

A Note from Author

Holly M. McGhee



Photo by CBS

I began to write my first middle-grade novel, the book that would become Matyllda, Bright and Tender, in the summer of 2012. My oldest child was beginning to recover from a long and complicated illness right when Sussy Reed blew into my conscious; I took that as a sign and I paid attention. By the end of that first summer, I had twenty pages cobbled together, but I didn't know what Sussy's story was yet . . . only that, like my daughter's, it had something to do with survival.

As the other characters began to appear, Sussy's friend Guy Hose and their leopard gecko, Matyllda, I understood the story had something to do with my own survival, too, and a fatal accident I experienced in my youth. I'd been haunted by it for many years, and I knew in my bones that Sussy Reed had come to lead me through it.

But another year went by. . . .

The following fall, I had a disturbing and unforgettable dream, in which my fingernails were blue. It was an urgent message. I knew that if I didn't find a way to write this book, I would lose a part of myself. That's when I made my commitment to Sussy Reed. I began typing every day, on NJ Transit during my morning commute and after my children went to sleep at night, sometimes with my eyes closed to better hear the words.

Although this story is entirely made up (except for the cricket-trap design), my own emotional experience was its muse. Sussy's best friend, Guy Hose, is the kind of friend I wished for as a child, the kind of friend who loves you exactly as you are. And Matyllda, a character inspired by my son's leopard geckos, is a mythical lizard of my own dreams and imagination, a noble survivor like Sussy.

I am thankful to these characters for the gifts they brought to me as I listened to what they had to say, and I am so happy and surprised that their story turned out to be a great love story. I never would have guessed that as I was writing. This novel is about the boundless love we can have for each other and for ourselves, and how that love can be revealed in the most astonishing and sometimes terrifying ways. It's about the knowledge that love makes anything possible and bears all things.

It's my deepest wish that Sussy and Guy's story will bring hope to those who read it, even the youngest among them, the way it did for me. There's a light on there in the darkness—sometimes hard to see, sometimes flickering, but always on. Stay on the path of love and stick with your friends; choose love and you'll find the light.

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