

My novel *Speak* is the story of 13-year-old rape victim struggling to find the courage to speak up about what happened to her. I wrote the book because I was raped when I was 13, and I didn't tell anyone for a very, very long time. Like so many victims of sexual violence, my untreated trauma led to years of depression and suffering.

After it was published in 1999, *Speak* quickly became a standard novel used in high school English classes across the country. In the past 24 years, I've spoken to more than a million of those students about sexual violence, trauma, and how to speak up when a bad thing happens.

Thousands and thousands of my readers have shared their stories with me, stories of being raped, or sexually abused, or sexually harassed. They tell me that *Speak* and my memoir *Shout* gave them the information that they needed in order to speak up, to reach out, and to get appropriate support. Readers who haven't been a victim appreciate the vitally important conversations about consent, and about the laws that govern sexual violence. Boys, in particular, tell me that they didn't realize the impact that sexual violence or harassment has on a victim before they read my book.

Bad things happen to our children much more than anyone wants to admit.

One in four girls and one in 13 boys are the victims of sexual abuse or violence. More than 4 in 5 female rape survivors reported that they were first raped before age 25, and almost half were first raped before age 18. The perpetrators of sexual violence against children and teens are rarely strangers, 91% of child sexual abuse is done by someone known and trusted by the child or the child's family. The effects of sexual violence can last for a lifetime.

When confronted with challenging topics like sexual violence, some people prefer to stick their heads in the sand. That makes some children vulnerable to predators, and it ensures that others will grow up to be predators.

We have the tool to dramatically reduce these horrifying statistics: books. Literature has the power to open hearts, heal souls, and promote growth and understanding. Non-fiction books can supply information, and offer perspective and personal experience.

The families of Iowa deserve robust, well-curated libraries in their communities, in their schools, and in their classrooms. The families of Iowa have the right to supervise and choose what their own children are reading, of course. But no one group of parents, or politicians has the right to limit the books available to other citizens.

Democracy can be uncomfortable. Democracy means learning to live with people who have different opinions. Democracy, as defined in the Constitution of the United States, means that publicly-funded libraries must offer a variety of books, perspectives, and information, and that we all have the freedom to read and to think without government interference.

I urge all the residents of Iowa to contact their state representatives and local school board members. Speak up against Iowa SF 496. Speak up for vibrant libraries and public education. Speak for your right to read.

Laurie Halse Anderson

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/fastfact.html>

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