

# Laurie Halse Anderson

She is no one-hit-wonder. After becoming famous for her novel “Speak” 10 years ago, Laurie continued to write numerous award-winning YA novels, historical fiction and children’s picture books. Her heartfelt desire for reaching out to teens in need has changed the lives of thousands and, along with her voracious appetite for research and history, has resulted in her novels being part of classroom discussions all over the world.

Here, Laurie opens up to Mackin’s Lori Tracy about the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of “Speak,” her newest YA novel “Wintergirls,” and her belief that classic novels are turning teens away from reading.

## Ten = One Million

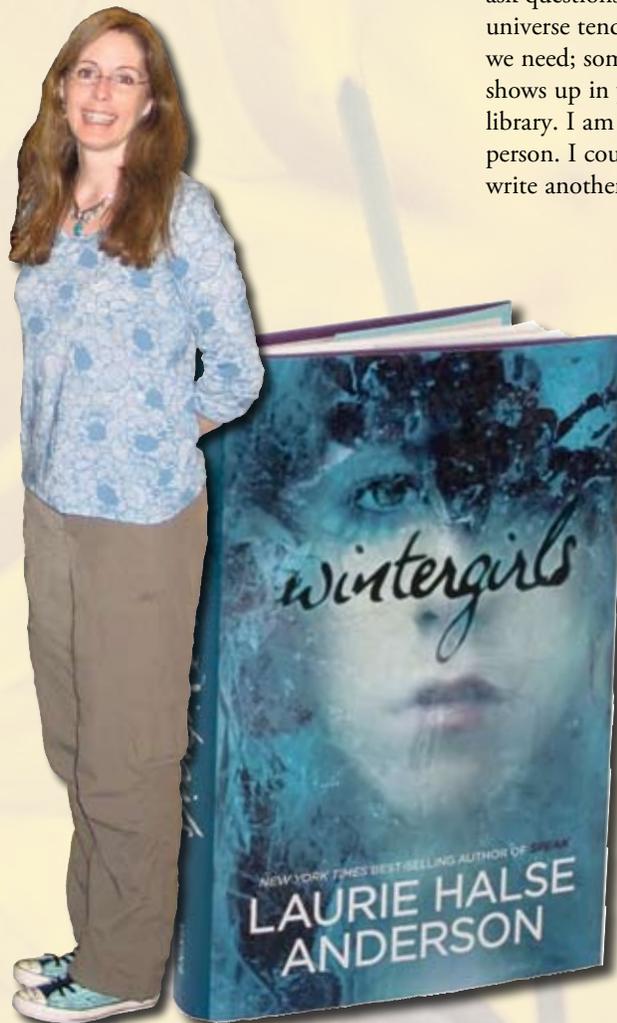
*Maya Angelou:* “If one is lucky, a solitary fantasy can totally transform one million realities.”

*Laurie:* “I am beyond lucky. I am blessed.”

**Mackin:** It’s been 10 years since you wrote “Speak,” and more than 1 million people have read it. Tell me about the poem you wrote entitled “Listen” in response to all the reader feedback over the years. Do you still get reader feedback from the book?

**Laurie:** Every day. The book is now read by teenage girls who perhaps read “Wintergirls” [Laurie’s newest YA novel] and ask the librarian, “Has this author written anything else?” There’s a whole new generation discovering the book. When I was discussing the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of “Speak” with Penguin, they asked if I could share some of the feedback from readers. About half of the mail I get about “Speak” comes from survivors of sexual assault, and the other half are kids who weren’t raped, love their parents and are doing fine in school. But, they have something going on in their life that helps them relate to Melinda’s feelings of isolation.

[See page 5 for an excerpt from “Listen.”]



## Wintergirls

**M:** What research did you do to prepare yourself for writing “Wintergirls?”

**L:** A lot of my research came from my readers. Many readers reach out to us authors through the Internet, whether Facebook or MySpace, regular email or even traditional letters. My readers let me know what’s working in their lives and what isn’t, and I start to see a pattern. Something will become apparent, like eating disorders, then I start to ask questions to everyone I know. The universe tends to feed us the information we need; sometimes the right person shows up in your life. Then it’s to the library. I am kind of a research-obsessive person. I could just research and not even write another book and be happy.

**M:** So you still like to go to the physical library.

**L:** Oh gosh, yes, and I live way out in the country. I use my local library or the nearest small college library. If I really get stuck, I go down to Syracuse University.

Often at the library, I’ll come across books and see who’s writing the really good stuff about this specific topic — who can I talk to. “Wintergirls” was a little bit different. My friend and ex-husband’s wife is a physician and has been nudging me to write about eating disorders. So that worked out really well.

**M:** How did all the “Speak” responses from suffering teen readers help you with writing “Wintergirls?”

**L:** My readers have changed my life. It’s been the greatest blessing aside from my children. At least once a day I’ll get a letter or email. So after 10 years, that’s a lot of correspondence, a lot of kids’ voices. First, I hear how important books are to them, how important story is, especially to the kids who most people wouldn’t peg as traditional readers. When you find the right book for a troubled kid, that’s life-transforming. Second, it’s harder now to be a teenager than it’s ever been in America. I have a lot of respect for them. We have to do a better job.

**M:** It’s great to hear you say these kids want the physical book.

**L:** They absolutely want the book. They are desperate for the book — and also desperate for loving, caring adults in their lives. Like those teachers who connect with them, yet stay firm with them about doing their homework. Those are the ones these kids adore.

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**M:** Lia, the main character in “Wintergirls,” started going downhill at the age of 12, when she hit puberty and wasn’t skinny anymore, her parents got divorced, and she started cutting. In this novel, however, you don’t really talk about peer pressure in relation to Lia’s need to be skinny, but more about Lia having a psychological disorder. Today there is a ton of pressure for girls to be thin. What do you want teen girls reading “Wintergirls” to come away feeling with regards to their bodies?

**L:** I really think that as adults we have a wonderful opportunity to help teen girls and teen boys. It’s really consumer awareness. We’re allowing ourselves to be manipulated by the people who are trying to sell us things. They take the skinniest young women available (who are genetically thin to begin with), take pictures of them, then digitally reduce

the size of their bodies even further. The image is really unattainable. I think that pressure is catching up with boys. They also are battling looking at images of men that are not realistic.

Moms and aunts have a great opportunity to stop saying, “Oh, I look so fat.” My new watch phrase is: “Cellulite is the new cleavage.” We need to own the body that God gave us. We have given our power away, but we can take that power back. When we do, we’ll be healthier.

**M:** In “Wintergirls,” you explore the many relationships Lia has with peers, parents, stepparents, her therapist, and others. Why so often do none of these people see what’s really wrong with the troubled teen?

**L:** This is one of the hardest parts about being a teenager, and one of the hardest parts about loving a teenager. Biologically, physically, in adolescence, we’re prewired to separate from our parents. I kind of think that’s part of God’s plan. You know, if they were as sweet at age 17 as they were at age 7, we’d never send them to college. They need to develop that independence, so they’re naturally inclined to pull away. Then if things aren’t working in their soul, if something’s happened, if there’s a chemical imbalance, bouts of depression, they’re more likely to be pulling away even farther. You know, most parents are amateurs. They don’t know how to help their kids.

From the writing perspective, it’s an interesting challenge to write from the first-person point of view. You want to write a character like Lia, or Melinda in “Speak,” who is seeing the world through their eyes, but you also have to find a way to show there are different sides to the story. Mom and Dad are trying to reach out, but the kid can’t see that. That’s the hardest thing about being a parent.

**M:** How and when did you come up with the title “Wintergirls?”

**L:** The titles never come first. I think my working title for this was “Bones.” Then I started looking at the Myth of Persephone, and that’s when the book really started to gel for me. Just thinking about Persephone trapped in Hell, literally, while her mother and family are scouring the globe for her, and the world falls into winter. All these pieces fell into

place. I knew I wanted to find an image system that showed Lia and girls like her in a liminal place, an in-between place — in between life and death.

**M:** Did you know anyone personally who suffered from anorexia?

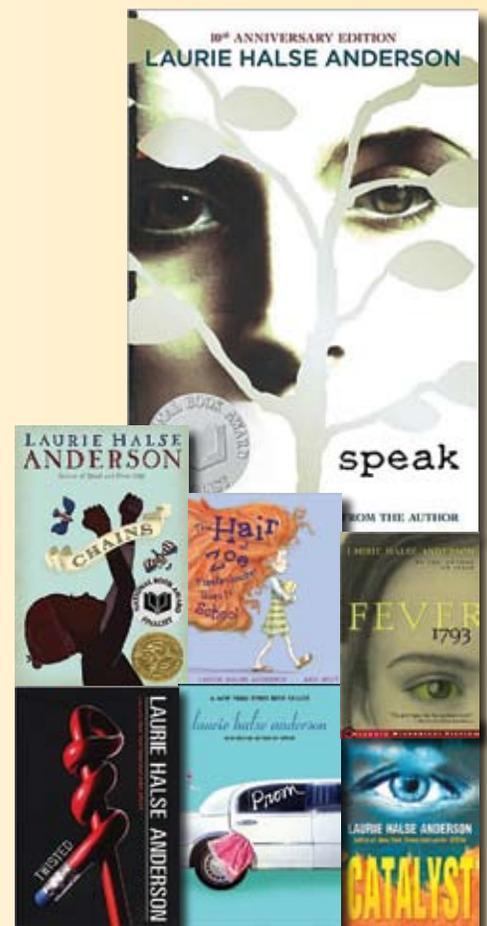
**L:** Yes, both anorexia and bulimia. It’s about the hardest thing you’ll ever see anyone go through, because you can’t talk them out of it. The statistics are about 10 million American women and girls and about 1-1.5 million guys. Our culture creates a lot of broken people.

### Metaphorically Speaking

**M:** You avoided English classes in college because you hated the way teachers made you analyze books. Yet many of your books are written in a way that begs to be analyzed. In “Wintergirls,” for example, you use lots of metaphorical phrases, and readers must read between the lines to figure out what’s going on.

**L:** First of all, if I’ve done my job, my books are accessible at two levels. The top level is plot and story, when people

(continued)



are flipping pages because they want to see what happens next. Either they care about the character or they're irritated with the character, but they want to know what's going to happen next. Then there's a subtextual layer of metaphor and such, where if you care enough about the character to read and understand the code, you have an added layer of pleasure. I will say that because I was such a poor English student, it takes me a couple times to understand metaphors in a book. It took me several tries to write metaphors in "Wintergirls."

I set out to use elements of the mythical and magical realism to make the story go deeper. The trick is to turn my brain off and just write, not think. In my early drafts, the story is a mess, but there's a lot of imagery that shows up in those early versions. In later drafts is where I craft a beginning, middle and end.

### Rethinking the Classics

**M:** Some of your YA novels discuss very painful yet realistic social issues, such as rape and anorexia, and are used in the classroom for group discussion. What do you feel is the role of contemporary fiction versus the classics like Shakespeare in the library or classroom?

**L:** From where I stand, which is a different perspective from teachers and librarians, I'm not trying to make anybody read "Moby Dick," which frankly needs to be taken out of the curriculum as far as I'm concerned. I think all those classics have done more to produce an illiterate generation of Americans than anything. We have amazing books available that connect with kids, ones that reflect kids' experiences today. We've always turned

to literature in Western culture for stories that will help us understand where we come from, what our moral heading is, etc. When you hand "Moby Dick" to an inner-city kid today, guess what? You just lost another reader. But if you hand them a book that speaks to that child's experience, one they can connect with, now you've gone someplace.

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Shakespeare didn't write his plays for high school kids to read. Shakespeare's plays, all plays, are written to be acted. When you're forced to read books like that and analyze them, you're learning how to disrespect education, how to disrespect your teacher and to hate reading. I was that kid. When I was in high school, I never finished an assigned book. I was working my way through the entire library – all the fantasy books, science fiction, historical novels – **I was a voracious consumer of books. But the books they handed me in my classroom? I didn't read any of them.** And if I didn't read those books, I who grew up to be this author, what does that tell you?

Mostly it's a financial concern for schools. You have districts who have invested in classroom sets of the classics, like "Scarlet Letter." Then you have people on school boards who say, "That's what a classic is. That's how I was educated." So there are those barriers in place. Now we have this generation of English teachers coming along who are smart and compassionate and vibrant, and they're taking their job seriously. You're seeing more books like mine in classrooms.

Author Don Gallo wrote a book that advocates using contemporary YA text to hook your students into reading. Use the text to talk about literary devices because the kids care about the story, then bridge it thematically to a unit on a classic. "Speak" is often taught in conjunction with "Scarlet Letter." You use "Speak" as the teaching book, then briefly discuss "Scarlet Letter" and its place in American tradition and culture so the kids get a taste

of it. But "Scarlet Letter" wasn't written for teens. It was written 150 years ago for middle-aged, rich, educated, white men.

### Listen, WRITE, Speak

**M:** You write award-winning teen fiction, historical fiction and children's picture books. How do you make the switch?

**L:** I have a short attention span and get bored easily. When I finished "Wintergirls," I was tapped out of using metaphors and image systems, and emotionally I was toast. So to be able to plunge into historical research again was a luxury. I really enjoy that back and forth. Also, I think adult writers are pigeon-holed.

**M:** You've received so many honors and awards for your writing. Do you feel any pressure now when you write because of this?

**L:** It doesn't feel like pressure. It feels like standards. It's good, because people have been very kind about my books. I wouldn't want to put anything out there that would fall short of expectations. I can't control the reviews and the awards, but I have total control over how much energy I put into my book before I turn it in.

**M:** You have children who've been through the tough teen years. Do you feel the research you had to do for your YA novels, and the writing itself, helped you understand your children more and help them through the tough times?

**L:** It's been a huge advantage. My kids read my books, and their friends read my books. They know I remember, that I know exactly what's going on in their lives. We've been very blessed. Everyone hit their rough spots, but not in a fatal way — nothing we couldn't all come back from. My kids always felt comfortable coming to us. You never really know how to raise a kid until you've raised your kids. Parents are amateurs. I think being exposed to as many teenagers as I was maybe gave me a little bit of an edge, more awareness of what they might come up against.

**M:** Do you have a mentor?

**L:** I've tried to pattern my career after Jane Nolan. There are a couple books she's really known for, and her family has always been a priority in her life.



## ONE GOOD TEACHER CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

*I was very depressed in high school, teetering on the dark side, and I had this amazing French teacher who just loved all of us. I would go to school and to his class just so he wouldn't be upset. You didn't want to disappoint the guy! I think he saved my life.*



*My guidance counselor told me once that he thought I was going to wind up in jail, or I was going to wind up dead.*

*So I was giving a speech at my hometown civic center (Syracuse, NY). There were 3,000 people there, and I started talking about this teacher. Then someone shouts out, "He's here!" He was there. It was his last year as a teacher. He stood up, and the entire auditorium rose and gave him a standing ovation. Then we all cried.*

*For any teachers reading this interview, if you approach teaching with your heart and soul open, you will change the lives and save the lives of thousands of children.*

## Fun Facts About Laurie

**What one person would you most like to meet?**

Barack Obama, although it may be even more interesting to meet his wife.

**What one place in the world would you most like to visit?**

Iceland

**What one family tradition would you never want to give up?**

Our 5K run on Thanksgiving morning. We all go as a family.

**If you had to choose the title of your autobiography, what would it be?**

"Confused." I'm a very blunt person. I say what I think. That got me in so much trouble as a kid. So it's kind of bizarre now that I'm here as an author.

**Do you have any pets?**

I have a dog, but I'm allergic to dogs.

**If you could go back in time and live, which time period would you pick?**

May 1776 to Aug. 1778. I would give anything to be George Washington's aide-de-camp.

ORDER LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON'S  
BOOKS ON MACKIN.COM.

LOOK FOR "WINTERGIRLS"  
ON PAGE 52!

*Below is an excerpt from a poem written by Laurie Halse Anderson in honor of the 10th anniversary of "Speak." With the exception of the first and last stanzas, all of the words come from letters or emails written to her by readers.*

### LISTEN

You write to us  
from Houston, Brooklyn, Peoria, Rye, NY,  
LA, DC, Everyanywhere USA to my mailbox, My  
Space Face

Book

A livejournal of bffs whispering  
Onehundredthousand whispers to Melinda and  
Me.

You:

I was raped, too  
sexually assaulted in seventh grade,  
tenth grade, the summer after graduation,  
at a party

i was 16

i was 14

i was 5 and he did it for three years

i loved him

i didn't even know him ...

... did it happen to you, too?

U ?

You:

i wasn't raped, but  
my dad drinks, but  
i hate talking, but  
my brother was shot, but  
i am outcast, but  
my parents split up, but  
i am clanless, but  
we lost our house, but  
i have secrets – seven years of secrets  
and i cut  
myself my friends cut  
we all cut cut cut  
to let out the pain ...

You:

I cried when I read it.  
I laughed when I read it  
is that dumb?  
I sat with the girl—  
you know, that girl—  
I sat with her because nobody sits with her at lunch  
and I'm a cheerleader, so there.

*Speak* changed my life  
cracked my shell ...  
... i am trying.

You made me remember who I am.

Thanks.

P.S. Our class is gonna analyze this thing to death.

Me:

Me:

Me: weeping

Read the complete poem at  
<http://speakupaboutspeak.blogspot.com>.