

Background Information for Library Materials in Review

Book Title: <i>Speak</i>	Synopsis "Speak up for yourself--we want to know what you have to say." From the first moment of her freshman year at Merryweather High, Melinda knows this is a big fat lie, part of the nonsense of high school. She is friendless, outcast, because she busted an end-of-summer party by calling the cops, so now nobody will talk to her, let alone listen to her. As time passes, she becomes increasingly isolated and practically stops talking altogether. Only her art class offers any solace, and it is through her work on an art project that she is finally able to face what really happened at that terrible party: she was raped by an upperclassman, a guy who still attends Merryweather and is still a threat to her. Her healing process has just begun when she has another violent encounter with him. But this time Melinda fights back, refuses to be silent, and thereby achieves a measure of vindication. <small>Source: Publisher Description</small>
Book Author Anderson, Laurie Halse	
Copyright Year: 1999	

Professional Reviews of *Speak*

Source: Follett Titlewave

Booklist (Vol. 96, No. 2 (September 15, 1999))

Gr. 8-12. Having broken up an end-of-summer party by calling the police, high-school freshman Melinda Sordino begins the school year as a social outcast. She's the only person who knows the real reason behind her call: she was raped at the party by Andy Evans, a popular senior at her school. Slowly, with the help of an eccentric and understanding art teacher, she begins to recover from the trauma, only to find Andy threatening her again. Melinda's voice is distinct, unusual, and very real as she recounts her past and present experiences in bitterly ironic, occasionally even amusing vignettes. In her YA fiction debut, Anderson perfectly captures the harsh conformity of high-school cliques and one teen's struggle to find acceptance from her peers. Melinda's sarcastic wit, honesty, and courage make her a memorable character whose ultimate triumph will inspire and empower readers.

Kirkus Reviews (1999)

A frightening and sobering look at the cruelty and viciousness that pervade much of contemporary high school life, as real as today's headlines. At the end of the summer before she enters high school, Melinda attends a party at which two bad things happen to her. She gets drunk, and she is raped. Shocked and scared, she calls the police, who break up the party and send everyone home. She tells no one of her rape, and the other students, even her best friends, turn against her for mining their good time. By the time school starts, she is completely alone, and utterly desolate. She withdraws more and more into herself, rarely talking, cutting classes, ignoring assignments, and becoming more estranged daily from the world around her. Few people penetrate her shell; one of them is Mr. Freeman, her art teacher, who works with her to help her express what she has so deeply repressed. When the unthinkable happens--the same upperclassman who raped her at the party attacks her again--something within the new Melinda says no, and in repelling her attacker, she becomes whole again. The plot is gripping and the characters are powerfully drawn, but it is its raw and unvarnished look at the dynamics of the high school experience that makes this a novel that will be hard for readers to forget.

Publishers Weekly (September 13, 1999)

In a stunning first novel, Anderson uses keen observations and vivid imagery to pull readers into the head of an isolated teenager. Divided into the four marking periods of an academic year, the novel, narrated by Melinda Sordino, begins on her first day as a high school freshman. No one will sit with Melinda on the bus. At school, students call her names and harass her; her best friends from junior high scatter to different cliques and abandon her. Yet Anderson infuses the narrative with a wit that sustains the heroine through her pain and holds readers' empathy. A girl at a school pep rally offers an explanation of the heroine's pariah status when she confronts Melinda about calling the police at a summer party, resulting in several arrests. But readers do not learn why Melinda made the call until much later: a popular senior raped her that night and, because of her trauma, she barely speaks at all. Only through her work in art class, and with the support of a compassionate teacher there, does she begin to reach out to others and eventually find her voice. Through the first-person narration, the author makes Melinda's pain palpable: "I stand in the center aisle of the auditorium, a wounded zebra in a National Geographic special." Though the symbolism is sometimes heavy-handed, it is effective. The ending, in which her attacker comes after her once more, is the only part of the plot that feels forced. But the book's overall gritty realism and Melinda's hard-won metamorphosis will leave readers touched and inspired. Ages 12-up. (Oct.)

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School Library Journal (October 1999)

Gr 8 Up-This powerful novel deals with a difficult yet important topic-rape. Melinda is just starting high school. It should be one of the greatest times in her life, but instead of enjoying herself, she is an outcast. She has been marked as the girl who called the police to break up the big end-of-the-summer party, and all the kids are angry at her. Even her closest friends have pulled away. No one knows why she made the call, and even Melinda can't really articulate what happened. As the school year goes on, her grades plummet and she withdraws into herself to the point that she's barely speaking. Her only refuge is her art class, where she learns to find ways to express some of her feelings. As her freshman year comes to an end, Melinda finally comes to terms with what happened to her-she was raped at that party by an upperclassman who is still taunting her at school. When he tries again, she finds her voice, and her classmates realize the truth. The healing process will take time, but Melinda no longer has to deal with it alone. Anderson expresses the emotions and the struggles of teenagers perfectly. Melinda's pain is palpable, and readers will totally empathize with her. This is a compelling book, with sharp, crisp writing that draws readers in, engulfing them in the story.-Dina Sherman, Brooklyn Children's Museum, NY

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Horn Book Magazine (September/October, 1999)

Speaking out at the "wrong" time-calling 911 from a teen drinking party-has made Melinda a social outcast; now she barely speaks at all. A conversation with her father about their failed Thanksgiving dinner goes as follows: "Dad: 'It's supposed to be soup.' / Me: / Dad: 'It tasted a bit watery, so I kept adding thickener....' / Me: ." While Melinda's smart and savvy interior narrative slowly reveals the searing pain of that 911 night, it also nails the high-school experience cold-from "The First Ten Lies They Tell You" (number eight: "Your schedule was created with your needs in mind") to cliques and clans and the worst and best in teachers. The book is structurally divided into four marking periods, over which Melinda's grades decline severely and she loses the only friend she has left, a perky new girl she doesn't even like. Melinda's nightmare discloses itself in bits throughout the story: a frightening encounter at school ("I see IT in the hallway....IT sees me. IT smiles and winks"), an artwork that speaks pain. Melinda aches to tell her story, and well after readers have deduced the sexual assault, we feel her choking on her untold secret. By springtime, while Melinda studies germination in Biology and Hawthorne's symbolism in English, and seeds are becoming "restless" underground, her nightmare pushes itself inexorably to the surface. When her ex-best-friend starts dating the "Beast," Melinda

can no longer remain silent. A physical confrontation with her attacker is dramatically charged and not entirely in keeping with the tone of the rest of the novel, but is satisfying nonetheless, as Melinda wields a shard of broken glass and finds her voice at last to scream, "No!" Melinda's distinctive narrative employs imagery that is as unexpected as it is acute: "April is humid....A warm, moldy washcloth of a month." Though her character is her own and not entirely mute like the protagonist of John Marsden's *So Much to Tell You*, readers familiar with both books will be impelled to compare the two girls made silent by a tragic incident. The final words of Marsden's books are echoed in those of *Speak*, as Melinda prepares to share her experience with a father-figure art teacher: "Me: 'Let me tell you about it.'" An uncannily funny book even as it plumbs the darkness, *Speak* will hold readers from first word to last.

Awards/Distinctions Awarded to *Speak*

Source: Follett Titlewave, NovelistPlus, SC Association of School Librarians

Booklist Editors' Choice - Books for Youth - Older Readers Category: 1999
Golden Kite Award: Young Adult Fiction
Michael L. Printz Honor Book: 2000
National Book Award Finalist for Young People's Literature: 1999
New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age: 1999
School Library Journal Best Books: 1999
South Carolina Young Adult Book Award Winner: 2002
YALSA Best Books for Young Adults: 2000
YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers: 2000