

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO *ALWAYS MATT*

INTRODUCTION

A poignant tribute to the life of Matthew Shepard and his legacy in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, honoring the formation of the Matthew Shepard Foundation, which dedicates its mission to erasing hate.

On the night of October 6, 1998, in Laramie, Wyoming, Matthew Wayne Shepard (1976–1998) was brutally killed solely because he was gay. It was a shocking murder that was nationally covered in the media, and it became a rallying cry for the LGBTQ+ rights movement. In 2009, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act was signed by President Barack Obama, expanding the federal hate crime law to include crimes motivated by a victim's actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability.

With a foreword by Jason Collins, the first openly gay active player in the NBA, and written by Lesléa Newman—author of the Stonewall Honor-winning novel-in-verse *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* and a friend of the Shepard family, *Always Matt* is an emotional yet ultimately hopeful look at the progress that's been made, as well as the work that still continues, in advocating for the dignity and equality of all people.

Without shying away from the pain and tragedy of Matt's death, Newman's moving, lyrical prose and Brian Britigan's simple color line drawings present a celebration of his incredible life. Matt's story still resonates for those who lived through it, and remains a vital piece of LGBTQ+ history for younger generations to learn.

Abrams lists the age range for this book as 14–99 years old. This teaching guide fulfills middle grades CCSS for ELA, and can be used as well in teaching topics in literature and social studies in both middle grades and high school. I have used the Grade 6 standards and skills for both Literature and Informational Texts as a baseline; they can of course be adapted for other grades and levels. Almost every question below could be followed by “find text to support your answer,” so feel free to use them for textual evidence and citation exercises.

My emphasis is mostly on getting students to analyze the text and images (together and separately), the decisions that the author and illustrator have made, and their consequences for readers. I encourage readers to think about the whole structure of the book, and the various elements the author and illustrator use that might encourage empathy, especially moves that might enable readers to identify with Matt and/or his family and community.

STANDARDS AND SKILLS

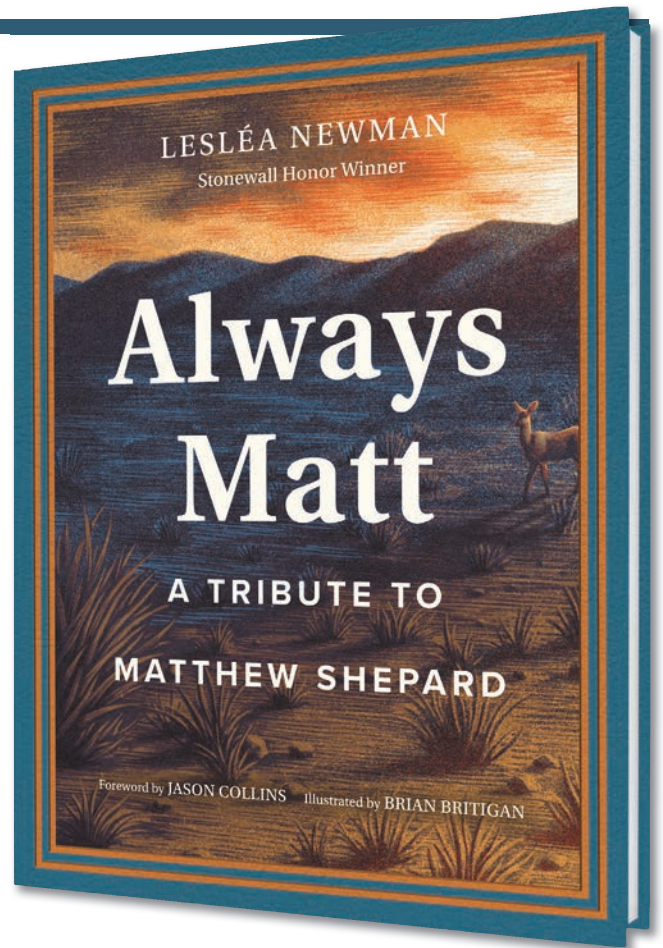
KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1

Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.



ALWAYS MATT

A Tribute to Matt Shepard

Written by **LESLÉA NEWMAN**

Illustrated by **BRIAN BRITIGAN**

ISBN 978-1-4197-5942-0 • U.S. \$22.99

6 × 8" • Hardcover • 104 pages



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CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.3

Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text (e.g., through examples or anecdotes).

CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5

Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and explain how it is conveyed in the text.

INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9

Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres (e.g., stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories) in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.7

Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.



PRE-READING IDEAS

You might offer some context for Lesléa Newman and her work, particularly since children's literature can be a useful vehicle for easing into conversations about difference. As the author of *Heather Has Two Mommies*, Newman is one of the pioneers of bringing LGBTQ+ representation into children's literature. Consequently, she has also been very active in speaking out against censorship. Read *Heather Has Two Mommies* with students, and ask them what they think is dangerous about the book. Then, tell them about its mention on the floors of Congress, and its status as a regularly challenged book (see ALA.org). In 1994, Senators Bob Smith (New Hampshire) and Jesse Helms (North Carolina) introduced an amendment that would keep federal aid from school districts that "carry out a program or activity that has either the purpose or effect of encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative." In proposing this amendment, Smith read the picture book into congressional record. The amendment passed, 63–36. What might these adults have found threatening about this children's picture book?

How often do we read books with illustrations, once we begin reading text-only "chapter books"? Why might that be? While this has been changing with the growing popularity of graphic narratives, you might talk about having to relearn how to read an image. Remind students that we usually develop our visual literacy before we learn how to read text, and we might need to practice our visual literacy skills. You might choose a wordless book (e.g., Suzy Lee's *Wave*, David Wiesner's *Flotsam*, Mitsumasa Anno's *Anno's Journey*, Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*), or panels from a comic or graphic narrative, and have students practice narrating the story.

For ways to approach an image, you might review Molly Bang's *Picture This: How Pictures Work*, and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*.



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Ask students what they know about Matthew Shepard, and to write it down. Then, share with students a newspaper clipping about the murder of Matthew Shepard, and have them write how this has added to their knowledge about the event. After reading *Always Matt*, return to this writing, and have students update it with what they now know about him. Why might they not have known much about him to begin with? How do the accounts they have read differ? What are the benefits and limitations of each kind of writing when it comes to Matt's story? What has Newman and Britigan's work done for their understanding?

Additional resources and support for teaching LGBTQ+ content are available at the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) website, and the American Library Association (ALA) has resources having to do with book challenges and censorship.

For up-to-date terms and definitions for genders and sexual orientations, please visit the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) website and the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Media Reference Guide (links in "Additional Teaching Resources").

Further, you might find the following articles of interest: C. J. Pascoe's "'Dude, You're a Fag': Adolescent Masculinity and the Fag Discourse," in which she studies the various (and perhaps surprisingly nonsexual) ways young people use the term "gay," and Victor Malo-Juvera's "The effect of an LGBTQ themed literary instructional unit on adolescents' homophobia," in which he demonstrates that reading Newman's *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* in high school classrooms can work to decrease levels of homophobia amongst high school students.


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you summarize *Always Matt*? Lesléa Newman writes this book twenty-five years after Matt's murder. How might this affect the content of the book? What would you expect to find in the book if, instead, Newman had written this just after the murder had happened?
2. Newman and Britigan both write about taking a new approach to Matt's story. Newman, who has written about Matt in the past, writes, "I decided to tell the story in a different way: a way that celebrates and pays tribute to Matt and the short life that he lived" (xvii). Britigan writes, "My first task in illustrating this book was to reexamine the version of this story that I've held within myself for all these years. [. . .] Creating these images became an attempt to fill the gaps in my own understanding, holding up my flawed assumptions to the light and replacing them with stark truths. My hope is that this book can be an invitation for others to do the same" (77). How does *Always Matt* depart from more conventional representations of death or grief? What does it offer that these conventional approaches do not? How would you assess Newman's and Britigan's new approach? What might they accomplish here? Britigan invites readers to, like him, examine "flawed assumptions" and replace them with "stark truths." Do you find yourselves doing so?
3. How would you describe the tone, or mood, of the text? Find specific words used by Newman that help create this tone. How would you describe the tone of the illustrations? How does Britigan create this tone with images? How do the images make you feel? When we talk about books with both text and illustrations, we talk about the relationship between the words and images. Is there a one-to-one relationship between the words and images here? That is, do the images illustrate exactly what the text says? Does the image show something that the text does not? Does the image contradict the text?
4. What does Newman focus on in her text? What do the illustrations focus on? What if we read just the images? Just the text?
5. How would you describe Newman's language and writing? What is the effect of this language on your comprehension? On the tone? Why might she have chosen to write this way?
6. Look at each image. Write a caption for each illustration, without looking at the text Newman provides. Is your writing specific to Matt, or more general? Once finished, compare your text to Newman's. Where are the overlaps? Where are the differences? What does her text offer that yours doesn't, and vice versa?
7. Look at the text only. Draw your own images. Now look at yours with the illustrator's. Are yours more literal or abstract, compared to the illustrator's drawings?



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8. Type up the text and cut it into strips. Can you match the writing to the illustrations? Are there multiple illustrations that might fit with each piece of text? How do these alternative pairings affect the story?
9. Describe the color scheme of the illustrations. What do you notice about the illustrator's use of lightness and darkness?
10. Newman writes that she appreciates how Britigan's illustrations complement the empty space on the page left by her poetry (xvii). For you as the reader, what is it like to read the poetry on such an empty page? What do you focus upon? Are we comfortable with empty space, or, silences in conversations? Why or why not? What do the illustrations do for the text on their opposing pages? How does each author and illustrator use empty space?
11. Compare the photograph included (74) to the illustrations of the photographs. What is the difference between seeing a photo and a drawing? What assumptions do we make about photographs? About illustrations? What is the relationship between these illustrations and the photographs they are based on? The actual people and events? What does this comparison suggest to you about the illustrator's work? Why might Newman have wanted to use illustrations rather than photographs and newspaper clippings?
12. Now that you have read the book, can you find any other images from within the book that you think would work as an alternative cover representation of the entire work?
13. Look through the book and note each place you see a candle. What do you notice about them? Where are they, and in what contexts? How is the illustrator using them?
14. How does Newman introduce readers to Matt? To the perpetrators? To the crime? Who else does she include in Matt's story, and what roles do they play? Ultimately, where is her emphasis in this work?
15. At what point in the main text do you realize that Matt is gay? At what point does Newman actually write this word? What language does she use to write about Matt's gayness, and what details/context does she use? Why might she have chosen to present it this way?
16. How does the crime of Matt's murder itself fit into the overall structure of the book? How much time and space does Newman devote to it? Would you say that this book is about the crime? Why, or why not? How much of the book concerns life before the crime? After the crime? Where is Newman's emphasis? What does this indicate to us about her message?
17. We tend to classify books by genre, or kind of book. *Always Matt* might be considered a picture book, a book of poetry, an informational book, a historical book, a biography, a memoir (whose?), true crime, or nonfiction. What do each of these genres require, and which would you say *Always Matt* is? Why? Could it be a blend of genres?
18. Where does the title *Always Matt* come from? What does this mean, and why might Newman have chosen this to be the title for the whole book? What does she want us to know about Matt? What is Newman emphasizing by giving the book this title? Choose another line from the text. What if this were the title? What would the book be emphasizing then?
19. Newman is very careful about marking her sources and contexts for her material. She also offers a list of resources. What does this indicate about her approach to Matthew Shepard and his story?



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20. On the back of the book are “blurbs,” or quotations, from different people about the book. Who are these people? Why might their thoughts about this book be relevant? What do their thoughts suggest about this book and Newman’s work?
21. If you have a hardcover copy of the book, notice the imprint on the cover under the dust jacket. Why might there be a deer on the cover? What role does the deer play in Matt’s story, and why is the deer appropriate (or not) for the cover?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

22. Look at the table of contents. What does each section have to offer? How does each one enhance your experience as a reader? Why might Newman have included it?

INTRODUCTION

23. Who is Jason Collins? What perspective does he have to offer? Who might listen to him? How is this audience important when it comes to the message of Matt’s story? Why is the Matthew Shepard story important to Collins? Why might Collins’s voice be significant today?
24. Collins writes that while he learned about Black history, art history, and European history, he never had a course on LGBTQ+ studies. According to his foreword, why is it important to consider Matt’s story as American history? What can we learn, about history and about gay people, if we think about Matt’s story as American history?

PREFACE

25. Read Newman’s preface. What are her goals in writing this book? Now that you have read the book, would you say that she has accomplished these goals? Why or why not? Use the text to support your claims.
26. How does Newman introduce Matthew Shepard to readers? What is her relationship to Matthew Shepard and his story? How does this make her an appropriate person to write this story? What might be some limitations to her perspective?
27. What does the preface offer you as a reader? What questions might you have for the author? Are they answered by the preface? The rest of the book?
28. At the end of her preface, Newman addresses you, the reader, directly: “Reader, I invite you to turn the page and meet Matthew Shepard, known to his friends and family as Matt” (xvii). How does this make you feel? What does this do with respect to your position regarding the narrative? Why might she want to deliberately involve you in the story of Matt?


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29. Why introduce Matt first as “a grandson, a son, and a brother” (3)? Why start there? Who might be able to identify with being or having a grandson, son, or brother? Why might Newman hope that people can identify with and relate to Matt? Why might readers resist relating to Matt?
30. The first illustrations of Matt are of his photograph, of his hand when he was a baby, and of him as a young child. Why might Newman have decided to begin this story with Matt’s birth and childhood, instead of with him as a young, gay man? When we watch commercials, how do we tend to feel about babies and pets?
31. Maurice Sendak’s picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* and the song “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” are popular features of American childhood. Have you read this book and/or sung this song? What do they make you think of? Why might Newman have used a book and song that might be familiar to many readers? She also features Matt’s stuffed rabbit, Oscar. Did/do you have a stuffed animal? Why do we keep stuffed animals? What does this do to your relationship with Matt?
32. The setting for this book is the state of Wyoming. How does this affect the story? Matt did move, even living abroad for a short time. Why might Newman have focused on just one location? Why might it be important that Wyoming is a constant throughout this book and Matt’s story?
33. Both the text and images return repeatedly to nature. What role does nature play in this story?
34. Newman writes that Matt liked to leave poems and drawings and rocks in his neighbors’ mailboxes. She also writes that Matt liked to hike, fish, ride horses, stargaze, and dress up. Newman describes Matt as a good and active listener (17). What does this tell us about Matt? What kinds of qualities does he have as a person? What might this do for readers? Can you relate to any of these? Does he sound like you or someone you know? Would you like a friend like Matt?
35. Who is Dolly Parton? What has she done that is special, and how would you characterize her point of view? (While Dolly is mentioned as someone Matt liked to dress up as, you might take this opportunity to introduce students to this phenomenal songwriter, singer, philanthropist, literacy supporter, and LGBTQ+ ally).



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36. Look at pages 14 and 15. What do you see in the family portraits? Why is it important that Newman places the line “Someday he hoped to fall in love with a man and start a family of his own” on the page with these images?
37. Newman writes that Matt promised to make our world better, kinder, and more peaceful (18). She returns to these words on page 49. Why might she repeat these words? How does she use these qualities and goals in her book?
38. Similarly, the last page of text (58) echoes the first (3). What are the differences? What does the change in words indicate?
39. On page 47, Newman writes, “What would Matt do?” Is this the central question of the book? How does this question drive the book? Do we as readers know what Matt would do, and if so, how? How does Newman circle back to this question in the epilogue?
40. Britigan uses frames in many of his illustrations, with photographs, mirrors, and windows. What is being framed in each case? What do frames alert us to, and how do they affect what is being framed? What is the difference between how you see an illustration with and without a frame? Can the borders of each illustration act as a frame, as well? What does this do to our position as readers?
41. Look at the images on pages 4 and 34. What are the similarities, and what are the differences? Why might Britigan have decided to return to this kind of image at this point in the story?
42. We see images of Matt as a child, and as a young adult, in both drawings, drawings of photographs, and one photograph (74). What do all of these different representations do for our familiarity with Matt?
43. How is Matt’s gayness represented in this narrative?
44. There are a few pages describing “that night.” How did you feel when you read about what happened to Matt? How did Newman handle this part of the story? We get more details about the murder of Matt Shepard in Newman’s epilogue. Why might she have left many of these details out of the main body of the book? Why might she have chosen to include them in the epilogue?
45. What role do people’s responses to the violence against Matt play? What is the role of local, national, and international communities? What do you make of the fact that this act of violence in a rural town made international news?
46. Why doesn’t this story end with Matt’s death, or his funeral? Where does Newman choose to end this narrative instead?
47. Newman includes a variety of ways that people, including Matt’s parents, are taking action in memory of Matt. Who is included in these last few pages? What are some of their activities, and what are their goals? How are these actions and goals appropriate, given Matt’s own character?



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EPILOGUE

48. Read each of the biographies. What specific elements do they have in common? What do they have in common with Jason Collins' story? Why might people not initially group these people together? Do you know anyone like this? Write a profile of them.
49. In her epilogue, Newman includes brief profiles of Dennis and Judy Shepard and the Matthew Shepard Foundation, Moisés Kaufman and *The Laramie Project*, President Obama and the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, the Angel Action, and Michele Josue and *Matthew Shepard Is a Friend of Mine*. This range of people has produced a variety of initiatives, including works of art, activism, education, and legislation. What does each form contribute to the fight for LGBTQ+ equality and wellbeing? What are the strengths of each genre? What do they contribute together?
50. Jim Osborn was the chair of the University of Wyoming's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Association at the time of Matt's murder, and was the person who invited Newman to speak at UW. Osborn has an oral history recording archive in the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming (<https://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:80444/xv100044>). Read Newman's profile of him, and then read the entry for his oral history. Based on the profile, how has he committed to work for the LGBTQ+ community?
51. Visit the website of the Matthew Shepard Foundation. On their "Changing Hearts and Minds" page, the foundation states that their mission is to "amplify the story of Matthew Shepard to inspire individuals, organizations and communities to embrace the dignity and equality of all people." What are some ways you see the foundation doing that, according to their site? Based on *Always Matt* and the MSF website, how are Dennis and Judy Shepard doing this, personally?
52. Research Bishop Gene Robinson. Read or listen to this NPR article about Matt's interment at the Washington National Cathedral: <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/26/659835903/watch-matt-shepard-laid-to-rest-at-national-cathedral>. What are some reasons that make Bishop Robinson an appropriate choice to preside over Matt's interment? What are some of the significances of Bishop Robinson's words, "Matthew, welcome home"?
53. Newman includes the Angel Action in her epilogue. Led by Matt's friend Romaine Patterson, this act performed at the trial of Matt's murderers meant to shield people from the Westboro Baptist Group protesters. It is an example of peaceful protest, one "offering a message of peace and compassion to counteract messages of hate" (69). Patterson's website (<http://eatromaine.com/1/laramie-angels.html>) includes instructions for building angel costumes. If possible, have students build their own Angel Action costumes. You might have them read the poems "A Protestor" and "An Angel" that are on facing pages in Newman's *October Mourning*. What were these angels facing, both literally and figuratively? What was their experience like, standing in front of people who were supporting the perpetrators, and who had protested at Matt's funeral? What does it feel like to actually wear the angel costume, and to stand with others wearing them?
54. Ask students what comes to mind when they think of "public memorials." The memorial bench for Matt at the University of Wyoming is one of a number of memorials to LGBTQ+ people in the world. Have students choose and research other memorials to LGBTQ+ people (e.g., the Memorial at Harvey Milk Plaza in San Francisco, the Stonewall National Monument in New York City, the Memorial to Persecuted Homosexuals in Berlin). Whom/what does each memorialize? Why is this person, place, or event being memorialized, and how? What kind of information is offered to visitors? How would you describe the design of the memorial? (If you have time and want to use a point of reference in order to talk about issues of design, you might introduce students to the controversy that occurred upon the selection of Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the more conventional statue placed as a compromise.) What kind of experience does the memorial offer visitors, and what does it encourage?
55. What is the function and definition of community in Matt's story?
56. Newman is clear throughout the book about her commitment to Matt (63), as well as her hopes for this book (76). Do you think that she has achieved these goals? Use textual evidence to support your claim.
57. Just as Newman directly addressed readers in her preface, she also does so in her epilogue. On page 75, Newman issues what is called a "call to action" to readers: "What can you do in Matt's memory in order to make a difference?" How can you answer this question? Has Newman helped prepare you to answer this question?
58. The final image of the book is that of a little boy reading with his stuffed rabbit. How does this influence our final thoughts about this book? About Matt? Why might Newman and Britigan have chosen an image of Matt as a child for our last image of the book?



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Millions of people have heard Matt's story and are making a difference. They are writing letters, marching, protesting, voting, passing laws.

They are doing their best to make the world a better place, a kinder place, a peaceful place for everyone.



EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. For whom is this book? Abrams lists *Always Matt* as appropriate for ages 14–99. It includes illustrations, and Newman's poetry in the main text is written using plain language. Her writing in the other sections is a bit more detailed and dense. Which readers is this book designed for, and how might this be part of Newman's and Britigan's strategies? Use examples from the text to support your argument.
2. Newman includes a number of resources at the end of her book. The books, films, and CD all offer various representations of Matt's story. Choose one or more to compare with *Always Matt*. What does each resource have to offer? How would you describe their portraits of Matt's story?
3. Look at some newspaper articles about Matthew Shepard. What do you learn about him? How would you describe the portraits of Matt they offer? What kind of information do they give you? What are their strengths and limitations? How does reading/viewing/listening to them affect your understanding of Matt's story?
4. What does it mean to hate someone? Have you ever hated someone? How do you think about hating people now that you have read about what happened to Matt? Ask students how they would define a hate crime. Have them research how a hate crime is defined on national, state, and local levels. Read the text of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, and have students research James Byrd's story. What kind of legislation exists where you live? Does your town or county have hate crime or anti-discrimination legislation? Which groups are included in it, if so? What might (or not) be surprising?



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5. Have students research the organizations behind the Anti-Violence Project, Black Lives Matter, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women USA, and the International Transgender Day of Remembrance. What are connections across these movements? What does the violence have in common? What are the organizations' goals, and how are they working to achieve them?
6. Look up the definitions of "memorial." What do memorials do, and what do we expect them to look like? What are some factors that must be considered when creating a memorial to someone or an event? In what ways can this be a sensitive subject? How might *Always Matt* function as a memorial and for whom? Does Newman create a memorial with her writing? Why, or why not?
7. Visit the Matthew Shepard Foundation website and learn more about the work of Judy and Dennis Shepard.
8. Across the book we see a number of a number of ways to make a difference. Which ways are practical for you and where you live? How might you participate in these kinds of actions?
9. Does your school have a gay-straight alliance or equivalent group? Consider partnering with them for an activity.
10. Is there a queer community center or similar kind of resource where you live? You might invite someone to speak about the local queer community, and what it has been like historically in your region. You might also find someone who can speak to hearing about the events of Matthew Shepard's murder in real time. This connection might give you options for post-reading activities and community service, as well.

ADDITIONAL TEACHING RESOURCES

See pages 78–79 for Matthew Shepard–related resources

Bang, Molly. *Picture This: How Pictures Work*. Chronicle Books, 2016.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. William Morrow, 1994.

Malo-Juvera, Victor. "The effect of an LGBTQ themed literary instructional unit on adolescents' homophobia." *Study and Scrutiny: Research in Young Adult Literature*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–34.

Pascoe, C. J. "'Dude, You're a Fag': Adolescent Masculinity and the Fag Discourse." *Sexualities*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2005, pp. 329–46.

The American Library Association Banned & Challenged Books Resources: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks>.

The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network: <https://www.glsen.org/>.

GLAAD Media Reference Guide: <https://glaad.org/reference/>.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S WRITER

Katie R. Peel is an associate professor of English at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She teaches courses in queer, young adult, Victorian, and Holocaust literatures.



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