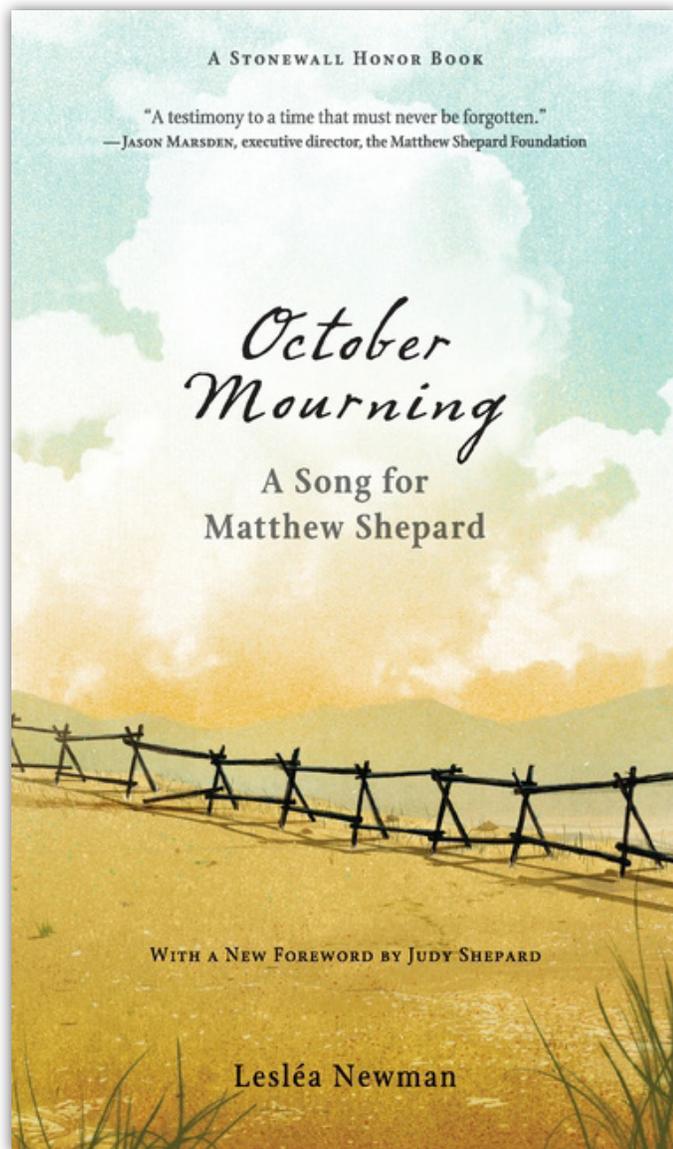


October Mourning

A Song for Matthew Shepard

LESLÉA NEWMAN



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Also available in audio



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About the Book

On an October evening in 1998, Matthew Shepard, a twenty-one-year-old gay student at the University of Wyoming, was kidnapped from a bar, savagely beaten, tied to a fence, and left to die on the outskirts of Laramie. In this acclaimed historical novel in verse—a Stonewall Honor Book as well as an American Library Association Best Fiction for Young Adults Selection—the author of *Heather Has Two Mommies* brilliantly imagines the brief life, the horrifying death, and the enduring legacy of Matthew Shepard.

★ *“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.”* —Booklist (starred review)

“Newman’s verse is both masterful and steady-handed. Each poem is beautiful in its subtle sophistication.” —School Library Journal

Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.

Discussion Questions

1. In her introduction to *October Mourning*, Lesléa Newman explains that “the poems are not an objective reporting of Matthew Shepard’s murder and its aftermath”; they are the author’s “own personal interpretation of them” (page xi). Her notes at the end of the book, however, reveal how deeply she drew from the reporting of others. Discuss how facts and imagination intertwine throughout this book. Can poetry be more truthful than factual reporting? How?
2. “Recipe for Disaster” (page 4) lists the deadly ingredients that were combined on the night that Matthew Shepard was tortured. Which ingredient do you think was the most dangerous? Why?
3. A truck, a road, a deer, even a length of rope (pages 8, 9, 20, and 13, respectively) offer their perspectives on the deadly October night. Why do you think the author decided to give voices to these normally silent witnesses?
4. How does an ordinary person become a martyr? In “Class Photo: Me in the Middle” (page 39), Matthew’s classmates are described as future ballerinas or karate masters, but he’s labeled a martyr. Does any child want to grow up to be a martyr? How is the memory of a martyr kept alive?
5. While Matthew Shepard was dying at a nearby hospital, some fraternity brothers in Fort Collins, Colorado, mocked his suffering at their university’s homecoming parade (page 51). Why would they behave that way? Why does cruelty sometimes disguise itself as humor?
6. The subtitle of *October Mourning* is *A Song for Matthew Shepard*. Why do you think the author chose to describe her book as a song?
7. Experienced medical professionals have seen many shattered bodies. Why is it so hard for the physician who narrates “The Doctor” (page 25) to control himself when he sees what has happened to Matthew Shepard?
8. “Mercy. For the boy” (page 76). Matthew Shepard’s father spoke out against the death penalty for his son’s killers. Why do you think Mr. Shepard took this stance? Would you, in his situation?
9. Because of the author’s crisp and clear explanations of poetic forms, this is not just a book of poems; it’s also a book about poetry. How does the form of a poem shape its meaning and its impact? How, for example, would a concrete poem like “Stars” (page 18) be different if it were written as a haiku, like “Every Mother’s Plea” (page 7)?
10. “Now Showing: Matthew’s Story” (page 36) is a found poem, a poem made up of text taken from everyday life—in this case, movies titles from 1998. Compile a list of recent movie titles and turn them into a poem of your own.
11. In the prologue of this book, the fence wonders “*will anyone remember me/after I’m gone?*” (page xv). How does the poem “The Fence (after)” (page 82) answer that question?
12. Matthew Shepard was the victim of a hate crime, which is defined by the FBI as a “criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity.” Learn what you can about hate crimes that have been committed in your own community. Who was targeted? How were the criminals punished, if at all? Are steps being taken to prevent more hate crimes in your community?

13. In her afterword, the author includes several concrete steps that every reader of *October Mourning* can take to combat homophobia. Which of her suggestions can you do right now? What specific actions would you add to her list?
14. More than twenty years have passed since Matthew Shepard was killed. Do you think a similar atrocity could happen now? Why?
15. In “Then and Now” (page 40), the poem concludes with the narrator realizing, “Now I am a lesson.” What do you think is the lesson of Matthew Shepard?



About the Author

An acclaimed poet and an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ rights, Lesléa Newman has written more than seventy books, including the groundbreaking children’s classic *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Five days after Matthew Shepard was attacked for being gay, she was the keynote speaker at the University of Wyoming’s Gay Awareness Week, an event he had planned to attend. Ever since, she has carried a picture of him in her wallet. She travels to schools across the country giving her presentation “He Continues to Make a Difference: The Story of Matthew Shepard.” Lesléa Newman lives in Massachusetts.



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