



October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard

By Lesléa Newman

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On the night of October 6, 1998, a gay twenty-one-year-old college student named Matthew Shepard was lured from a Wyoming bar by two young men, savagely beaten, tied to a remote fence, and left to die.

Gay Awareness Week was beginning at the University of Wyoming, and the keynote speaker was Lesléa Newman, discussing her book *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Shaken, the author addressed the large audience that gathered, but she remained haunted by Matthew's murder.

October Mourning, a novel in verse, is her deeply felt response to the events of that tragic day. Using her poetic imagination, the author creates fictitious monologues from various points of view, including the fence Matthew was tied to, the stars that watched over him, the deer that kept him company, and Matthew himself.

More than a decade later, this stunning cycle of sixty-eight poems serves as an illumination for readers too young to remember, and as a powerful, enduring tribute to Matthew Shepard's life.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review On October 6, 1998, 21-year-old Matthew Shepard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming, was lured into a truck, driven into the country, savagely beaten, tied to a fence, and left to die—which he did, five days later. In the 68 poems that make up this novel-in-verse, Newman re-creates the events and circumstances surrounding this unspeakably vile hate crime and offers a moving tribute to a young man she regards as a martyr. Her poems are told from multiple points of view, including that of the fence, the rope that bound the boy, and a doe that stood watch over him. The beautifully realized selections are also written in a variety of forms, ranging from haiku to villanelle, from concrete poetry to rhymed couplets. Each form (discussed in an appendix) matches the tone and mood of its content, creating an almost musical effect that is both intellectually and aesthetically engaging. Written with love, anger, regret, and other profound emotions, this is a truly important book that deserves the widest readership, not only among independent readers but among students in a classroom setting, as well. Most importantly, the book will introduce Matthew Shepard to a generation too young to remember the tragic circumstances of his death. Grades 8-12. --Michael Cart

Review

"Written with love, anger, regret, and other profound emotions, this is a truly important book that deserves the widest readership, not only among independent readers but among students in a classroom setting as well." - Michael Cart, Booklist Starred Review

"This is the one book I've reviewed so far this year that I believe must be read by everyone ages 14 and up. It takes less than an hour to read; but it will likely stay with the reader for a long time to come. Highly recommended for both YA and adult poetry collections."

--Becky Walton, MLIS, Collection Development,

From the Author

October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard was eleven and a half years in the making.

The book began on October 12, 1998, the day I flew across the country to give a speech entitled "*Heather Has Two Mommies: Homophobia, Censorship, and Family Values*" at the University of Wyoming in celebration of National Coming Out Day. But that day, there was little to celebrate. That day, the University of Wyoming campus, the town of Laramie, the state of Wyoming, and the entire nation were all grieving for Matthew Shepard, who had died early that morning from a beating so horrendous, its brutality shocked the world.

As I stood behind the podium that evening, I caught sight of an empty seat in the very front row. I imagined Matt Shepard, whose picture had been splashed all over the newspapers, sitting there. I knew he had planned on coming to my lecture. I knew he had attended a meeting of the school's Lesbian Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Association to finish planning Gay Awareness Week the night he was attacked. I knew he had been robbed, kidnapped, beaten, and tied to a fence where he remained undiscovered for eighteen hours all because he was gay.

That night I promised the people attending my lecture that I would do my best to make sure Matthew

Shepard was not forgotten. To that end, I wrote an essay entitled "Imagine" and published it in regional LGBT newspapers across the country (a version of this essay appears as an after word in the book). I put together a slide show to go with the essay, and to this day, I begin all my lectures on gay rights with a tribute to Matt's memory. I tucked a photo of Matt inside my wallet, which I still carry with me wherever I go. I traveled to New York to attend *The Laramie Project* a play that consists of interviews conducted by the Tectonic Theater Project with the people of Laramie shortly after the crime. I attended a lecture given by Judy Shepard at the University of Massachusetts, and afterwards went back stage to greet her. Though I never met Matt Shepard, he became woven into the fabric of my life.

Flash forward ten years to 2008, when something happened that was critical in the writing of *October Mourning*: I was appointed the poet laureate of Northampton, MA. This honor inspired me to focus fully on my first literary love, which has always been poetry. In the fall of 2009, near the end of my two-year term, I created a project entitled, "30 Poems in 30 Days" in which I challenged local poets to write a poem a day during the month of November. During the month of October, poets would solicit pledges (ranging from a penny a poem to a dollar a poem) and the money collected would be donated to a local literacy group.

On October 12, 2009, the eleventh anniversary of Matt Shepard's death, something else happened that was crucial to the writing of my book: the play, *The Laramie Project - Ten Years Later: An Epilogue* premiered in 100 cities, including Northampton, MA. The Tectonic Theater Project had gone back to Wyoming ten years after Matthew Shepard's murder to interview the people of Laramie once more, to see what had and hadn't changed. The play was riveting, and it opened up something inside me. I remembered my time spent in Laramie vividly. I could see the mountains. I could hear the wind. And I could feel my grief over Matt's death as profoundly as I had on the day that he died.

When I got into bed that night, I couldn't sleep. Instead, I picked up a pen and wrote the first draft of "Wounded". The next day, I wrote "The Fence (that night)." When November arrived, I knew that my 30 poems would explore Matt's death and its impact on the world.

The poems poured out of me as if they had been cooped up for years. Always a morning writer, I found myself scribbling in the middle of the night, when I couldn't sleep. I imagined Matt out there in the prairie tied to the fence all alone, and decided to call upon the silent witnesses to the crime to give me their side of the story: the truck, the rope, the moon, the stars, the wind, a deer, Matt's shoes. The "30 Poems in 30 Days" project ended, but I continued writing a poem a day. When I had written 67 poems I felt finished. Almost.

I had come to the end of the narrative, but it didn't feel like the end of the story. Something was missing. I didn't know what it was, but I knew I had to travel back to Wyoming to find it. A few months later, I flew to Denver, drove to Laramie, and visited the site where Matt's murder had taken place.

As I walked across the prairie, the land felt spongy under my feet. Though it was April there were still patches of snow all around. The wind was brisk and very cold against my face. The fence was solid under my hand. I said Kaddish, the Jewish mourner's prayer, and placed a stone I had brought from home on the fence. Two hawks flew overhead. I stared at the sky, so big and open, and again wondered what it had witnessed that night more than a decade ago.

And on April 12, 2010, eleven and a half years to the day Matthew Shepard died, I flew home and wrote the last poem of the book while soaring through the air. "Pilgrimage" takes its form from an ancient Navajo prayer, and incorporates lines from Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist traditions. The poem allows readers to pay their respects to Matt; it also reminds readers of the great beauty of the world and conveys a feeling of hope. My hope is that those who read *October Mourning* will be inspired to honor Matthew Shepard's legacy by working to replace hate, ignorance, and fear, with peace, compassion, and love.

--Lesléa Newman

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Kenneth Sigler:

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