The Most Influential Book That I Read During My Formative Years and How It Has Impacted My Life

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“The tears dissolve the last block of ice in my throat. I feel the frozen stillness melt down through the inside of me, dripping shards of ice that vanish in a puddle of sunlight on the stained floor. Words float up.” Laurie Halse Anderson, Speak

The true mission of an author is to empower, to enlighten, and to inspire. In an artful twist of irony, Laurie Halse Anderson inspires her readers to find their voice through a powerful demonstration of her own. Anderson crafts her words in a manner that inspires both awe and envy in the very core of her audience, with a profound demonstration of what it truly means to inspire others through the medium of written language. An author of contemporary classics that address the challenges of adolescence, Laurie Halse Anderson spoke to me in a way that no author ever has. There is one novel in particular that has spoken volumes to me: Speak. It is a story I will never forget, a piece of literature that has helped me find my voice, and inspired a desire to help others find theirs.

Up until the time I began eighth grade and it became absolutely unthinkable to engage in any activity whatsoever with one’s parents, my mother and I would have regular dates at Border’s Bookstore. We would find a table in the café, and my mother would settle in, opening up her John Grisham novel, while I would traipse off to the young adult section. One particular evening as I was combing the vast aisles for something that might catch my eye, I happened upon a book that seemed to stand out from the rest. Its cover was mint green with a sprawling silver tree embossed on the front; a girl’s eye peered through the branches. I removed it from the shelf and flipped through its deckle edged magnificence, marveling at the story’s formatting. The chapters were marked by witty, sardonic titles centered above
irregularly spaced paragraphs. There were run-on sentences abound, a marked lack of punctuation, and pages left entirely blank. It was clear to me that the author was incredibly liberal with her creative license. I didn’t have to search for any other novel. I had found my prize.

The story was nothing short of powerful. Half of the book was spent hinting at a tragic event that traumatized the main character, Melinda, the summer before she began her freshman year of high school. The entire student body seemed to hate her, her closest friends had alienated her, and her only solace could be found in the art room, where her assignment for the year was to capture the essence of a tree in any medium she saw fit. It soon became apparent that this was her only outlet, for the words that would release her from her prison of silence, the words that would let others into her world of suffering and horror, eluded her grasp. Melinda could not yet speak the words that would free her. The other half of the book is a product of the author finally revealing what tragedy had befallen Melinda: at a party one night, she was taken behind a backyard shed and brutally violated by an upperclassman. She blamed herself for not being able to say no, and she tried to reconcile her guilt with the anger and hatred she harbored for her attacker. But soon, Melinda began to grow, began to come to terms with her pain, and expressed a desire to move past it. The story is about Melinda desperately grasping for purpose. Much like Melinda’s tree, an archetype for growth and change, her recovery began to take root, to breathe, as she slowly began to find her voice again. A girl of few words, Melinda was able to discover the importance of the spoken word, and Anderson demonstrated to her audience the power of one’s own voice.
Speak taught me that just because the words you are searching for are not there now, that does not mean that you will never find them. *Speak* taught me that as a young woman struggling to find myself, there will be men who will try to take things from me that do not belong to them, and the world will try to convince me that it was my fault because the words on my lips never made themselves audible, but I must not let this break me. *Speak* taught me that in order to grow, in order to find my voice, I must allow myself to break a little, for the strongest trees are those that have endured the harshest storms. *Speak* taught me to take as much creative license with my writing as I would like, for it might one day inspire in a young girl the refreshing realization that the most beautiful women are those who break the mold, just as Anderson's words brought a storm of realization to my own fragile adolescent awareness. There is no hesitation in my voice when somebody asks me the title of my favorite book. *Speak* is easily the most influential piece of literature it has ever been my fortune to read, for it cultivated a sense of self-respect and an acceptance of my own fears that seems to be absent in so many young girls these days. *Speak* has made me want to help others find their voice. It is the very reason that I want to enter the healthcare field, why I aspire to become a dietitian who works with individuals suffering from eating disorders. I feel that if I can find the right words to release someone from their prison of suffering, if I can empower them to tell their own story and to learn to heal themselves, I will consider mine a life well lived. Others can expect to garner this same inspiration from Anderson's work. And I will always have Laurie Halse Anderson and Melinda to thank for inspiring this dream within me.