

Paper 2/Anderson's *Speak*
Dan Baker

Laurie Anderson's novel, *Speak*, is a captivating piece of literature. Witty and brutally honest, Anderson creates a deeply personal narrative that fearlessly investigates the internal and external struggles of teenager, Melinda Sordino, a self-described "outcast," trying desperately to survive her first year of high school. At first glance, readers will undoubtedly find Sordino's feelings on topics as such friends, parents, personal appearance, schoolwork, cliques, and the rest, quite familiar, wholly believable, and worthy of comment. Digging deeper into the story, however, reveals much more. Specifically, the way Anderson characterizes many of the story's "school adults" – Merryweather High School's teachers and administrators – draws attention to fact that there are too many adults in today's schools that are shallow, out-of-touch, unhappy, uncaring, domineering, or insensitive.

In *Speak*, one of the most disturbing characters is "Mr. Neck," Melinda's burnt-out social studies teacher, who also serves as Merryweather High's football coach and lunchroom monitor. Repeatedly, Melinda casts him as a power-tripping, insensitive prick. During their first encounter, for example, he fails to notice the entire cafeteria laughing at Melinda after someone threw potatoes and gravy on her clothing. Seemingly blessed with the innate ability to differentiate between good and bad kids simply by "looking in their eyes" (9), as Melinda runs from the lunchroom in embarrassment, Neck stops her, stares at her, scolds her, and quickly brands her as "trouble" (9). Instead of feeling empathy for a shaken teenage girl on the first day of school, he hands her a demerit for "wandering the halls" (9).

According to Melinda, Neck's explosive, bullish personality is just as noticeable in his social studies classroom. Clearly a racist, Neck is obviously more concerned about addressing his personal problems (his son's inability to find a job) than in teaching. To Neck and many teachers like him, high school classrooms are places to pontificate. For example, Neck uses his classroom to discuss why "we should close our borders so that real Americans can get the jobs they deserve" (54). During a classroom "debate" on whether "America should have closed her borders in 1900" (54), Melinda notes Neck's interest in students who agree with his views, and disinterest in those like "Brave Kid" who dissent: "You watch your mouth mister . . . I don't want to hear any more from you" (55); "Sit down or you're going to the principal" (56). Melinda quickly learns that although school adults say they want students to be critical thinkers and to share opinions, they don't actually mean it (notably, she argues that "We want to hear what you have to say" is just another one of ten lies that students are told in high school (148)). Frankly, Neck's classroom is typical. Schooling continues to be about maintaining the status quo. Opposing viewpoints are discouraged, particularly from students. True, Melinda says Neck eventually does get into a bit of trouble with some parents regarding his classroom demeanor and treatment of Brave Kid. However, it is a safe bet that Neck – a tenured teacher and football coach – will ultimately receive little more than a slap on the wrist. For him, the slap will be a momentary inconvenience. Like many hypocritical, mean-spirited school adults, Neck will undoubtedly continue to "decide who talks" (56), and continue to marginalize, oppress, bully, and scowl at young students, such as Melinda and Brave Kid, until the end of his career.

Besides Neck, there are other unimpressive school adults at Merryweather High. Melinda mentions, for example, her "weird" (6), stringy, orange-haired English teacher, "Hairwoman," who

not only possesses a “warped sense of humor as well as a demented beautician” (84), but also an over-zealous passion for making ninth-grade students understand the importance of symbolism in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, *Scarlet Letter*. Also, Melinda says her Spanish teacher is an easily ignorable twit who continues to speak to her class in Spanish even though it is obvious that no one understands the language. Further, Melinda characterizes the school’s principal, “Principal Principal,” as a rube: a school adult easily fooled by errant students roaming school hallways without passes. Other observations from Melinda include:

- Her “fizz-ed” (74) teachers play favorites to student-athletes with the “Potential” to secure “future State Championships” (19).
- Melinda feels her biology teacher, the portly Ms. Keen (who has a voice that “sounds like a cold engine that won’t turn over” (146)), is too old to teach, postulating that she has been teaching “since the Middle Ages” (65).
- Melinda is struck by her algebra teacher, Mr. Stetman, whose love of algebra does not appear to be matched by students. Stetman is “poetic” about algebra in “an integral-number sort of way”; his love of talking about algebra reminds Melinda of “the way some guys talk about their cars” (38).

Fortunately, not all of *Speak*’s school adults are characterized as clueless or insensitive. Although she finds him physically unattractive – someone with a “Big old grasshopper body, like a stilt-walking circus guy. Nose like a credit card sunk between his eyes” (10) – Melinda’s art teacher, Mr. Freeman, appears to be a sincere, well-rounded character. Although she doubts him at first

“Is he going to make us thrash around with this ridiculous assignment without helping us?” (32)), by story’s end, it is quite clear that Melinda sees Freeman as a school adult truly interested in relevant teaching and in helping students find their souls.

Without question, Freeman understands how schools “beat the creativity” (11) out of students. However difficult, Freeman convinces Melinda, a self-described “screwed up ninth grader” (153), that she has a lot to say. Ultimately, his attention gives Melinda the strength to “say something,” to express emotion, and to speak to every person who looks at her (12). Because of him, she successfully manages and confronts her feelings – feelings of “shame, mistakes” surrounding the rape at the party (125). Thankfully, at *Speak*’s end, Melinda walks away from her first year of school knowing that life, like art, is about “making mistakes and learning from them” (122).

