

Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson

Subjects: High school; Rape

Awards: Printz Honor Book, Ten Best Books for Young Adults, Horn Book Fanfare

Book Lists: Gifted, Middle School, Reluctant Readers

Props: Cell phone, chalk



Speak—the dictionary definition is: “To utter words with ordinary speech modulation, to talk, to express oneself, to convey a message.”

But that’s something Melinda can’t seem to do anymore. She wants to speak, to talk. But as words climb up into her throat, her throat burns. No, she’s not going to talk about it now. It was ugly, but it’s over, and she’s not going to think about why she called the cops who busted up the end-of-the-school year party.

She spent her summer watching bad cartoons. She didn’t go to the mall, the lake, the pool, or answer her phone. (*Show phone*) She is entering high school with the wrong clothes, the wrong hair, and the wrong attitude.

It’s the first day of school and as Melinda is herded into the auditorium with the other 9th graders. She watches as they fall into clans: Jocks, Country Clubbers, Cheerleaders, Human Waste, Eurotrash, Big Hair Chix, the Marthas, Suffering Artists, Goths, Shredders. But she is clanless, an outcast. In the auditorium, Melinda scans the crowd for a friendly face but sees only blank or hostile stares. After suffering through the welcome message, Melinda and the other students are released to their first period classrooms.

Melinda heads for English and finds a teacher who’s face is hidden by stringy black hair with frizzy neon orange

ends. Melinda calls her “Hairwoman.” Social Studies follows. At the front of the room is a man with a gray jock buzz cut and a whistle around a neck that is thicker than his head. Melinda calls him “Mr. Neck.”

Next is lunch, tortuous as always, then Art where she meets Mr. Freeman. Mr. Freeman is ugly with a big old grasshopper body, like a stilt-walking circus guy. His nose is like a credit card sunk between his eyes but he smiles at the students as they enter the classroom. Then, with muddy red clay in his hands from a spinning pot, Mr. Freeman grabs a piece of chalk (*Write with chalk on blackboard*) and writes, “SOUL” on the blackboard.

He says, “Welcome, welcome to Art. This is where you can find your soul if you dare. This is where you can touch that part of you that you’ve never dared look at before.”

Melinda closes her eyes, afraid of his words.

“I don’t dare look at my soul,” she whispers.

Why did Melinda call the cops? What happened at that party? What is it that she can’t speak of? (*Hold up book*) *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson.