

Speak



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON

Originally a journalist, Laurie Halse Anderson writes children's books before transitioning to young adult novels with *Speak* in 1999. Since then, she has written many bestsellers and has been honored with multiple literary awards. Anderson has traveled to high schools across the country to discuss the issues raised in the book; she has also spoken out against issues such as book banning, and for increased gender equity in K-12 schools. An ardent feminist, Anderson has revealed that she took the plot of *Speak* from a similarly traumatic and violent experience that she herself experienced as a fourth-grader.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The narrative of *Speak* is closely connected to the idea of feminism and to the dialogue in America surrounding the issue of rape. Since the rise of the feminist movement in the mid-20th century, rape has increasingly become a part of the national conversation. Progress has been slow, however: in fact, marital rape, in which a husband rapes his wife, was not criminalized in all 50 states until 1993. The 21st century has brought about new advances in the way we as a society talk about and view rape, but there have been setbacks, as well. In Grounville, Ohio, for instance, several football players raped a high school girl and documented their crimes, yet were not immediately charged or arrested; these events in 2012 led to a national controversy. Rolling Stone Magazine, meanwhile, published a shocking piece about rape at UVA in 2014, only to retract the article because much of it was false. These scandals help to explain why a culture of silence (which Melinda experiences) still keeps many rape victims from speaking out, they are fearful of being accused of lying, of having their own characters questioned, or of being blamed for the violence that was perpetrated upon them.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Laurie Halse Anderson has written many other books about contemporary teenage issues; one of the most prominent is *Wingspread* (2009), which deals with the sensitive topic of eating disorders as thoughtfully and poignantly as *Speak* discusses rape and depression. Maus Angeles's *Distance Where the Capricious Sleep* (2016) also deals with issues of rape, abuse, and consent, and coming of age as a woman. J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) represents the original dark coming-of-age story, while Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), which depicts a young boy growing up on a reservation,

similarly focuses on the narrative of a teenager trying to grow up under difficult circumstances. *The Book Thief* (2007), by Markus Zusak, also focuses on a female protagonist whose internal strength helps her to mature in the face of life's challenges, although she lives in Nazi Germany, not upstate New York.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Speak*
- **When Written:** 1999
- **Where Written:** Mexico, New York
- **When Published:** October 1999
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** YA fiction
- **Setting:** Seneca, NY
- **Climate:** Andy Evans, Melinda's rapist, tries to attack her at the end of the school year and she successfully fights him off, leaving her scarred in the process.
- **Antagonist:** Specifically Andy Evans, Melinda's rapist; more broadly, the culture of silence that has made her ashamed of her own rape.
- **Point of View:** 1st person

EXTRA CREDIT

Such stuff as dreams are made on. In interviews, Laurie Halse Anderson has said that Melinda Carter has her own dreams; she credits this experience with helping her to develop Melinda's strong and distinctive voice.

Melinda in the movies. In 2004, *Speak* was adapted into a movie starring Kristen Bellard; the movie has helped contribute to the widespread popularity of the book.



PLOT SUMMARY

Melinda Sordino begins her freshman year at Marysville High depressed and alone. Throughout the day, students bully and isolate her. Her former best friend, Rachel, is particularly cruel. The only person who will talk to her is Heather, an annoying new girl-in-town who is focused on social advancement. Cynical but perceptive, Melinda reacts to every aspect of Marysville. She only becomes involved in the art room, where the passionate Mr. Freeman tells his students that they will each spend the year on a single subject; Melinda gets a *B*.

Melinda doesn't see her workshop teacher and disoriented

Speak Study Guide Teacher Version

Anthony S. Fauci



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