



LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON: “Human Beings Need Stories”

The way Laurie Halse (rhymes with waltz) Anderson sees it, her main job is to tell stories that young people will read.

“More than anything that’s my job, to tell stories so that kids will keep reading and developing their literacy skills. If I can do that then I can sleep well at night.”

Anderson’s first book, *Ndito Runs*, was published in 1996, but she had been writing stories for many years before that.

“I believe human beings need stories,” says Anderson. “Stories give kids insight into themselves or into somebody who’s different from them. Stories become our common language when we don’t have much in common.”

Anderson is perhaps best known for her book *Speak*, which was published 10 years ago and has received numerous awards. But in addition to YA novels, including *Twisted*, and her latest, *Wintergirls*, Anderson also writes historical fiction (*Fever 1793* and *Chains*) and picture books, as well as a very popular series called *Vet Volunteers* (formerly *Wild At Heart*), about a group of middle school students who volunteer at a veterinary clinic. Anderson describes it as “*Babysitters Club* meets *Animal ER*.”

Now that *Wintergirls* is published, Anderson is working on *Forge*, a historical novel set during the American Revolution that is a sequel to *Chains*.

Anderson sees this wide range of audiences and topics as a real advantage.

“I have a very short attention span and in children’s literature we’re given this freedom to go where the muse takes us,” says Anderson. “I think it is very good for my writing to have different kinds of projects that pull from different skill sets and keep me fresh.”

Anderson had written several books before *Speak*, but the reception of that book changed the direction of her writing life. That book is about a girl who is raped by a classmate and can’t bring herself to tell anyone. She becomes so depressed she stops speaking.

Speak grew from a bad dream Anderson had of a girl sobbing, though she had no idea who the character was or why she was sad. Everybody was surprised at the book’s success: Anderson was surprised it was published; the publisher was surprised when it sold so well.

“I really never thought anybody would publish it,” says Anderson. “It was a strange little book about a girl who doesn’t talk.”

“Kids write to me about *Speak*, and say, either ‘I am Melinda because that happened to me’ or ‘that didn’t happen to me and my life is completely different, but I know exactly how she feels,’” says Anderson. “And when you’re a kid and you feel like nobody knows what goes on inside you it is so incredibly affirming to read a story and to see your thoughts on the page and then to see somebody struggle with and ultimately conquer whatever demon it is you are fighting.”

Schools over the country teach *Speak*, though at differing grade levels in different regions. Anderson has several theories for the book’s success, but one of them is that around the time *Speak* was published there was a new generation of English teachers coming in who “are committed to literacy for their kids and who recognize that the canon, the old traditional books, aren’t reaching all of our children, so they are more open to putting books in kids’ hands that kids will read.”

Before she wrote her YA novels, Anderson had written seven books for younger readers and had been visiting schools for many years. With the publication of *Speak*, her audience changed, but her visits continued.

“I love teenagers,” says Anderson, who has four children: Stephanie, 24; Jessica, 23; Meredith, 21; and Christian, 17. “I was in some ways more comfortable in a high school classroom than a gym full of second graders.”

On her visits, Anderson talks a little bit about what she was like as a teenager, but says she likes to get quickly to students’ questions “because then I can answer what they

really want to know about instead of going on and on and on in my pontificating way.”

In the course of her school visits, Anderson began to realize teen boys were a mystery to her. When she visited schools and discussed *Speak*, for example, boys frequently seemed confused about why the main character would be so upset that it would put her in a depression. Some boys’ perspective was, it wasn’t a stranger in the bushes with a gun who raped her, so why was it a big deal?

“Their confusion made it clear to me that I didn’t understand teen boys,” says Anderson.

That set her to writing *Twisted*, a book in which the protagonist is a teen boy with a fraught relationship with his father. She researched the book by going to schools, throwing out questions to teen boys and paying attention to the answers.

“It both saddened and surprised me how many boys didn’t have a relationship with their dad,” she says. “My theory is that teen boys want to grow up to be good men and they need and are looking for good men to show them the way.”

The heroine in Anderson’s latest YA novel, *Wintergirls*, also has lost her way and struggles with the demon of anorexia. The book, which was published last March, has received much acclaim, including starred reviews in *Booklist*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *School Library Journal*, which wrote, “The intensity of emotion and vivid language here

are more reminiscent of Anderson’s *Speak* than any of her other works.”

Many of Anderson’s YA characters confront sticky, complex, and emotional issues that resonate deeply with adolescents who are struggling. Her gift is the ability to tell these stories in a deeply authentic voice. Where does that voice come from? Anderson, who sounds bright and cheery on the phone, laughs when she tells of a school visit where a student said, “Ma’am, I’m confused. You’re a very happy person, how can you write these depressing books?”

She points to her own adolescence, during which her family moved frequently and her father lost his job, for some of her ability to write her so-called “depressing books.”

“We were a nuclear family in nuclear meltdown,” she says.

Anderson had “packaged up and put away” those difficult memories until her oldest daughter became an adolescent.

“Watching my daughter get to that age brought all that up to the surface for me,” she says. “I pull from those feelings of misery for every book.”

Deb Aronson is a freelance writer based in Urbana, Illinois.



Laurie Halse Anderson will speak at the ALAN Breakfast on Saturday, November 21, at 7:00 a.m., at the 2009 NCTE Annual Convention in Philadelphia.