Kylie Constantine, Marguerite Johnson, "Entry on: Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/106. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Laurie Halse Anderson

Speak

United States (1998)

TAGS: Apollo Daphne Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Ovid Philomela Procne





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Speak
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1998
First Edition Details	Laurie Anderson, *Speak*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999, 198 pp.
ISBN	9780374371524
Awards	All the awards are listed on Wikipedia.
Genre	Fictional autobiography, Novels, Teen fiction*
Target Audience	Young adults
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This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators



Laurie Halse Anderson by Larry D. Moore. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 (accessed: December 15, 2021).

Laurie Halse Anderson , b. 1961

Laurie Halse Anderson was born in 1961, in Potsdam, Northern New York State, the daughter of Rev. Frank A. Halse Jr. and Joyce Holcomb Halse. Her father was a Methodist minister at Syracuse University, and her mother worked in management. Both parents wrote poetry and instilled a love for storytelling in their children. Anderson describes her father as a talented storyteller, and recounts sneaking downstairs after bedtime as a child to listen to him, commenting that "he always told the best stories when he thought that I was sleeping." She credits her mother's indulgence in her avid reading as a child for her continued love of literature. From the second grade, she began writing after she was taught haiku, and it was her love of books that became her solace when at the age of thirteen, her father lost his position as Chaplain at Syracuse University. Anderson's teenaged years were consequently difficult, since the family became impoverished, her father suffered from depression, and the family unit broke down. High school was also difficult, as her family's financial situation was evident in her clothing and impacted her social acceptance. As a senior in high school, Anderson participated in an exchange student program, and spent time in Denmark, living on a pig farm and learning to speak Danish.

She studied for a Bachelor's degree in Languages and Literature, and graduated from Georgetown University in 1984. While studying, Anderson married her first husband, Gregory Anderson, with whom she shares two daughters. She married her second husband, Scott Larrabee, in 2005 and is stepmother to his two children.

Anderson began her writing career as a freelance reporter and wrote fiction as a hobby. Her first book was *Ndito Run*, released in 1996, which was followed in the same year by *Turkey Pox*. During the early years of her writing career, she supplemented her income by writing non-fiction books. Anderson often tackles subjects of difference, emotional trauma, and becoming. Anderson has stated that she writes young adult fiction "because after a wonderful childhood, my nuclear family had a nuclear meltdown. The fallout poisoned us for decades." To-date she has written over thirty books, including historical fiction,

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young adult literature, and fiction and non-fiction for young readers, and has received several major literary awards. In 2009, she was awarded the ALA Margaret A. Edwards Award for her contribution to young adult literature. Her novel *Speak* received the Golden Kite Award, the Edgar Allan Poe Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and was runner-up for the Michael L. Printz Award and the National Book Award for Young People's Literature.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: May 29, 2018).

Laurie Halse Anderson Acceptance Speech, 2009 Winner of the Margaret A. Edwards Award. "Young Adult Literary Services Association" (accessed: July 2, 2018).

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Additional information

Adaptations

Speak was adapted into a film in 2004 by Showtime Networks, Inc. Dir. Jessica Sharzer. Screenplay Jessica Sharzer and Annie Young Frisbie.

In the First Square Fish Edition (2011) of the novel, an interview with Laurie Halse Anderson is included. Therein, she states that she was unable to contribute to the screenplay of the film due to conflicting writing obligations, but visited the set with her daughter during filming. Anderson features in a cameo as the "Lunch Lady Who Puts Mashed Potatoes on the Plate" in the cafeteria scene early in the film. Anderson has high praise for the movie, including actors' performances and direction, noting that although some scenes had to be cut, the film is faithful to the book.

Translation

Chinese: □□□□□.

Czech: *Mluv.*Spanish: *Cuando los arboles hablen.*

Dutch: *Vertel de waarheid.*

Finnish: *Lukossa.*

French: *Vous parler de ça.*

Georgian: *ლაპარაკე.*

German: *Sprich.*

Greek (Modern): *Σπάσε τη σιωπή* [Spáse tī siopḯ].

Hungarian: *Hadd mondjam el…*

Ingonesian: *Sst! … Ada Apa dengan Melinda?*

Italian: *Le parole non dette.*

Lithuanian: *Kalbėk.*

Persian: □□□ □□□□ □□ .

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Polish: *Mów!*

Portuguese: *Grita.*

Russian: *Говори* [Govori].

Serbian: *Progovori.*

Slovak: *Hovor!*

Slovenian: *Povej!*

Swedish: *Säg något* .

Turkish: *Runāt.*

Vietnamese: *Chuyện Ở Trường Của Melinda.*

Summary

Speak is the first-person narrative of fourteen-year-old Melinda Sordino, who documents her freshman year at Merryweather High School in Syracuse, New York, over the course of four academic "marking periods."

Melinda experiences alienation at school owing to an unspecified event during the summer. At a party, Melinda had called the police after an incident involving her, causing her friends to reject her. She returns to school without the support of her friends, except for a new student, Heather, who befriends Melinda and tries to get her to engage in school life and become popular. The incident at the party that caused Melinda's ostracism is not immediately articulated but revealed over the course of the novel. A major cause of the delay is Melinda's refusal to speak about the summer party and what happened to her.

Despite Heather's overtures, Melinda tries everything she can to avoid social encounters at school, going as far as to hide in an old janitor's closet. Melinda avoids her ex-friends and is especially alert in her attempts to avoid "IT," which is her name for a senior student by the name of Andy Evans. The only reprieve from the anxiety of school is art class, which she enjoys because of the assignment she has been given, namely to create various interpretations of the meaning(s) of the word "tree." The tree per se is a metaphor throughout the novel

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and a symbol of Melinda's sense of self. The trees she creates are lightning-struck, dead or dying and represent the state of being after something or someone has received a monumental shock. In this sense, the tree epitomises her own post-traumatic stress after the incident at the party.

As the school year progresses, Melinda's anxiety and sense of hopelessness increase. She begins to truant and her grades crash. Despite the efforts of her parents and counsellor, she refuses to reveal the source of her crisis. In short, Melinda continues to refuse to speak. She bites her lips, suffers from a sore throat and wishes she could swallow herself. Action, condition and fantasy combine to further symbolise not only her determination not to speak but her increasing inability to speak. Melinda describes the secret that she dares not vocalise as an animal inside her gut. Another animal metaphor is that of the baby rabbit, which she compares to herself on seeing Andy Evans one day in a parking lot. Like the rabbit, she only has two options: flight or fright.

As profoundly difficult as it is, Melinda eventually acknowledges the reason for her silence during the "Third Marking Period"; the fact that Andy Evans raped her at the summer party. This acknowledgement comes one night when she talks to herself about the party, narrating the details leading up to and including the rape. Melinda describes Andy Evans as a "Greek God" who danced with her, kissed her and then pushed her to the ground, covered her mouth, and raped her. At the end of the story, her lips are bloodied where she has bitten through them. After the trauma of voicing her rape, Melinda decides to tell her ex-friend Rachel about it. At first, Rachel does not believe her, but the attempts to tell her story provides her with a sense of freedom. She begins to contact other ex-friends and focuses on completing her artwork inspired by the word "tree." As a sign of her increasing healing, she writes a list of the names of boys to avoid on the toilet walls. By this action, Melinda is shown that protest and self-liberation are not only expressed in verbal words but also in written words. Her actions inspire other girls at the school to follow her lead, and in no time the wall is covered in a commentary on the behaviour of Andy Evans. Rachel sees the writing on the wall; this, in addition to his sexually aggressive behaviour to her at the prom, leads her to dump him. Enraged, Andy confronts Melinda but she fights back and her screams finally alert other girls to come to her aid.

On the last day of school, Melinda receives an A+ for her art project.

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The tree she finally created looked vibrant and alive. Her beloved art teacher, Mr Anderson, congratulates her on her accomplishment, adding that he knew she had experienced a rough year. She decides to tell Mr Anderson her story.

Speak is an example of young adult fiction that tackles challenging, complex and confronting topics. Narrated in diary form, and making use of the first-person perspective, the text provides a direct or first-hand account of rape. To convey the trauma of the rape, it also rejects a linear structure and privileges uneven sentences and varied stylistic features such as subheadings and lists as well as dialogue and interior monologue. The temporal cohesiveness of the text is also regularly disrupted with sudden flashbacks, which further convey the shattered psychology of Melinda.

The novel has been the subject of censorship debates and rulings, being ranked 60th on the American Library Association list of the Top 100 Banned / Challenged Books for 2000-2009. Anderson is an opponent of censorship and has spoken out against it on several occasions. Despite the censorship, *Speak* is taught in schools in the United States and other countries.

Analysis

Laurie Halse Anderson maintains that the inspiration for *Speak* came to her in a dream. Following years of nightmares, Anderson developed the practice of writing down her dreams in a dream journal. On this occasion, she awoke to the sound of a girl sobbing, initially thinking it was one of her own daughters. Realising it was part of a dream, Anderson began writing, which formed the basis of the novel, *Speak*. In all the interviews and discussions of the novel, Anderson has not mentioned any inspiration taken from Classical literature or mythology. However, the silence of Melinda matches numerous tales in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that describe the silencing of raped women who are inevitably transformed into something else after their trauma, thereby losing their voices.

The two principal stories from the *Metamorphoses* that equate with Melinda's story are "Apollo and Daphne" and "Philomela and Procne." The former tells of the pursuit of the nymph Daphne by the god Apollo and her "salvation" in the form of transformation into a laurel tree. The latter depicts the rape of the young princess Philomela by her brother-in-law Tereus who cuts out her tongue to stop her from

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accusing him (whereas Andy Evans places his hand over Melinda's mouth as he rapes her). Both women are rendered silent. The tale of Daphne's fate is further alluded to in Melinda's artistic rendering of trees, her identification with the various trees she creates, and the rapes both taking place in a remote area under a tree. Unable to speak of her rape, Melinda, like Philomela, recounts her attack through writing. Whereas Philomela weaves a story in order that her violator is named, Melinda writes a note to her old friend, Rachel, shares written notes in the library with Rachel, and later posts a written warning on the wall of the girls' toilet. Anderson draws the reader's attention to Melinda's mangled lips and repeated injuries to her hands, often having blood drawn from injuries such as a paper cut to her tongue (staining her father's brochures) or cuts to her wrists and hands.

Further connections to the story of Philomela are evident in the film in the strong images of silencing, with Melinda using eyeliner to draw stitching on her lips, and taping the mouth of a Barbie doll in her turkey sculpture. The doll's head hangs from the sculpture, giving it the appearance of having been devoured or imprisoned. The image of a tree in the line of Melinda's sight through the window of Andy's car during the rape scene also echoes Ovid's use of tree imagery in Philomela's rape. Both Melinda's and Philomela's rapes take place in seclusion in a wooded area; Melinda in the back of Andy's car under a tree in the film, or under a tree in the novel, while Philomela is taken to a hut hidden in the forest. The violent image of a broken tree in both the film and the book has allusions of Philomela, but the theme of healing through trees in Melinda's art project and the tree in her front yard suggests a link with Daphne's escape from rape through Apollo by metamorphosing into a tree.

Injuries to Melinda's hands provide a link to Shakespeare's appropriation of the Philomela myth in *Titus Andronicus*. Further images of birds and apples are repeated throughout the novel, recalling the name Philomela itself; in Latin, "lover of melody," and in Greek, "lover of apples." Indeed, as Melinda begins to regain her confidence, evident in the tennis match she plays with her former friend, Nicole, she describes her serve: "I bounce the yellow ball, one two three. Up in the air like releasing a bird or an apple …" (p. 170).

In addition to classical intertextuality, there are echoes of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, both of which treat alienation and abuse of women.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Apollo Daphne Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Ovid Philomela Procne
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Coming of age Friendship Isolation/loneliness Parents (and children) Rape School Silence Teachers Violence

Further Reading

Glenn, Wendy J., *Laurie Halse Anderson. Speaking in Tongues*, Scarecrow Press: Lanham, Maryland, 2010.

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