

Critical Analysis of *Speak*

Speak, by Laurie Halse Anderson, is a book about the trials and tribulations of high school life. The main character Melinda, has a particularly hard time fitting in because of an incident that took place over the summer (Anderson, 1999). Her old friends will not speak to her and no other “clans,” as Melinda calls them will accept her (Anderson, 1999). In her school the “clans” mean everything (Anderson, 1999). They dictate who to talk to, what to wear and basically how to exist (Anderson, 1999). Without a clan to belong to a person is essentially an outcast to be tormented by those lucky enough to fit in somewhere. The thesis of *Speak* seems to be that life in general is unfairly segregated and unkind to outsiders, especially those who cannot fit in because of things they cannot change.

Looking at the cultural competency models, Melinda’s high school would fall under the “Cultural Incapacity” model. The description of this model, “a system or agency that does not intentionally seek to be culturally destructive but rather lacks the capacity to help minority clients and communities” is a fair analysis of the high school (notes provided). There are clans on top of clans (these being what most people call “cliques”) and the school is powerless to break them up. Even if there was a ban on cliquish behavior it would not stop people from falling into groups that keep the unwanted out. Schools want to be places of learning, not social grounds but they are incapable of keeping cliques out and they are often clueless about how to help those left on the outside. No one can force someone to accept another, so those in the minority must flounder around and do the best they can for themselves. While the school clearly showed signs of wanting to help Melinda through parent meetings and school counselor meetings, they still had no clue about her situation (Anderson, 1999). The counselor even falsely assumed that she was part of the “Marthas” clique just because she had been seen near them a few times (Anderson, 1999). Although the school system did not mean to be a torment to Melinda, it completely “lacked the capacity to help.”

I found *Speak* enjoyable, if not a little heartbreaking at times. Cliques are an everyday part of life but to see someone subjected to such meanness on an everyday basis for no reason was difficult for me. Even more difficult was discovering the reason why Melinda was treated as a minority and an

outcast at her school. While most of the students angrily believed that she had “messed up” their summer party because of calling the police about alcohol being present. The truth of the matter was that she called to report her own rape (Anderson, 1999). She was so full of fear about getting in trouble for being at the party in the first place and terrified over what had just been done to her that she left the scene (Anderson, 1999). Thus, no one knew the true reason she called because she was unable to speak about it to anyone.

I found this portrayal of high school very believable. The book stated that most of the characters were around Melinda’s age and just ready to go to high school. I think that there is a particular strain on kids of that age that this book reflects well. Society seems to want to make young adults grow up so fast and that results in them having to deal with things that people much older and much more in control of their emotions should be dealing with. Melinda mentions her thoughts right before her rape, when the senior guy who did it was kissing her, she is happy that she is going to be able to start high school with a boyfriend (Anderson, 1999). People her age used to just be getting over the impulse to play with dolls and here she is making plans in her mind for a steady boyfriend. Then after the physical and emotional trauma she experienced, she was left to navigate high school alone. *Speak* is painful but true, as that is exactly what would happen to a person who was thought to be a “rat.”

Melinda had been part of a clan called the “Plain Janes,” but because one member had moved away and the others had split off into new clans. She was left alone to be a “wounded zebra,” as she put it (Anderson, 1999). For a time she kept company with another “wounded zebra,” Heather, who was new to the school and did not have a place to belong either (Anderson, 1999). Heather was determined to find a clan, and she eventually settled on the “Marthas” (Anderson, 1999). These girls were the “do-gooders” of the school but they were mean under the surface (Anderson, 1999). They basically made Heather their slave and she was glad to be one (Anderson, 1999)...

...Works Cited

Anderson, Laurie H. 1999. *Speak*, Puffin Books, New York.