speak

by laurie halse anderson · Language: EN

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Overview

Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson tells the story of Melinda Sordino, a high school freshman who becomes an outcast after calling the police to break up an end-of-summer party. She starts her new school year completely isolated, unable to speak about what truly happened that night. Melinda's internal struggle is depicted through her fragmented narrative, as she navigates the social hierarchy of high school, her deteriorating relationships with friends and family, and her profound sense of shame and trauma. Her silence becomes both a coping mechanism and a prison, manifesting in her physical appearance, her failing grades, and her withdrawal from the world.

As the school year progresses, Melinda finds solace in art class, where her teacher, Mr. Freeman, encourages her to express herself through a year-long tree project. This artistic outlet slowly becomes a metaphor for her own growth and healing. She grapples with flashbacks and the persistent presence of her rapist, Andy Evans, who continues to prey on other girls at school. The novel powerfully explores the devastating impact of sexual assault, the difficulty of speaking out, and the societal pressures that often silence victims. Melinda's journey is one of gradual self-discovery and the arduous process of finding her voice, ultimately confronting her trauma and beginning the path toward recovery and justice. The book is a poignant exploration of adolescent pain, the power of art, and the critical importance of speaking truth, even when it feels impossible.

Key Takeaways

- Trauma can manifest as silence, making it incredibly difficult for victims to articulate their pain and experiences.
- Art and creative expression can provide a vital, non-verbal outlet for processing difficult emotions and beginning the healing process.
- Supportive adults, even those who don't fully understand the depth of a young person's struggle, can play a crucial role in their recovery.
- Speaking out against injustice, though terrifying, is a powerful step towards personal healing and protecting others from similar harm.
- Social isolation can exacerbate trauma, highlighting the critical need for empathy, understanding, and connection.

• The path to healing from trauma is not linear; it involves setbacks, internal struggles, and gradual, often painful, progress.

• It is essential to believe and support individuals who are brave enough to share their stories of abuse and trauma.

Chapter Summaries

First Marking Period

Melinda Sordino enters high school as an outcast, ostracized for calling the police at an end-of-summer party. She loses her friends, struggles to speak, and retreats into herself, finding refuge in an abandoned janitor's closet. Her art teacher, Mr. Freeman, assigns a year-long tree project, which Melinda initially struggles with, reflecting her internal turmoil. She begins to hint at the traumatic event that caused her silence and social isolation.

Second Marking Period

Melinda's isolation deepens as she continues to struggle academically and socially, often skipping classes or hiding in her closet sanctuary. She observes Andy Evans, the boy who assaulted her, preying on other girls, which triggers her anxiety and flashbacks. She attempts to communicate her pain through her art, drawing increasingly dark and distorted trees, but remains unable to verbally express what happened to her. Her parents remain largely unaware of her profound suffering.

Third Marking Period

Melinda's internal turmoil intensifies as she witnesses Andy Evans's manipulative behavior with her former best friend, Rachel. She starts to find a voice through her art, with her tree project evolving to reflect her growing strength and understanding. She makes desperate, though misunderstood, attempts to warn Rachel about Andy. This period marks a shift as Melinda begins to realize the necessity of speaking up, not just for herself, but potentially for others.

Fourth Marking Period

Melinda's tree project finally takes shape, symbolizing her inner growth and resilience. She confronts Andy Evans after he corners her again in her art closet. This time, she fights back, scratching him and using a shard of mirror to defend herself. With the unexpected help of other girls who witness the struggle, Andy is exposed. Melinda finally begins to speak, telling her story to her art teacher, Mr. Freeman, signifying the beginning of her long journey toward healing and recovery.

Themes

• Trauma and healing

- Silence and voice
- Social isolation
- Art as therapy
- Sexual assault
- Adolescent struggles

Frequently Asked Questions

What is speak about?

"Speak" is about Melinda Sordino, a high school freshman who becomes an outcast and selectively mute after a traumatic event at an end-of-summer party. The novel chronicles her internal struggle to process her sexual assault, her isolation from friends and family, and her gradual journey toward finding her voice and beginning to heal through art.

Is speak worth reading?

Yes, "Speak" is highly worth reading for its powerful and sensitive portrayal of trauma, its exploration of the importance of speaking out, and its realistic depiction of adolescent struggles. It offers a crucial perspective on the impact of sexual assault and the arduous path to recovery, making it a significant and impactful read.

How does speak end?

Spoiler: Melinda finally confronts Andy Evans when he corners her again in her art closet. She fights him off and, with the unexpected help of other girls who witness the struggle, manages to get him exposed. She then begins to speak, telling her story to her art teacher, Mr. Freeman, signifying the start of her healing process.

Who should read speak?

"Speak" is primarily intended for young adults, especially those in high school, but it is also a valuable read for parents, educators, and anyone interested in understanding the effects of trauma, the importance of empathy, and the power of finding one's voice.

How long does it take to read speak?

"Speak" is a relatively short novel, typically taking between 3 to 4 hours (180-240 minutes) to read for an average reader. Its concise chapters and engaging narrative contribute to a relatively quick reading experience.

Best Quotes

“I want to be an artist.”

Welcome to Merryweather High

This is Melinda's internal declaration early in the book, expressing her desire to find a way to communicate and cope with her trauma. Art class becomes her sanctuary and a crucial outlet for her unspoken pain, allowing her to process and eventually confront what happened to her.

“It is easier to not say anything. Less complicated. Nobody gets hurt.”

Spotlight

Melinda's internal monologue reveals her coping mechanism for the trauma she experienced. Her silence is a shield, an attempt to protect herself and others from the painful truth. This line highlights her isolation and the burden she carries alone.

“My throat is closing up. I can't breathe. I can't speak.”

Burrow

This quote vividly describes Melinda's physical and emotional reaction to her trauma, particularly when confronted with the memory or presence of her rapist. It's a literal manifestation of her inability to articulate her pain and the suffocating weight of her secret.

“I have been trying to make a tree all year.”

Peeled and Cored

Melinda says this about her art project. The tree symbolizes her struggle to grow, heal, and find stability after her assault. Her inability to create a perfect tree reflects her internal brokenness and her journey toward self-acceptance and recovery.

“I dive into the art room and hide.”

Sanctuary

This line illustrates the art room as Melinda's safe haven, a place where she can escape the judgment and confusion of her peers and teachers. It's where she finds solace and begins to express her inner turmoil through her artwork, even before she can speak about it.

“I want to confess. I want to scream. I want to tell her that he raped me.”

Dinner Disaster

Melinda's internal conflict is laid bare here. She desperately wants to reveal her secret to her mother but is paralyzed by fear and the inability to form the words. This highlights the immense psychological barrier she faces in breaking her silence.

“IT is my first real day of high school. I have seven new notebooks, a fresh box of pencils, and a heart full of hope.”

Welcome to Merryweather High

This opening line, full of youthful optimism, starkly contrasts with Melinda's reality after the summer party. It sets up the tragic fall from innocence and the profound impact of the trauma that will define her freshman year.

“I am a good girl. I am a good girl. I am a good girl.”

The Beast

Melinda repeats this mantra to herself, reflecting her desperate need for validation and reassurance after the assault. It shows her internal struggle to reconcile her self-perception with the shame and guilt she feels, questioning her own goodness.