



## Matylda, Bright and Tender

*Holly M. McGhee*

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**In a courageous debut novel, Holly M. McGhee explores the loss that shakes one girl's world — and the unexpected consequences of the things we do for love.**

Sussy and Guy are best friends, fourth-graders who share their silliest thoughts and deepest hopes. One afternoon, the two of them decide they must have something of their very own to love. After a trip to the pet store, they bring home a spotted lizard, the one with the ancient face and starfish toes, and they name her Matylda (with a y so it's all her own). With Guy leading the way, they feed her and give her an origin story fit for a warrior lizard. A few weeks later, on a simple bike ride, there is a terrible accident. As hard as it is, Sussy is sure she can hold on to Guy if she can find a way to love Matylda enough. But in a startling turn of events, Sussy reconsiders what it means to grieve and heal and hope and go on, for her own sake and Matylda's. By turns both devastating and buoyant, this story is a brave one, showing how far we can justify going for a real and true friend.

## Matylda, Bright and Tender Details

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Author : Holly M. McGhee

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## **From Reader Review Matylda, Bright and Tender for online ebook**

### **Lori says**

A tale of a young girl's grief painted in all its fierce, world-shattering depth and how she emerges from the throes.

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### **Patrick says**

Wow! Just finished this MG novel and absolutely loved it. Read it in 1 1/2 sittings. Such a beautiful story of young friends, a gecko, and the meaning of true loss. Sussy, Guy, and Matylda will remain with me for a long time. Incredible...

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### **Haley Ryan says**

I really enjoyed this book. I received it as an advanced copy. I chose this book originally because I am trying to build up a library for my elementary classroom (I am currently student teaching). I was pleasantly surprised by this book. The characters are given time to develop and have good dialogue. There is a quick surprise and sudden turn of events that I absolutely loved. I didn't see it coming at all and I like that in a book. I think this will be a great addition to my classroom! There are a lot of lessons my students could get out of this book.

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### **Shelley Thompson says**

Matylda, Bright and Tender is a short juvenile fiction book with a huge emotional punch. Two best friends adopt a leopard gecko and name her Matylda. After an accident, one friend must go on, find a way to cope, and care for Matylda. The descriptions of handling grief are described so vividly that I wonder if the author actually lost a friend or child too. This is a well-crafted story that I will highly recommend.

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### **Steph says**

I don't even quite know how to review this one. Lots of tears and lots of healing of my heart, all at the same time.

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"Then I could hear my father, from that day so long ago, even as he stood right there.

Breathe.

Remember to breathe."

"Not here, but here anyway."

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### **Diane says**

"It was hard to stay mad at Guy of the Big Bold Heart."

Sussy and Guy have been friends ever since they bonded over the Potato Heads in kindergarten. Guy is the kind of friend that really knows how to be a friend. He would risk missing the school bus to run back and get your coat if you looked cold. He would bring you every flower from his mother's garden just because he knew you liked flowers. He would step between you and a dog that is charging at you to scare it away.

Sussy and Guy are called spaghetti and meatballs because they are almost always together. So, in the spring of fourth grade they decide that they need a pet to take care of together. And they find a leopard gecko at the local Total Pets store. They call her *Matylda with a y* and make up her own back story. She was a warrior lizard who only wanted to be loved. And she really takes to Guy because he seems to understand her. Sussy can't help but be a little jealous.

And then one day, they decide to go to Total Pets to get some vitamin D3 for Matylda. "I was the girl who wanted to ride bikes and see flowers that day." And when that dog came charging at Sussy and grabbed her leg, Guy was off his bike and trying to help. And that's when the car comes around the corner, not seeing Guy, and hits him. And suddenly, Sussy's world is in pieces. How can she be expected to go on without Guy?

"You've got to live for Matylda." Sussy actually hears Guy's voice saying this at the funeral. So Sussy throws all of her energy into taking the best care of Matylda that she can. "If I did everything right, I could hold on to Guy." At first, it seems to help her manage her grief. But the pressure and anger starts to build, especially when she feels like she can't live up to Guy's expectations of caring for Matylda. And that's when the *stealing girl* enters her mind. It's the voice that encourages Sussy to steal things for Matylda from Total Pets. First it's the meal worms. Then it's an enrichment toy for Matylda. She just can't fight the compulsion.

And then the summer ends and she realizes she's going to have to go back to school without Guy. She'll have to leave Matylda alone all day. How will she ever be able to cope?

Heartbreaking at one turn, uplifting at the next, this book runs the gamut of emotions as Sussy tries to work through her guilt, grief and anger at the death of her best friend. The language is gorgeous and the characters are beautifully written. A definite addition to the my school library.

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### **Tory says**

I guess I'm the only one who didn't much like this book, huh? First of all -- and something that nearly made me give up within the first couple chapters -- was the completely unbelievable dialogue between two second-graders. Has McGhee never heard a little kid talk? Guy goes on this whole long story about his dad accidentally cutting off his thumb, which 100% doesn't even sound like dialogue that an adult would use. It jerked me right out of the story and made me very wary to get immersed again.

I will fully admit: I have never experienced grief. I know theoretically how disconcerting and unsteady it must be, but it was a struggle to follow Sussy's cartwheeling thoughts and emotions as she tried to deal, and it was something else that made this book difficult for me to enjoy. There were many times when it felt like CRAZINESS for the sake of CRAZINESS.

(And can I please mention that her name was "Susquehanna Indiana"? Manic pixie dream girl deluxe.)

All in all, I'd much rather read Winn-Dixie.

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### **La La - Everyone's Crazy Aunt says**

4.5 stars on my blog because one of the two things the MC did at the end of the story was pretty serious and she was given zero consequences for it. Compared to the other thing she did, which did not physically harm anything, it seemed to be kind of sloughed off by everyone, including her, as not as egregious. I would recommend either reading this book with your Middle Grade aged reader, or reading it before they do so you can discuss the story. There were some pretty heavy themes in this book.

That being said... the story elements are wonderful. The book deals not only with loss and grief, but also grieving anger and self-destructive behaviors, and healing. It also shows how pets can help with the grieving and healing process.

As a Middle Grade the story will grasp and hold the intended audience's attention, and I feel they will have no trouble connecting with the character on many levels. The characterizations of the children were realistic.

I was approved for this eARC, via Netgalley, in exchange for an honest review.

I will be reviewing this title on my blog at some point, and will add the link when it is posted.

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### **Book Riot Community says**

This is a beautiful middle grade story about best friends, Sussy and Guy, fourth graders who do everything together. They end getting a spotted lizard, name her Matylda, and make up a warrior origin story for her. Shortly after, an accident changes their lives, and Sussy decides she must love Matylda so deeply and care for her so perfectly in order to hold onto Guy and his memory. This story was so incredibly touching and beautiful, and Sussy's journey through her grief moved at just the right pace. Side note: I cried through most of this book.

— Karina Glaser

from The Best Books We Read In May 2017: <https://bookriot.com/2017/06/02/riot-...>

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### **Aeicha says**

Fourth graders, Sussy and Guy, are the very best of friends. They share everything together and love each other very much. When the two BFFs decide they need something of their own to love and nurture, they get a leopard gecko named Matylda. Even though Guy seems a bit better at handling and feeding Matylda, Sussy is determined to love her just as much. And when a tragic accident shakes Sussy's world topsy-turvy, both Sussy and Matylda discover things about love, loss, and friendship that they never knew.

Ok, y'all, you better have the tissues handy when reading this book because it's a heartbreakin, sniffle-inducin, tearjerker for sure! Holly M. McGhee's *Matylda, Bright & Tender* is aptly named, for it is both tender and bright, heart-wrenchin and heartwarming, poignant and full of hope.

Told through Sussy's POV, *Matylda, Bright & Tender* unfolds through an earnest, vulnerable, and sweetly charming voice. Young readers will fall in love with Sussy, Guy, their parents, and Matylda, and will love experiencing and exploring their world so full of laughs, love, and heart. Sussy and Guy's genuine, love-filled friendship is so endearing and lovable and I just wanted to wrap them both in a gigantic hug.

It's not a spoiler to say that the story takes a tragic turn and one character's death leaves the other characters in a world of grief and greyness. Holly M. McGhee beautifully and achingly explores the pains and startling revelations that come with grief and loss, and does so in ways that are appropriate and accessible to her intended audience.

Sussy, Guy, and Matylda's story is the kind that sits in your heart for a long time and, while it brings the tears, and also brings so much light, hope, and happiness. Readers, young and old alike, will love and be moved by *Matylda, Bright & Tender*.

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### **Colby Sharp says**

You will cry if you read this book. BUT it is worth it. I enjoyed every single page. My heart is full.

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### **Lu Ann says**

Matylda - with a "y" - Bright and Tender is a wonderful, poignant tale of a close friendship which ended tragically.

It is about developing love for someone, or something, difficult to love. Additionally, it is about the process of grief

each individual must go through in her/his own way and how others can allow them to work through it.

Finally, it is about unselfishness of caring individuals and of redemption.

The author has created a unique, captivating story which induces the reader to become very endeared to the characters,

The reader is "drawn into the story" to the point he/she will feel he/she is there.

The writing of the author, Holly M. McGhee was very effective, coupled with the most outstanding narration of amazing Jenna Lamia.

makes this a truly DYNAMIC Children's book on CD! Jenna Lamia is, by far, the most talented and entrancing "voice" i have ever listened to on tape. Her voice for each character is very concise. She never deviates. When she speaks of the background scenes its in a separate voice, also.

The Book content will explain the Title and the Cover is simple but "fitting". I feel it would have more appeal to the "Browser" if there had been a few more images on the cover.

If an educator wants a break or if a audio story is needed for Summer Reading Programs, rest assured, this young voice will captivate children more than most anyone!

This is not only an entertaining book but has a multitude of lessons one can use for several discussions.

This is a very STRONG Five Stars rated book on tale, in this reviewer's opinion

\*I Won this Book on Tape in an Early Reviewer Giveaway by the Library Thing. I am remorse, because of circumstances, I was unable to listen to and review this book sooner.

. I was not asked to offer a positive review. This is my honest Review.

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### **Tj Shay says**

I give it eight out of five stars (my highest rating to date) "I believe in the magic of this world" is the last line of the acknowledgments and it puts the finishing touch on one of the best books I've read in a long time. I didn't want to pause and write down lines I loved, I wanted to live it, soak it in, and continue on. This book is a true journey of the human spirit and I don't have adequate words to even describe how I feel about it.

There are lessons upon lessons in this book and I loved every minute of reading it. In addition to representing awesome talent, Holly IS an awesome talent. This is the perfect book.

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### **Alex (not a dude) Baugh says**

Sussy (short for Susquehanna) Reed and Guy Hose have been inseparable best friends since that day in Kindergarten when he showed her how to make a never-ending Mr. Potato Head. The two friends have done everything together ever since - with one exception. They have never been allowed to have a pet.

Now in fourth grade, Sussy and Guy manage to talk Mr. Reed into letting them get Guy's choice of a leopard gecko. They find the perfect one at Total Pets, a gecko that seems to have been as immediately attracted to Guy as he was to her. And he thinks she should be called Matylda "of the Ancient Face and Starfish Toes."

Although Matylda lives in a tank on top of Sussy's dresser, she seems to like Guy so much more than Sussy, much to Sussy's dismay. The friends even give Matylda a warrior history, in which she is victorious in battle and her master grants her one wish - to be loved, a wish that is granted when Sussy and Guy find her in Total Pets.

Then one morning, Guy decides Matylda needs some vitamin D3. The two friends hop on their bikes and start riding, when a dog runs out and goes after Sussy on her bike. Guy gets off his bike to yell at the dog just

as a car is coming down the street. Next thing Sussy knows is that her best friend is dead.

After the funeral, Sussy suddenly finds herself alone for the first time since Kindergarten. She begins to obsessively focus on Matylda, trying to figure out how to love Matylda the way Guy had, believing that if she does everything right, she could hold on to Guy.

When summer comes, Sussy isolates in her bedroom, every day dressing in the same red capri pants and sunflower shirt she wore the day of the accident, reliving it over and over and over. The only time she leaves the house is to go to Total Pets to buy something for Matylda, something that she hopes will convince Matylda that she loves her just like Guy had, and that will make Matylda love Sussy just as she had loved Guy, enabling Sussy to continue to hold on to him.

At Total Pets, she finds herself stealing food and toys for Matylda, egged on by the stealing girl's voice in her head. As each thing fails to do what she wants, Sussy returns to the store more frequently, until she realizes the store clerk, who had always been so friendly and helpful, is on to her and Sussy's world, as carefully constructed as the never-ending Potato Heads, comes flying apart. But it was a world constructed by Guy, and now, Sussy must find a way to construct her own world without him.

Sussy and Matylda are the central characters here, and both are believable. Sussy's first person narrative feels natural and realistic as she tries to navigate her new life without Guy while still not letting go of him. Her story is interspersed with memories of the two friends, giving the reader a real sense of what their friendship was like. As Sussy recalls more and more about Guy, the reader begins to realize that this was an uneven though dear relationship, with Sussy frequently letting Guy take the lead and acquiescing to his ideas - like insisting that they must get the vitamin D3 for Matylda.

The other characters, including Sussy's parents, Guy's mother, Mike from Total Pets are satellite characters, secondary to Sussy's struggle, much of which is experienced in her thoughts. These other characters don't need to be fleshed out, but they are needed to be there for support and love, which they all do well.

McGhee has written Sussy's grieving process with a mixture of anger, confusion, guilt, and magic thinking. Sussy begins to find herself so very tired from have to go on without Guy, suddenly not really knowing how to do things by herself. The world has lost all its color, and Sussy experiences everything around her as grey. It doesn't take long for her to endow Matylda with thoughts and feelings that a gecko is just not capable of having. The fact that Matylda would rest on the back of Guy's neck probably has more to do with hiding and warmth than with the love Sussy thinks the gecko has for him.

Matylda, Bright & Tender masterfully explores the very sad, very poignant grieving process of a child, and while Sussy's pain is palpable, McGhee has infused her story enough humor so that it doesn't overwhelm the reader. Sussy's story does end on a note of hope and new friends who will help her move on and discover who she is without Guy.

Matylda, Bright & Tender is a well-done, heartwarming, tender story, and one not to be missed.

This book is recommended for readers age 9+

This book was sent to me by the publisher, Candlewick Press

This review was originally posted on Randomly Reading

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## Oona says

This was a beautiful book that deserves to be read many times. It reminded me of two texts from my childhood: *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Bridge to Terabithia*. Sussy's reflections and internal monologues in particular are what remind me of Scout Finch. You get the sense that she's mature beyond her years, and yet it is believable that she is also a child.

I loved how Matylda's story intertwined with Sussy's recovery. The language in this is both accessible and well crafted. It is a good mentor text for teaching the value of formatting choices such as italics, punctuation and line breaks. This is also a text that is perfect for read-aloud, not because it is just over 200 pages, but more so because it would allow time for lots of turn and talks and responses from students. It's a book about recovering from heartbreak, about grief and anxiety, and how those are physically and emotionally experienced by a young person. There are very few adult voices in this book that last for more than a few paragraphs. In fact, most of the adult support we see Sussy receiving is not with words, but with actions and listening. The story is Sussy's to tell.

My advice to any teacher who would consider using this in class? Don't make this a conditional text, or one to read if/when a student loses a loved one or tragedy strikes. Read it because your students deserve the life rehearsal that goes with this story. They deserve to know that grief can strike at the most unexpected of times, and they deserve to know that they have the capacity to recover from tragedy, but only over time and with a lot of support.

On a practical note, I would advise that teachers purchase the digital e-book of this and project some of the pages up on an interactive whiteboard. Include digital annotations with students' questions as you read and perhaps return to them as you continue or conclude reading.

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