



SPEECHLESS

BY ARON NELS STEINKE

Speechless: A Graphic Novel

By Aron Nels Steinke

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The Story

Middle school was supposed to be a fresh start for Mira, who struggles to speak in class even though she can speak at home without a problem. Her former best friend, Chloe, has become her worst enemy, and Mira's only solace is making videos for her secret stop-motion animation channel. But when Chloe's mom has to travel for a family emergency, Mira is horrified to learn that her family has volunteered to let Chloe stay with them. When it feels like everything is going wrong, will Mira ever find her voice?

Reading Group Questions

1. Mira struggles to talk in public, although throughout the story, she becomes more comfortable communicating with other people. What might have made it easier for her? Have you ever been scared to speak up?
2. Mira's worst nightmare comes true when her mom lets Chloe live in their house temporarily. Would you have done anything differently if you were Mira?
3. Chloe hurt Mira's feelings deeply with a careless remark, but they reconcile in the end. Why do you think Mira forgave Chloe? Can you come up with any ways that Chloe could have been a better friend to Mira?
4. Mira loves making stop-motion animation films. Can you identify two instances her stop-motion animation helped her? Do you have a hobby that helps you in some way?

About the Creator



Photo © Werns Photography

Aron Nels Steinke is the creator of the bestselling Mr. Wolf's Class series, the Eisner Award-winning illustrator and coauthor, with Ariel Cohn, of *The Zoo Box*, and is a former classroom teacher. When he's not writing, drawing, or visiting schools, Aron can be found taking long walks with his family and his dog, Ginger, in his hometown of Portland, Oregon. His favorite thing is to go swimming in the Sandy River when it's just barely warm enough to do so. Visit him online at mrwolfsclass.com.

Creator Q&A

What inspired you to create a graphic novel about selective mutism? How much of Mira's story was inspired by your own experiences?

When I was a classroom teacher, I worked with several students who had extreme difficulties speaking in class, and then there was one student, in particular, who didn't speak at all in class, even though he could speak at home. That experience reminded me that I, too, had a very hard time speaking outside of my home when I was a kid, and the more people pressured me to speak, the more I'd freeze and clam up. Eventually, I gained confidence from finding the right friend groups over the years, working jobs that gave me more exposure speaking to people, and the added confidence I got from sports. As a young adult, I discovered I could use my sketchbook and my drawing skills to help me talk to people. I'm still trying to get better at making small talk and meeting new people. I'm a very sensitive and anxious person, and I know there are a lot of people who feel like me.

Mira has to learn to manage a lot of difficult emotions throughout the story. How did you balance the book's energy and humor with the more serious, heartfelt themes?

I love to laugh, and I LOVE to make other people laugh. I've always wanted to be the class clown/the funny friend, but I've never had the quick wit and verbal skills to pull it off. And of course, you read about my difficulty speaking. But when I write books I get to take my time, and plan it out, and I can be funny that way. Of course, I knew if it were too playful and silly, then you wouldn't take seriously the struggles that Mira feels in the book. I'm pretty sure I had some fart jokes in the book that didn't make the final cut, because it just didn't fit with the tone.

Was your process for creating this book different from creating your series for younger readers, Mr. Wolf's Class? Did you run into any challenges?

When I make a Mr. Wolf's Class book, it takes me about a year from start to finish. *Speechless* took me three years to complete, mostly because I had to come up with a whole new cast of characters and they were fully human. Drawing humans is actually much more difficult (for me) than drawing animal characters. You have less to work with in getting characters to stand out from one another, because they all have human faces and heads. Also, I was writing about a sensitive topic that required a lot of care, so that meant I had to do a lot more rewrites and edits to get it right. There's a much wider range of emotions in *Speechless*, whereas Mr. Wolf's Class is lighter and more humorous.

Was there anything you wanted to include in *Speechless* that ended up not making the cut?

I had a scene in an early draft where Mira and her new friend Alex play Truth or Dare. Their game starts out all innocent and tame, but then builds until the stakes are raised to the point where Alex dares Mira to do something quite risky. Because it's such an outrageous dare, Alex doesn't actually expect Mira will actually do it. But Mira has a momentary lapse of judgment and ends up doing the risky dare. Of course, she immediately regrets what she's done, and there are big consequences. We ultimately left it out of the book because it was too complex of a concept to add in, and it needed more pages to explain. Maybe I'll put that idea into a future book, and I'll give it more pages to fully explore the idea.