

BookTalk Information Sheet

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Anderson, L. H. (1999). *Speak*. (1st ed.). New York City: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Intended Audience

Speak is classified as young adult literature since it is about the high school experience, but is accessible and well-written and as a result has been enjoyed by readers of all ages. The book has had an enormous impact on many of its readers. Anderson has said: “Somebody calculated I’ve spoken to over a million teenagers in high schools in the last decade or so, and every time I’ve ever given a presentation, I’ve had somebody come up to me afterwards in tears because they really feel like for the first time it’s safe for them to talk about what happened to them” (Rose, 2013). It is an important book that has helped to open up the conversation around sexual violence and mental illness, for all readers, not just young adults.

Plot summary

Speak tells Melinda Sordino’s story. After calling the police and ruining a party in the summer, her friends have abandoned her, and she starts high school ostracized by her peers. Melinda sinks deeper and deeper into depression, isolating herself from her family and struggling to make friends. At home, Melinda’s parents fight frequently and pay more attention to their careers than to each other or their daughter. Her parents express frustration with Melinda’s attitude but make little effort to understand the cause behind it. Her grades drop and she grapples with apathy, fear, and anger. She is assigned a yearlong

art project to learn to draw a tree, and, throughout the story, uses her artwork as an outlet for her emotions. The book gradually reveals that Melinda called the police to the party because she was raped.

As time passes, Melinda slowly begins to recover. She begins to find her voice and slowly settles into her life in high school. Discovering that she is talented at basketball and art are important moments that help Melinda towards recovery. When her rapist begins to date one of her former friends, Melina speaks out against their relationship, but is still afraid to say why. Melinda endures a second attack from her rapist, but this time manages to fight him off. The novel ends with Melinda preparing to finally tell her story to her art teacher.

Notes

Laurie Halse Anderson's seminal novel, *Speak*, was published in 1999. It has since been translated into 16 languages, received many prestigious awards (Glen, 2010), and been ranked by the ALA as one of the most banned books in the United States (ALA, 2009). A month before beginning high school, Anderson herself was sexually assaulted. Anderson did not tell anyone for nearly 25 years, citing "the dynamics of our family and what was going on at the time in our family life" (Rose, 2013) as a part of why she remained silent.

Melinda is a fourteen-year-old girl living in Syracuse, New York. Struggling with depression, she is keenly observant and very intelligent. Melinda tends to treat those around her with derision, making sarcastic but honest observations that manage to be funny and endearing. The book is written in a first person narrative with lots of dialogue.

While not epistolary, the novel does read very similar to a diary, giving the reader an intimate look at Melinda's inner thoughts.

Anderson's novel stands up to literary analysis; it has a great deal of intertextuality and symbolism. Melinda connects to Hester Grey from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Maya Angelou. *Speak* is told with a fragmented narrative, heavily influenced by Cubism, which Melinda feels represents her trauma. The novel also incorporates a wry perspective on intellectual freedom and educational funding. Anderson depicts Melinda's high school teachers as people with a host of their own problems, providing a cast of well-rounded characters.

Speak is often used in high school curriculums, cited as a tool that can open discussion around not only literary analysis, but also sexual harassment, school cliques, sex, and family relationships. Wesley Scroggins, a professor at Missouri State University, wrote in 2010 *Speak* should be banned for "exposing children to immorality," that the novel should be classified as "soft pornography" (Scroggins, 2010). *Speak* was the 60th most challenged book in the United States from 2000-2009 (ALA, 2009). In 2004, *Speak* was made into a movie starring Kristen Stewart.

Developing a Booktalk

Developing a booktalk was an experience I was excited about but found challenging. It was interesting to think about the creative aspect, but unfamiliar and a little intimidating. It was hard to pin down one idea: I knew I wanted something visual, but initially wanted a much bigger scale that I was capable of producing. I also quickly realized the project had to be scaled down: using actors or scenery would give more

artistic license, but I didn't have the time or the patience. It was important to me to choose an appropriate medium – I didn't feel that something goofy or fun with sock puppets would be a good way to represent this book, as it deals with very serious and mature subject matter.

I decided on a simple concept. Like Melinda, I would draw trees, and give my 'talk' in the background. I did (and still do) have some concern that this theme it is not obvious to someone who has not yet read the book. I explain the tree project in the video, but not until halfway through. I know from experience that editing a movie takes a long time, so I wanted something that was straightforward. In order to create a movie where both of my hands were showing, I needed to rely on assistance. This was another challenge: although I have a camera that works as a video camera, I had to teach someone else how to use it and explain to them how I wanted the video shot. As with all group work, this involved a lot of compromises, and my video didn't turn out exactly as I had envisioned it. While I find usually the creative process very satisfying, I find it stressful to not have full control. Another stressor was the editing process: as I mentioned, it's a long process. I was out of practice with it, making it even slower.

The content of my 'talk' was also an important consideration. Since it was going to be posted to YouTube, I didn't want it to contain any spoilers. My summary in the booktalk was significantly longer and more detailed, but for the video I kept my summary relatively brief. Since I was talking, I tried not to overload the viewer with information and tried to cover only the most points. I found this limiting but preferable to providing an overload of confusing details.

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