggested units for secondary English classrooms. There are many that have a specific focus whether it is social issues or ways of teaching YAL, especially in connection with digital media opportunities.

My next question is about the content of YA novels. We all know that YA authors tap into ongoing discussions of issues from identity struggles, to bullying, to eating disorders, and now moving onto issues of social and racial justice, acceptance, preserving cultural values, and so on. Do you think these are still the issues that are at the forefront of the YA authors?

Chris: I think most of them are. Identity is. It has always been central to young adult books, coming of age stories at least. An important part of adolescence is to determine “who am I?” or “what am I?” It’s nothing new, but identity is more complex now than it was three decades ago, and that’s certainly central to the books themselves and to the audiences too. I wouldn’t call it a trend, but a feature of YAL. The problem novels of 1970s addressed the social issues at the time and maybe went a little too far to exclusion of some other kinds of books. Now we are seeing authors writing about our time and what’s happening in the world today and how it affects us. I don’t think that good writers sit down and think: “I am going to write about issue X.” They write about characters and their contemporary setting. These issues naturally come up and then the book gets a label, maybe a book about Black Lives Matter or something like this, but I really don’t think that’s how the writers start. Many YA books are a reflection of the world in which we live, the world the writers are occupying with their readers.

Leilya: Right! I talk about it with my students as well and emphasize that the story and characters come first, and yes, they mirror those characters’ world with the present societal problems or challenges. What books or book series do you see as increasing YAL’s visibility and legitimacy and energizing readers, teachers, and scholars?

Chris: The *Harry Potter* books blew up publishing. That series was, in some ways, similar to some of the earliest juvenile series books. Book one becomes popular, and teachers and when kids finish the first one, they want to return to familiar settings and characters—it's like a new episode with familiar faces and places. So, if they like the first episode, they know they'll like all the rest. Series books are comfortable, familiar, stable for teen readers, and, of courses, best-selling series books provide real stability for the publishers who know that there is ready audience for this book, whatever it might be—*The Babysitter Club* or *Goose Bumps* or *Sweet Valley High*. Somehow, though, *Harry Potter* seemed to transcend typical series books. Obviously, it is a series, but each book is a sequel, and it can stand alone, independent of the previous book because it has its own story.

Hunger Games (Collins, 2008) is another one that became wildly popular. In addition to the enormous financial security they provide for writers, successful series may also offer other incentives. I would imagine that a new, stand-alone novel is more difficult to write than book two or three of a series because the author is returning to a familiar, already established set of places and characters. For series' readers, it's the same thing; they know what's coming generally, and they return to familiar characters. I think series have always been a part of literature and will always be for the reasons I named: financial and readership stability. Personally, I am not a huge fan of series books. I'd rather read solid, stand-alone novels.

Leilya: I feel the same way, but what I noticed is that adolescent readers often ask the YA authors if there is going to be a sequel to the book. Just like you say, the readers already know the characters and setting and want the progression of the story. They want to see the characters' growth, and, maybe, maybe they want to find hope for themselves seeing how other adolescents face struggles, experience pain or loss, and still manage to cope with all the challenges, become confident and successful. This is what we essentially teach them—becoming stronger through trials, to make choices that will lead them further, to embrace who they are, and etc.

Chris: Exactly!

TRENDS IN TEACHING YAL AND THE FUTURE OF ALAN

Leilya: Let's talk more about teaching and scholarship in studying and teaching of YA literature. What do you see happening here?

Chris: Because of his extensive work on the teaching of YA lit, Steven Bickmore would probably know more than I do about this, but my impression is that more and more universities offer true young adult literature classes, not just as a component of the methods course, but a course in young adult literature, or maybe in combination with children's literature. This is encouraging. If we want teachers, especially English majors, who are immersed in the canon or adult stuff their entire academic career, to find relevant texts for their students, this kind of course is essential. It's hard for preservice English teachers to shake off their immersion in canonical/classic literature to create some space for another kind of literature that is out there. It's important for students preparing to enter the teaching profession to take a semester-long course on YAL in order to discover some of the rich tradition of YA books and to know where to find those books later on their own. I do hope that the semester-long, three-credit course in YA literature really is a trend in colleges and universities.

As for the scholarship, the articles have become more empirical and less teacher-focused, less practical, or classroom-focused. It seems they have less emphasis on pedagogy and more on some other kinds of issues. That's a good thing in some ways, but it seems that kind of scholarship ignores the pedagogical needs of secondary English teachers, especially teachers who newcomers to young adult literature. I think empirical and pedagogical and bibliographical articles can coexist, of course. I guess I'd like *The ALAN Review* to be more for teachers than it is for academics.

Leilya: There is another side to it, I think. Have you noticed that the journals struggle in the past few years? *The Signal Journal*, for example, has outlived itself, and even *The ALAN Review* seems to struggle with receiving enough of competitive submission. I'd like to say that among the NCTE journals, *English Journal* is very much still oriented towards the teachers, and from my own experience, the editors push the writers who submit the manuscripts to adjust and revise their pieces so the teachers can benefit the most. From what I see, it appears that maybe in the next five to ten years, the journals may not be as effective and popular.

Chris: Yes. Yes, that's a change, and I think secondary teachers are just so busy; they don't have time to read long research articles. The journal has to be really engaging and useful for them to hang in there with it.

Leilya: This is the reality of a teaching profession. Teachers are extremely busy. I have a couple more questions, and this one is one of the most important: What makes ALAN unique? How is it different from any other literary association, if it is in fact different? How can we continue keeping it this way?

Chris: ALAN is really a grassroots organization. Consider Alleen's account of its founding, where just a group of teachers, scholars, and people who cared about YA books got together and created an organization. One of the strengths of ALAN is that it's not NCTE. It's independent in some ways. It's attached to NCTE, but it's not entirely dependent on it. Well, maybe, it is kind of dependent on NCTE, but recent ALAN leaders have done some things to push back against NCTE policies that were not relevant for ALAN. They have their own Workshop, their elected leadership, a Board of Directors, and a president. They also have the Executive Director, now that's Mark Letcher, who provides stability and transition of leadership. I think it would really be hard to divorce ourselves from NCTE, and it might be a big mistake, but at the same time, the way we are able to function in our own way, most of the time, is really a good thing. ALAN's roots go back to founders who just loved kids, loved reading, loved books, and they were aware of the emerging field of young adult literature. They considered the field and their work in it important. ALAN has evolved in wonderful ways since its beginning, and it has attracted so many smart people, librarians, university people, and terrific authors. The ALAN Workshop is a place where everybody who loves young adult books can feel comfortable and can find a session that's interesting to them.

Leilya: I also like that ALAN is at the intersection of several other organizations and committees. There is ELATE with its Commission on the Study and Teaching of Adolescent Literature, and there is YA Summit, founded by Steven Bickmore, so there is a lot going on around ALAN and in connection with it. I like the idea that this intersection creates numerous possibilities to participate in the study and teaching of young adult literature regardless to which of these entities they belong or choose to participate.

Chris: Yes, and I think that *Study and Scrutiny's* move from pedagogy to a focus on other scholarly approaches to young adult literature has helped to legitimize the academic study of YAL. I don't think it's competing with *The ALAN Review*; it serves as a complement to what *The ALAN Review*

does. The good news is that there are lots of people getting involved with young adult literature in various ways.

Leilya: Right! I was with *Study and Scrutiny* for seven years from the moment it was founded until this past summer. This journal allows the submissions to be longer than the print journals like *The ALAN Review* can afford. Here the authors may submit empirical research, comparative studies, and other things that take space, and because *Study and Scrutiny* is an online journal, it is a nice outlet for more elaborate work. It is also an open access journal, so the readers are not burdened with any expenses.

We can talk for hours, but I realize we will have to stop at some point. I do have one more question. In the recent years, ALAN has become younger. The membership seems to be younger and the leadership as well. Look at the latest ALAN Presidents: Danielle King, Sarah Ressler Wright, and Ricki Ginsberg. What do you think about it?

Chris: Our recent leaders have been amazing, and I've been grateful for their willingness and ability to serve ALAN. As for the young-ifying of ALAN, well, it's a good thing and a bad thing. I value our past, probably because I am so dang old, and I really care about the history of ALAN and our field. There is a science-fiction/time-travel novel, called *Timeline* by Michael Crichton (1999), in which one character, a historian, says that people who don't know history don't know anything. It's like being a leaf that doesn't know it's part of a tree. The tree of young adult literature has lots of interesting roots and branches, and I worry that focusing on the new and the now may lead people to forget our roots, the foundations of young adult literature and ALAN. It's good to have a few gray-hairs involved in the decisions the organization is making about directing and leading because old-timers have valuable experience, and they know what's been done and what needs to be changed. I'm saying that involvement of ALAN's senior citizens is important, but not to the exclusion of young blood and new voices. Many of the changes to ALAN and its leadership recognizes the need for some new voices; without them, ALAN might stagnate, we'd see the same people speaking, the same people in leadership. So, that's been a good move, but it would be nice to recognize that old-timers still have something to offer to ALAN. Probably every organization undergoes a similar evolution from old to young, but when those changes take place, there's a risk that the veterans might feel excluded sometimes. ALAN has such a rich history. That's why I am excited for your project because

it's important to capture this stuff. I would love to see it as a regular part of the Workshop and the journal. It'd be nice if the ALAN Website had a link that would take people to a page about the history of our organization. Without that information, current and new members have no easy way to learn our history. Newcomers don't know who started it, who were the early movers and shakers. Every ALAN member, every YA scholar should know Robert Carlsen, Ken Donelson, or Alleen Nilsen, or Patty Campbell. They really should know these people and the contributions they made. So I feel like I am kind of between of those generations—the founders and the bright, energetic newcomers. I'd like to pull the past and the present together to help people realize and appreciate ALAN's roots.

Leilya: I am completely with you on this. I think there should be a generational balance, and there should be a conversation going back and forth. Is there anything else you would like to tell me to conclude this conversation?

Chris: I think it's a great project. I hope you guys continue it. It will be wonderful to see it as a book. I think I have a book about the history of *The ALAN Review*. It has quite a bit of republication of important articles from TAR, but then there are some articles about the beginning of TAR, ALAN, and stuff like that.

Leilya: Thank you so much for this conversation and your knowledge of ALAN! Thank you for your time!

Chris: Thank you and good luck with the project. It is an ambitious one. I thoroughly enjoyed talking to you.

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