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# Love, Life and Potato Salad: An Interview with Alden Carter

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by Katherine R. Cagle

**Editor's note:** Katherine R. Cagle, the North Carolina Association of School Librarians representative to the North Carolina Libraries Editorial Board, interviewed young adult author Alden Carter after he spoke at the NCASL luncheon.

Novelist Alden R. Carter was the speaker at the NCASL luncheon on November 14 during the NCLA Conference in High Point. With a mixture of humanity and humor, Carter described his efforts to write meaningful novels for young adults.

According to Carter, one of the most difficult things about being a writer is responding to the question: "What do you write about?" To this question he never had a satisfactory reply until recently, when he was alone at home enjoying leftovers from a family reunion picnic. "I saw that the answer to the question was right at the end of my fork—potato salad. I have never attended any family gathering from baptismal lunches, to wedding suppers, to funeral brunches where potato salad wasn't served, and I began to see potato salad as a unifying metaphor—something that sticks with us through the high and low points of our lives."

Carter continued, "I'd always hated potato salad before that night, but afterward I began giving it a chance. Most of it is pretty tasty stuff: wholesome potatoes from the earth, held together with an ingenious creation called mayonnaise, made just a little wild by the addition of onions and peppers, and all rendered hopelessly garish by a coating of paprika. Then one day, I read a newspaper report of a family rushed to the hospital after eating tainted potato salad. 'How can this be?' I whined to my wife. 'I mean, potato salad is such harmless, homey stuff.' She explained gently that if you leave potato salad in the sun too long, enough nasty bacteria will develop to poison even the heartiest stomach. 'Wow,' I said, 'do you mean that if you don't take care of potato salad, it can flat kill you?' 'Yep,' she replied.

"So I mused on that revelation and discovered that potato salad connects with a lot more of life than I had realized. If we don't take care of love, it can spoil and become as deadly to our happiness as potato salad spoiling in the sun. If we forget to care for our fellow human beings—particularly for our young people—then we will find our society and our democracy putrifying. And if we fail to care for the earth—that earth which gives us not only potatoes but all the other things needed for life—then we

and our fellow creatures will live impoverished lives and die without hope for the future.

"But, if we look after love, if we look out for our fellow human beings, and if we take care of our earth, then—like potato salad kept cool and shaded while the cloth is spread and the picnic dishes set out—life will be good for us and for all those who will take our places after we have enjoyed the fullness of our lives. Many times I've been asked what I write about. I've never had a satisfactory answer until recently. Now I have one: in my humble way, I write about potato salad and some of the things it holds together."

Carter went on to describe his development as a writer, the plotting of a novel, the research involved, his deep concern over the growth of censorship, and some of the messages that he hopes his stories convey to young people.

In an interview after his presentation, Carter said that he became a writer for young adults more by accident than by design. "When I set out to become a writer, it really didn't make that much difference what I wrote about as long as I was writing. I was a high school teacher at the time, and I guess it was natural for me to write for and about that age group. To my astonishment, it worked. And although I didn't exactly plan to become a writer for young adults, I've been very comfortable in that role. I find the coming-of-age process endlessly fascinating.

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"The teen years are very difficult. Young adult readers are looking for characters who are also going through the struggle to become adults. I think teenagers are good at empathy but not so good at extending an active compassion to others. The value of the young adult novel is that it provides a refuge where teens can explore empathy and let their compassion grow."

To the age-old question "Where do you get your ideas?" Carter said that the human condition is his "stock in

trade." However, he seldom uses an incident as he observed it, but asks himself a lot of "what ifs" and uses his imagination to turn an incident into a story. He is more interested in the commonplace than the exotic, and is particularly impressed by the "great courage" of everyday teens struggling to become adults.

When asked how he works, he said that he adheres to a daily schedule, working from about 8:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. "while my wife and kids are out in the world." He rewrites a lot, seldom having anything published that "I haven't been through twenty to twenty-five times." He also spends a great deal of time on research: "I feel an obligation to get the details right. Kids don't need any more misinformation than they already get." He wants

a demanding editor who will give his manuscript a thorough reading: "The writer tends to lose perspective after working on a story for a long time. The editor's major function is to restore some objectivity to the process."

Carter's first four novels were named ALA Best Books for Young Adults: *Growing Season* in 1984; *Wart, Son of Toad* in 1985; *Sheila's Dying* in 1987; and *Up Country* in 1989. *RoboDad*, his fifth novel, was named Best Children's Fiction Book of 1990 by the prestigious Society of Midland Authors.

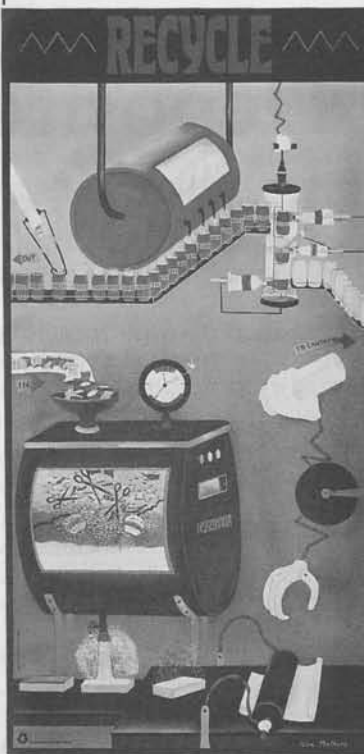
In addition to novels, Carter has written over a dozen nonfiction books for young adults on subjects as varied as the People's Republic of China, Shoshoni Indians, the history of radio, and the Battle of Gettysburg. The third of his four books on the American Revolution, *At the Forge of Liberty*, recounts Nathaniel Greene's campaign to drive the British from the Carolinas. "Greene was a brilliant tactician and an inspired leader," Carter commented. "To him should go much of the credit for setting up the final victory at Yorktown. George Washington recognized that, but history never gave Greene the fame he deserved."

Although writing occupies most of his time, Carter is also in demand as a speaker and workshop leader for both adults and young adults. In addition to his speaking engagement at the NCASL luncheon, Carter also spoke to students at High Point Central High School.

Carter is a graduate of the University of Kansas and a former naval officer and English teacher. He lives in Marshfield, Wisconsin, with his social-worker wife and their eight-year-old son and four-year-old daughter. Together they enjoy "canoeing, camping, and playgrounds."

When asked what he regards as his most important message to teens, Carter replied, "The importance of courage and compassion in everyday life and a message of hope—that the teen years can be survived."

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