Why Won't Melinda Just Talk about What Happened? Speak and the Confessional Voice

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Why Won’t Melinda Just Talk about What Happened? *Speak* and the Confessional Voice

Chris McGee

In “The Irony of Narration in the Young Adult Novel,” Mike Cadden writes, “Novels constructed by adults to simulate an authentic adolescent’s voice are inherently ironic because the so-called adolescent voice is never—and never can be—truly authentic,” precisely because young adult novels are rarely written by teens themselves (146). Yet for many young adult novelists, especially those who write in the problem novel tradition or those who employ the diary-type confessional format, the need for an “authentic”-sounding teen voice can border on obsessive. Successful teen novels are most often lauded as being “believable” or “realistic” simply because they sound like a teen might sound, promising the reader an unfiltered, inside peek into the secretive world of teenage life—a world typically outside of adults’ prying eyes. If the now infamous *Go Ask Alice*, written by an adult but marketed as the harrowing confessions of an anonymous teenager, marked an advent for the tradition, then the more recent *Gossip Girls* books could be read as a natural outgrowth. Sections of the books are cleverly written in instant messaging (IM) formatting, as though the teen reader is privileged to the gossip of the cool kids or adults suddenly have unrestricted access to their teen’s cyber diaries. In light of these books’ popularity, Cadden’s article naturally raises questions about precisely who young adult novels are written for, what fantasies they fulfill, and what purposes their “authentic” narrative voices serve. Are they “realistic” so that teen readers feel as though they are listening to a confidant? Or do they provide adults with fantasies that they are discovering, even if it is by proxy, what their teens are up to, no matter how shocking it may be? Whatever the answer, Cadden writes, “When an adult writer speaks through a young adult’s consciousness to a young adult audience, he or she is involved in a top-down (or vertical) power relationship” (146). Roberta Seelinger Trites, in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in*
Adolescent Literature, might describe this relationship as one that delegitimizes adolescence by participating in an ideology that “directs power away from adolescents and towards adults” (81).

There is certainly something odd, and something definitely worth examining further, in any sort of narrative where adults pretend to be real teenagers speaking to other teenagers about what adults would most like to hear. Trites wonders about who the implied reader is in most young adult fiction—adult or teen—and notes, “How the implied reader is positioned in a text helps us understand some aspect of the multivariate relationship between power and ideology in adolescent literature” (81–82). While many young adult novels are fairly transparent in their agendas when it comes to adult values, I’d like to suggest that few books are as “multivariate” or as complex as Laurie Halse Anderson’s 2000 Printz Honor novel Speak. Anderson’s book strives for authenticity as it confronts an extremely difficult topic while simultaneously problematizing the very nature of authentic identity after trauma. It is also, sadly, a novel that reinforces the same “power and ideology,” to use Trites’s phrase, that it otherwise cleverly challenges. For that reason, Speak seems like a perfect elaboration on the “irony” Cadden identifies, one that, as Cadden describes it, “counts on the reader’s failure to see, understand, and subsequently regret the adult’s ironic construction of an ‘authentic’ adolescent voice” (146). Its plot circles around a young girl struggling with speaking to others about her own ordeal in the most authentic way possible—in a way that will allow her to heal. Yet its very presentation raises a series of questions about why adults demand teens speak in the first place, and what they expect to hear when teens finally do.

Speak is the story of Melinda Sordino, a bright, witty but sullen girl who, we discover late in the book, was raped at a summer party by an older, popular boy she had barely met. Moments after the rape happens, and unsure what exactly to do, Melinda stumbles from the yard where it took place into the house where the party is being held, finds a phone, and calls the police. When the police answer, however, Melinda is unsure what to say and how to get help, and so she says nothing. The police respond despite her silence, and she is quickly swept up by a mob of fleeing teenagers who are angry with her for busting the party; not even her friends stop to ask Melinda what happened. At school Melinda has become an outcast; shunned by her peers, she becomes, for all intents and purposes, mute about the event, refusing to speak to anyone about what happened or even deal with it in her own mind. We learn only of the rape through flashbacks that occur much later in the book than one might expect—particularly a book that otherwise might simply be any standard narrative about an awkward girl dealing with the dilemmas of high school. If anything, it is Melinda’s mutism that is the real focus of the book (and the reason for the book’s title, naturally) as she struggles with exactly the same sorts of things she felt upon calling the police: whether she should talk to someone, how she can talk, and exactly what she would say. Suffering in silence throughout the majority of the book, Melinda eventually grows out of her seclusion.
with the help of some friends who have not abandoned her and a brave fellow student named David Petrakis, who stands up to a demoralizing teacher. By slowly expressing herself through art, and by trusting in the kind guidance of her male art teacher, she finally gains the strength to confront her attacker in a final showdown and eventually confess what happened.

One of the most common ways of reading Anderson’s book is, in fact, precisely as I have described it above: namely, that it concerns lost identity and found empowerment, whether it is because of Melinda’s trauma or simply because she is a teen girl. Sally Smith, in her review of the book, suggests, “[Melinda’s] silence, while extreme, is emblematic of the silence that often afflicts girls—particularly middle class girls—as they enter adolescence and the comparatively impersonal, competitive atmosphere of secondary school” (585). In their book Discovering Their Voices: Engaging Adolescent Girls with Young Adult Literature, Marsha Sprague and Kara Keeling contend, “The theme of the book centers on Melinda’s loss of identity because of the trauma she has endured. She slowly loses the ability to speak as she sinks deeper and deeper into despair” (6). Sprague and Keeling make the connection between this book and girl identity in general by evoking Erik Erickson: “Erickson argues that the primary role of adolescence is to create an identity, thus avoiding role confusion. . . . This summarizes, for most of us, our general understanding of adolescence: a search for who we are, for where we fit in” (1). This, they argue, is the very process Melinda goes through in Speak, that is, struggling with who she is as she finds the strength to talk about her trauma. It strikes me that this “empowerment narrative,” as we might call it—this triumphant search for personal identity that Speak presumably offers—is very appealing for many adult readers, and one reason they feel the book is worth recommending to teens. Blurbs on the first paperback edition attest to this. Booklist writes that Melinda is “a memorable character whose ultimate triumph will inspire and empower readers” (Carton). VOYA writes in another blurb, “This powerful story has an important lesson: never be afraid to speak up for yourself” (Vnuk).

In order to read Speak in the way these blurbs suggest, however, it seems necessary to have a book that begins with a weak character who, in the problem novel tradition, is healed by the events of the narrative and guided by adult figures who can offer comfort. This reading of Speak is certainly possible and might run thusly: Melinda, at the start of the novel, is positioned as someone greatly weakened by what happened to her, struggling with two contrary impulses. She wants to repress what has happened and make it go away but wants desperately to speak about it at the same time. Midnovel Melinda remarks, “I just want to sleep. The whole point of not talking about it, of silencing the memory, is to make it go away. It won’t. I’ll need brain surgery to cut it out of my head” (81–82). Don Latham, in his recent reading of the book, refers us to Judith Herman who, in her Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror, argues that the “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is
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the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (1). Herman adds, “Sharing the traumatic event with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world. . . . These two responses—recognition and restitution—are necessary to rebuild the survivor’s sense of order and justice” (70). The connections between Speak and Herman seem to be a natural; she even goes so far as to draw connections between the events of trauma and the dilemmas of identity formation, writing, “Trauma forces the survivor to relive all her . . . struggles over autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy” (52). She continues, “The traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others” (53; emphasis in original).

Sprague and Keeling praise Mary Pipher’s 1994 book Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls as initially raising awareness about the difficult dilemmas adolescent girls face everyday and, in their words, “the veil of silence that adolescent girls assume to protect themselves” (3). Pipher’s book argues that girls “split into true and false selves” (22), with the true selves they once held had as preadolescents disappearing once they reach adolescence. Pipher writes, “Adolescent girls are saplings in a hurricane. They are young and vulnerable trees that blow with gale strength” (22). Imagining such a victimized Melinda in Speak, we are naturally encouraged to want her to heal, for her to speak openly as soon as possible so that she can, in Herman’s words above, rebuild her sense of order and justice. It is well worth noting, however, that we simply don’t get this type of victimized character in Speak. It is true that Melinda suffers deeply after her trauma, but even early in the book we encounter an extremely bright Melinda, a Melinda whose humor, wit, insight, and wisdom allow her to knowingly and playfully mock what she sees in Hi School! (as she describes it). She stops her narrative often to include the top ten lies they tell you in high school or to dub a teacher a clever name. Furthermore, Melinda’s awareness of power—how it works, how it positions the individual in response to authority, what is asks the individual to do and be—is sophisticated and profound. In a very revealing passage early in the book, she notes: “It is easier not to say anything. Shut your trap, button your lip, can it. All that crap you hear on TV about communication and expressing feelings is a lie. No body really wants to hear what you have to say” (9). This statement becomes Melinda’s mantra and the deepest insight of the book: power demands that you speak, but it demands that you speak its truth rather than your own. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that an “empowerment narrative” reading of this book seems to miss some of its deeper nuances, in particular the complex ways the book discusses power and considers identity. This is, after all, a book in which the school’s comical search for a mascot (and thus a stable identity) becomes a running joke. I believe these reviewers and critics project an empowerment narrative onto a book that often resists those trappings, except in its last few chapters. If it is true, as Marnina Gonick put it recently, Reviving Ophelia “presents girls as vulnerable, voiceless, and fragile” (2), Anderson is careful to show that as much as Melinda struggles, she is none of these things nor purely
a victim. Nor is she purely powerless. In fact, she finds strength despite her lack of a traditional “voice.”

In this light I resist the urge to read this book as an empowerment narrative in the traditional sense because Melinda’s power does not come only from speaking about what happened. Just as often it comes from not speaking about what happened. If this is true, Speak troubles the very idea of “coming to voice” and “discovering personal identity” that is inherent in the readings described above. Is there a voice to be found? Is there a stable identity that can be voiced through language? Who exactly should it be spoken to? Anderson’s book, through its fragmented storytelling devices, through its careful exploration of how experience gets transformed into discourse, and through Melinda herself, brings many of these more complex questions to mind. It also alienates the reader to what Michel Foucault might call an overriding “incitement to discourse” run by well-meaning and not-so-well-meaning authority figures in Melinda’s life, including parents, teachers, principals, and friends, who all insist that Melinda talk about what is bothering her. Foucault describes this incitement to discourse in his History of Sexuality as a “technology of power, a will to knowledge” (12) that operates not through repression but on a demand for confession, situating the individual in response to a power to whom they feel they must confess.

Young adult novels using the first-person confessional narrative mode have long operated along these lines. Even S. E. Hinton’s seminal The Outsiders is written as an elaborate letter to a teacher explaining everything that happened in the story proper. Many young adult novels have even connected this confessional to the arena of therapy, as in the opening of J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye or Patricia McCormick’s Cut. Both novels begin with the teen protagonists speaking with medical authority figures in an institutional setting. Given that Speak itself explores such a troubling topic—sexual assault—anderson seems to be noticeably concerned with offering the best possible help to her readers, so it is no surprise when her book, or any young adult book for that matter, would want to defer to the proper authority figures who can best guide the struggling teen. Yet as Melinda resists the demand to voice what happened to her through much of the book—even refusing to expose to the reader what has happened to her until much later in the book—we can see Speak raise as many questions as it does provide answers.

Herman notes how difficult it is for most rape victims to confront what has happened to them, how “many women may have difficulty even naming their experience” (67). “The first task of consciousness-raising,” she writes, “is simply calling rape by its true name” (67). Although there is a section in the book Melinda titles “NAMING THE MONSTER,” one of the most surprising things about Speak is that even though we have access to Melinda’s thoughts, she never thinks to herself about what happened in terms of a “rape.” She talks in broad terms about her attacker as “The Beast” or “It” rather than overtly naming the man who raped her. While watching television and flipping channels late in the book, for instance, she stumbles upon a series of talk shows. She thinks, “If
my life were a TV show, what would it be? If it were an After-School Special, I would speak in front of an auditorium of my peers on How Not To Lose Your Virginity. Or, My Summer Vacation: A Drunken Party, Lies, and Rape” (164). Then, after a beat she adds, “Was I Raped?” (164). This moment, three quarters of the way through the book, is the first time the word “raped” even appears, and it is significant that it appears as a part of media culture because the word feels particularly mediated for Melinda. One gets the sense that Melinda asks this question—“Was I Raped?”—not because she wonders if it happened but because she is unsure if this is the right word for what did happen. Pretending she is on Jerry Springer, Melinda imagines his questions as “Was it love? No. Was it lust? No. Was it tenderness, sweetness, the First Time they talk about in magazines? No, no, no, no, no!” (164).

It isn’t simply that Melinda is struggling for the right, official name for what happened, or even what Herman calls the event’s “true name.” For Melinda, language is imprecise in capturing the event itself, let alone the emotions connected with it. As Melinda recalls what happened when she was raped in a long scene she titles “A Night to Remember,” we encounter the first moment in the book where syntax, sentence structure, and language simply fall apart, all in one sentence. Aspects of the event are held together without punctuation. The first period of her description, or for that matter grammar of any sort other than exclamation points, occurs at the end of this section, after the event happens. In some places events are broken apart by white space and a significant page break in the paperback edition (which I have tried to represent here). Melinda recalls:

I’m trying to remember how we got on the ground and where the moon went and wham! shirt up, shorts down, and the ground smells wet and dark and NO!—I’m not really here, I’m definitely back at Rachel’s crimping my hair and gluing on fake nails, and he smells like beer and mean and he hurts me hurts me hurts me and gets up

and zips his jeans

and smiles. (135–36)

Herman writes, “Traumatic memories have a number of unusual qualities. They are not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story” (37). In The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World, Elaine Scarry describes “the difficulty of expressing physical pain” (3); she argues that “Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). Scarry also remarks about “tendency of pain not simply to resist expression but to destroy the capacity for speech” altogether (54). Although most of Melinda’s narration up to this point in the novel has been largely fragmentary and nonlinear (I will discuss this in more
detail below), her description of the rape here seems particularly “unsharable,” to use Scarry’s word—something much different than simply implying that she has yet to find the right word.

With regard to Avi’s *Nothing But the Truth*, in which the teen protagonist, Philip, admits he doesn’t know the words to the national anthem, Trites writes, “His admission, ‘I don’t know the words,’ serves as a metaphor for adolescents’ position within many institutional cultures. Philip knows there are words—he knows that the language he needs to navigate within the institution exists—but he does not always have the capability of accessing those words” (21). She argues that he is effectively silenced by the institutions that purport to empower him and that the institutional discourses that surround the adolescent determine his or her relationship to power. In the very same way, Melinda’s inability to name what has happened to her as well as her overall silence after the rape is not purely a psychological mechanism of repression, which is where many other young adult novels on the same subject might choose to stop. Her trouble with language, rather, is deeply connected to the power around her, particularly the power expressed by the many adults in her life. Despite what she may say about not wanting to talk, Melinda does try at several points to voice what happened, but she is frequently silenced by the adult figures that purport to want her to talk. During a meeting with the principal and her parents because of frequent absences, for instance, Melinda notes the multitude of adult voices that demand her assent but silence any potential response. As an example, all of the following dialogue from the novel comes in a single paragraph, with no designation of who is speaking: “Why won’t you say anything?” “For the love of God, open your mouth!” “This is childish, Melinda.” “Say something.” “You are only hurting yourself by refusing to cooperate.” “I don’t know why she’s doing this to us” (114). Such a barrage of voices evokes Melinda’s own comment from earlier, that it “is easier not to say anything. . . . No one really wants to hear what you have to say” (9). When her mother remarks, “She’s jerking us around to get attention,” Melinda thinks knowingly, “Would you listen? Would you believe me? Fat chance” (114).

Melinda constructs several theatrical dialogues throughout the book, presented in script format, where this is elaborated nicely. When it is her turn to speak, we see only the word “Me” with a colon followed by blank white space on the page. In this way Melinda occupies no space on the page, to the eternal frustration of the adults around her who demand she say something, anything. At these moments Melinda is simultaneously fulfilling the role that has been assigned to her by adults (guilty teen who cringes while being chastised by angry but ultimately right adults) and a place of power (as long as she doesn’t speak she at least has some control, some point of resistance). Melinda also knows that standard answers don’t suffice here. I try to imagine her saying something like, “I’m sorry. I’ve been having some problems lately.” Would that please them? Melinda’s parents frequently show her kindness, including presenting her with a sketchbook for Christmas in recognition of her newfound interest in art,
and Melinda often strives to tell them exactly what has happened to her. Thus, it would be wrong to suggest that either Melinda is simply a snotty teen who hates her parents and won’t talk or that her parents are neglectful villains who give her no opportunity to communicate. Instead, what these bits of dialogue dramatize is how power is often built into the most everyday bits of communication between adult and teen and works to assign each designated roles and prescribed responses. In these and other moments, Anderson is also willing to acknowledge the particularly unstable nature of identity via the sophisticated depictions of Melinda’s “self” in the book, whether it is constructed through language or a product of a fragmented self. The latter comes up in the book’s discussion of the art movement cubism. In the novel the only adult Melinda does respond to is Mr. Freeman—a male art teacher who, much like Melinda, has a great deal of problems with authority. Mr. Freeman has Melinda work on drawing trees, a metaphor so important (and quite blunt, to be frank) that it appears on the cover of the book as an easy signifier for growth. But I find the book’s discussion of cubism far more interesting. When introduced to Picasso by Mr. Freeman, Melinda remarks, “Cubism. Seeing beyond what is on the surface. Moving both the eyes and a nose to the side of the face. Dicing bodies and tables and guitars as if they were celery sticks, and rearranging them so that you really have to see them. Amazing. What did the world look like to him?” (119).

Readers are often quick to note the unusual formatting of Anderson’s book, divided up into choppy, often unrelated, paragraphs divided by white space on the page, a format that seems to match Melinda’s fascination with cubist fragmentation. It is a significant metaphor, not simply because we are drawn to those empty bits of white on the page but because Melinda seems to struggle with producing the standard, cohesive narrative we would get in your average teen novel. Instead the book features a jumpy, incoherent, cut up narrative that reflects Melinda’s mindset, which interestingly, carries over to her body—she digs into her skin with a paperclip and bites into her lips with her teeth. Later in the novel, standing in front of a three way mirror at her mother’s clothing store and seeing reflection after reflection of herself, Melinda wonders, “Am I in there somewhere?” (124). She notes, “My face becomes a Picasso sketch, my body slicing into dissecting cubes” (124). The choice of narrative style she employs to tell her story, therefore, is significant. Herman notes, “People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth telling and secrecy” (1). It is hard not to see the same thing happening with Melinda. Cadden points to similarly experimental narratives in novels such as Stephen Chbosky’s The Perks of Being a Wallflower, a book that “manages to provide the reader with access to multiple points of view (though indirectly) and, more important in this case, creates doubt in the reliability of the narrator” (147). Speak seems to offer the same potential through its jumpy format. Melinda is in fact often very adept at
redirecting the reader’s gaze in multiple directions at once, having the reader contemplate what seems, on the surface at least, to be unrelated. The following is a particularly fascinating example, taking place while Mr. Freeman drives Melinda home one afternoon:

“You did a good job with that Cubist sketch,” he says. I don’t know what to say. We pass a dead dog. It doesn’t have a collar. “I’m seeing a lot of growth in your work. You are learning more than you know.” (121)

This quick scene provides a great portrait of the novel in miniature. Mr. Freeman, the wise and caring adult, seemingly knows more about Melinda and her growth than she does, something we would expect of almost any young adult novel in which the teen is struggling with a sense of self. Yet, once again, Melinda doesn’t “know what to say” and instead turns her gaze toward something else, in this case a dead dog without a collar.

In any other novel we might see this as simply another teen who is struggling with a personal problem, struggling to find a confidant in a caring adult. Smith might be tempted to read a moment such as this as an example of what she describes elsewhere as “the phenomenon of ‘going underground’ documented by researchers,” which, along with Melinda’s other psychological responses are “consistent with the psychological accounts of adolescents” (556) that Pipher also documents in her book. Melinda’s incapacity to respond to someone who is clearly reaching out to her is certainly a symptom of something much larger, something, we are led to believe, more psychological. But Smith’s more cultural reading of the novel actually turns out to be more nuanced. Referring to Melinda’s frequent, astute, and downright humorous critiques of gender politics in her school—she is especially cynical, for instance, about a group calling themselves the Martha’s who worship Martha Stewart—Smith remarks, “The novel positions the protagonist’s struggle as an individual against the gender and sexual stereotypes and pressures of the adolescent world” (556). Sprague and Keeling would no doubt acknowledge this aspect as a part of Melinda’s struggle with personal identity, but unlike them I’d posit that these gender politics are not something that keep Melinda from speaking and finding her voice; rather, not speaking puts her in a particularly good position to notice these things, much like the dead dog without an owner to which she temporarily finds more of a connection than her sympathetic teacher. Pipher laments how girls, when they enter adolescence, “lose their assertive energetic and ‘tomboyish’ personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies” (19). Pipher, Sprague, Keeling, and even Smith at points would like to read this as a whole in the book. Smith notes how the “sadness, anger, and sense of betrayal that girls often feel entering this transitional period in their lives” is for Melinda “increased by this shocking and demeaning experience” of her rape (556). But rather than being silenced by the ridiculous demands of gender Melinda sees
around her, she seems keenly aware of them, as though what happened to her put her in the particularly defamiliarizing position of noticing these things from an outsider’s perspective. Don Latham in fact reads this position as a queer one and suggests that the novel “can be read as a coming-out story” (369), with Melinda’s safe haven of a closet being the key metaphor. It is a smart reading of Melinda’s outsider status as, counterintuitively, a positive state. He writes, “From the queer perspective of the closet, Melinda is able, perhaps a bit more clearly that her peers, to see the performative, nonessential nature of identity and gender” (373).

Melinda’s attention, drawn to the side of the road while a teacher points out to her what she is learning about herself, is emblematic of the ways the novel as whole often turns (or fragments) its attention toward matters other than Melinda’s personal and psychological growth. Thus, rather than seeing Melinda’s fragmented narrative as a sign of her ongoing inability to voice what has happened to her, I see it as representative of the many ways Anderson creates a nuanced, complicated examination of power and its tendency to demand confession and also silence dissent—of how in the simplest terms, and in her words, no one really wants to hear what you have to say. There is a lot to admire, for instance, in the ways that Anderson actually avoids many of the trappings of the typical problem novel format where the teen is given a problem by the adult author that gets solved by story’s end, most often by a wise adult. In these novels the teen can be defined by the problem she has, given to her by the adult author, so much so that we often learn about the teen’s problem before we know much about the teen herself. In such a novel we learn about the teen through her problem. Anderson instead takes a much different approach. We learn about Melinda long before we learn of her problem, and we are far more sympathetic to her than you would find in the clinical perspective found in most problem novels.

Yet as much as Anderson’s novel explores the frustrating dynamics of that incitement to discourse so often found in the problem novel, her book noticeably shifts and tends toward that very thing as the book draws to a close. Even though she resists it early on, Anderson’s book does tend to assign teens problems that are outside of their capacity to fix as the book draws to a close. Trites remarks that for most young adult novels, “adults hold the knowledge that represents the highest goal: truth. No adolescent is given the opportunity to be as wise” (79). This is particularly evident in the book’s culmination when Melinda speaks to her male art teacher about her rape. Why not a female peer, we might ask? In Anderson’s imagination it seems as though a fellow peer simply does not bear “truth” the way an adult will. Although I am always impressed by Anderson’s sympathy for Melinda, her willingness to allow Melinda time not to speak, and her ambition in exploring power as complexly as she can, I am always disappointed by the turn the book makes at the end. Although our sympathy is clearly with Melinda while she sits in the principal’s office in the scene described above, Anderson cannot help but make the title of her
book an imperative verb, demanding that Melinda eventually speak. Whatever Anderson may have set up in the rest of the book, it becomes quickly evident that this was her real purpose all along when Melinda finally says aloud at the end of the book, “ME: ‘Let me tell you about it’ (198). While it might be tempting to see Anderson subverting the traditions of the problem novel by having Melinda begin to heal much earlier in the book, long before she finally speaks out loud to an adult, the mere fact that the book suddenly ends once Melinda utters these final words is telling for a number of reasons. Foucault writes of the confession:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated. (61–62)

For Foucault, in the act of confession, that “obligatory act of speech which, under some imperious compulsion, breaks the bonds of discretion or forgetfulness” (62), what one confesses is no more important than the fact that one is confessing. The act of confession acknowledges that they should confess and that this is the person to whom they should confess, ideas deeply ingrained, as Trites suggests, in the young adult genre. Despite the fact that Melinda certainly begins to heal after seeing David Petrakis stand up for himself, or when learning about the suffragettes, or sharing some sweeter moments with her former friend Ivy, or beating the superior athlete Nicole at tennis, or physically standing upon to her attacker in the final few pages, none of these events seem to satisfy the way speaking to an adult does. It isn’t even important that we know what she says to Mr. Freeman since we essentially know the events. What matters, it seems, is that she finally turns to an adult.

If Anderson seems to be doing something with Melinda’s silent protest against the powers around her throughout much of the book, then something much different happens when she finally does speak at the end, something Anderson builds to as the book draws to a close, particularly in its final section. As we’ve seen, Anderson is willing to acknowledge the “unsharability” of trauma earlier in the narrative, but it isn’t something she sticks to. She seems to be more and more insistent that Melinda open up and use more and more precise language in the final pages. There is a particularly revealing scene in this regard. When Melinda discovers that her former best friend Rachel (she now calls herself “Rachelle”) has begun dating the boy who raped Melinda, Melinda decides it is finally time to tell Rachel/Rachelle what actually happened. In the clever setting of the school library, with a particularly overzealous librarian insisting they not speak aloud (especially apt in light of the book’s themes), Melinda chooses to write down on paper what happened to her, for the first
time vocalizing (without voice) the rape, and thereby making it official. She writes (and note that at this point Rachel still believes Melinda busted the party), “I didn’t call the cops to break up the party, I called—I put the pencil down. I pick it up again—I called them because some guy raped me. Under the trees. I didn’t know what to do. I was stupid and I was drunk and I didn’t know what was happening and then he hurt—I scribbled that out—raped me” (183). This rewriting is an important step for Melinda in more ways than one. Here Melinda refines her statement from the (as we know from earlier) more apt and inclusive “he hurt me,” a repeatable phrase that re-enacts what happened to her, to the more clinical and official “he raped me.” It is a refinement that marks a significant shift in how Melinda deals with her trauma. She turns from internal struggle to external vocalization, building to the last page when Melinda finally articulates, in the most official, declarative means possible, “IT happened. There is no avoiding it, no forgetting. No running away, or flying, or burying, or hiding. Andy Evans raped me in August when I was drunk and too young to know what was happening. It wasn’t my fault. He hurt me. It wasn’t my fault. And I am not going to let it kill me. I can grow” (198).

One gets the sense that this is what the book has been building toward: an official confession that might easily go into a police report, followed by a signal that Melinda, the struggling teen at the center of the book, has learned something that has allowed her to grow. Throughout the narrative Anderson has built a careful dynamic between Melinda’s inner voice, which the reader is provided access to throughout but in a disjointed style, and the spoken or written word, through which adults and others can know her. Although Melinda may seem vacant, troubled, and rebellious to the adults who encounter her only through what she has to say or write, we as readers know differently. Melinda is in fact quite handy at manipulating language internally even if she can’t externally. But this is a dynamic that cannot stay settled at book’s end. Melinda, it seems, must transfer her wit and insight and identity into a form that can be seen, understood, or, in Foucault’s words, judged, punished, and forgiven. It is interesting to note, for instance, that rather than being impressed with Melinda finally talking about what happened, I have encountered many students who are frustrated that it takes her so long to do it. For many readers of the book, Melinda’s mutism can be quite frustrating. While they are pleased she has finally spoken aloud, it is surprisingly easy to blame Melinda for not talking—for not just pointing out the guy who did it, telling her parents, and in turn moving past what happened. For some readers, it starts to feel like it is Melinda’s fault that she is suffering because it takes her so long to say anything. These are the words from one of my male students:

I really liked this book, but it made me angry. I wanted to know why Melinda was so quiet and what happened at the party and that information was not revealed until the last quarter of the book. This was done intentionally I’m sure and it certainly kept me reading and wanting. But I guess I was angry when I found out that she was raped because I do not understand why that would
It might be easy to dismiss these comments as simple “blaming the victim” rhetoric, but I would suggest that this sentiment actually matches the impatience that Anderson builds in her book by initially trusting in the “unsharability” of what happened to Melinda (but only to a certain degree) and then insisting that she needs to move on to more open and more official speech. It is interesting that for all of the frustration this student feels, his reading of Melinda as “weak” is not far from the “fragile” depiction Pipher offers in *Reviving Ophelia*. What in fact frustrates many students is how long it takes her to finally speak up and how this is a sign of weakness on her part. Yet, as Foucault describes it, what makes the confession so powerful, and most importantly truthful, is precisely those “obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated” (62). According to Anderson’s logic, it is not until the very last sentence of the book that Melinda speaks to someone who might be able to help her, and it isn’t until the last page where Melinda finally articulates, in clinical, official language, what happened. Anderson certainly seems to suggest that Melinda is at her strongest at these last moments, perhaps even stronger than the courage it took to physically take on her attacker in an earlier scene.

Herman herself writes about how rarely simply naming what happened results in convictions or justice for the attacker, so it is even more surprising that the book ends here. Herman laments, “If one set out by design to devise a system for provoking intrusive post-traumatic symptoms, one could not do better than a court of law” (72). This is something Melinda never has to face since the book ends once she finally speaks, and this is the most telling aspect of the book in a way. For me this says everything about what Anderson values and why so many adult readers value the book so—everything is right once the teen comes to voice. It is no surprise that this is exactly the sort of book to which many adult readers would be most attracted. Yet it is hard to know how to feel about the book because in every way possible I want Melinda, even though she is a fictional character, to be safe, to be psychologically healthy, and to do whatever she needs to move past what happened to her. *Speak* is a particularly difficult book to talk about because it puts the reader in the awkward position of wishing for Melinda to get better but then blaming her when she takes so long to do it, even though the key seems to be that she does eventually speak. And no one would deny rape victims seeking external justice as well as internal peace by coming to terms with what has happened. Still, these frustrations that a rape victim has to respond in a particular way that my student felt, and the idea that if she doesn’t she is simply letting bygones be bygones, embodies what is for the most part a frustrating trend in young adult literature in general, an insistence that the adolescent speak and that strength comes only from “coming to voice.” Melinda’s transformation from refusing to speak about something that escapes language to someone who openly articulates and defines the event...
through official and clinical language (albeit a bit late in the book for some readers) in fact says a great deal about how institutional authorities, including teachers and parents, regulate the teen voice itself.

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault writes, “We must cease once for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it excludes, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained by him belong to this production” (194). This productive nature of power is particularly evident in Anderson’s book. Although our sympathies are clearly not with those repressive adults who demand that Melinda say something, it is hard for Anderson to imagine a book where Melinda doesn’t eventually say something to someone, and not simply to another teen either. Although she is willing to understand Melinda, to stand by her against the bullies she meets, in any number of ways this book ultimately demands Melinda’s confession. Even Mr. Freeman demands that their yearlong art project “say something, express an emotion, speak to every person who looks at it” (12). As Foucault explores in *The History of Sexuality*, when the confessor confesses, she is not simply confessing a secret but admitting that she must confess, that this is the person to whom she must confess, and that every secret must be turned into discourse. Power desires that everything be seen and made visible and, in disciplinary terms, that the individual knows there is no place outside of scrutiny. It is hardly a stretch to make the same case for this book. Melinda discovers that the public is better than the private, the official is more effective than the personal, and that adults are ultimately worth speaking to. It would ultimately be counterproductive to force Melinda to speak. Instead, Mr. Freeman’s art project acts as yet one more example of that “incitement to discourse” through which Melinda willingly confesses what she has hidden for so long in terms that can be scrutinized by an adult figure. Herman writes that “When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery” (1) and that “truth is a goal constantly to be striven for” (148). I see great power in Melinda’s silence, her questioning and resistance to power, and her willingness to work through her own traumas in her own way, even though all of this may frustrate readers. For Anderson, however, truth is indeed a thing constantly to be striven for. It is okay not to speak for a little while, Anderson might say, but in the end you should never hide anything from adults.

In *Reviving Ophelia* Pipher notes of teenagers, “Much of their behavior is unreadable. Their problems are complicated and metaphorical—eating disorders, school phobias and self-inflicted injuries. I need to ask again and again in a dozen different ways, ‘What are you trying to tell me?’” (20). It is a frustration that no doubt many adults feel at one point or another—why won’t teenagers speak, what are they trying to say? Pipher’s desires to make teenage behavior “readable” seem directly connected to the incitement to discourse, which is itself built into the “authentic” perspective inherent in the confessional narrative voice Cadden explores. From an adult perspective it probably goes without
saying that the best sorts of books are the ones where teens open up to adults in the most authentic, honest way possible, even if these books ultimately only represent fantasies for adults. They are similar to the journals Melinda's English teacher assigns; she wants them to write in the journals everyday, “but [she] promises not to read them” (6). This ideal sort of scenario no doubt results in the most revealing secrets, but it isn’t exactly honest. What marks *Speak* as an interesting variation on your typical young adult novel is how far Anderson is willing to go in exploring the complexities of power that operate on teenagers, not just the clichés Pipher lists in the quote above—eating disorders and the like. It is harrowing, it is honest, and it is open, and it also suggests identity is not nearly as stable as one might believe. I wholeheartedly agree with Latham when he writes, “Melinda’s ultimate growth, I would argue, is not toward any sort of ‘integrated’ self but rather toward an acceptance of the performative nature and inherent fluidity of identity” (375).

And yet at the same time Anderson’s book is preoccupied with what Melinda hides from others, no matter how long Anderson is willing to wait to have her speak. It is a book that consistently incites Melinda to discourse, suggesting ultimately that speaking to adults is ultimately in her best interest. And as Foucault suggests, power always works in such a way that it seems to be operating for our benefit, and in any number of ways Melinda’s health is inextricably connected to her final confession. In that sense, coming to voice or being empowered by a discovery of identity isn’t in itself an inherently positive thing, especially when it comes to the sort of trauma *Speak* explores. Herman is careful to note, “The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery,” leading her to add, “No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her best interest” (133). If, as Trites and Cadden suggest, a narrative like *Speak* is one that ultimately directs power away from teens and toward adults—de-legitimizing adolescence, so to speak—then in light of what Herman suggests, the entire project of problem novels themselves seems deeply flawed if their highest goal is recovery. *Speak*, in turn, seems at times less concerned with Melinda’s healing than it does her simply getting over her moping. At one point Melinda discovers that her mother left a self-help book about suicide on the back of her toilet seat rather than talk to her directly, what cannot help but seem like a terribly patronizing gesture. Melinda remarks, “She has figured out that I don’t say too much. It bugs her” (88). It is not hard to imagine Anderson, after a while, feeling exactly the same way.
Works Cited


