

PURPLE HEART

By Patricia McCormick

Reading Group Guide

About the Book

When Private Matt Duffy wakes up in an army hospital in Iraq, he cannot remember the events that brought him there, though he's given a Purple Heart for the traumatic brain injury he has sustained. As he questions others about what happened, his memory gradually returns, and he is able to piece together how it all played out. The final piece of the puzzle, however, does not fall into place until he rejoins his squad and they confront yet another tragedy. Matt comes to realize that notions of courage and heroism are fraught with complicated questions of morality.



A Conversation with Patricia McCormick

What inspired you to tell Matt Duffy's story in *Purple Heart*?

Several years ago I volunteered to help with a traveling exhibition designed to show the human cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The exhibit, which was set up in parks and public places all over the country, consisted of rows and rows of combat boots, each one with the name, age, and hometown of a soldier who'd died. Nearby, we displayed a pile of women's, men's, and children's shoes to signify the civilian casualties. As I set up the shoes for ordinary people, I came across a pair of little red sneakers and instantly I saw an image of boy being shot in the chest, his small body lifted into the air by the force of the blast.

I'd been trying to write a completely different book, but the image of the little boy haunted me until I set aside that book and wrote *Purple Heart*. I needed to understand how such a thing could happen. And what I came up with was a situation where none of the characters is really guilty—and none is completely blameless either.

How did you research the novel?

I'd hoped to travel to Iraq, but my family vetoed that idea, so I read every book I could, watched every documentary I could, visited a VA hospital, and interviewed military families and soldiers. Eventually, though, I had to set the research aside and let the story flow from my imagination. When the book was finished I asked a soldier who'd just returned from Iraq to fact-check the manuscript. He paid me the highest compliment when he said, "I don't know how you did it, but you made the characters sound like me and my buddies."

A Conversation with Patricia McCormick (continued)

Did you ever consider telling Matt's story in verse? Why didn't you?

I never considered writing this story in verse, but I did attempt to write *Purple Heart* as a soldier's diary. I even wrote a version where the diary entries were interspersed with news clippings—the plain, dry language that documents war—and with excerpts from military manuals. The language in the manuals was so stiff, so impersonal, it was almost comical when compared with the emotional language—the anger, exhilaration, sadness, and boredom—in the diary entries. I finally chose to write in the third-person because I realized I was writing a kind of mystery story and that point of view gave me more latitude.

What drives you to write stories about misplaced and displaced characters?

I guess I write about displaced people because they're always searching for something—for an answer, for some kind of home, or some measure of peace. And what is most interesting to me is that they rarely get the resolution they set out looking for. The journey takes them somewhere unexpected—but their courage is still rewarded. Sometimes, but not very often, the outcome is something better than what they imagined. Most often it's tinged with sadness or some sense of loss along with whatever they've gained. But they arrive at the end of that journey with a hard-won wisdom that always inspires me.

What was the most interesting or important thing you learned from writing *Purple Heart*?

While I opposed these wars, I came away with enormous feelings of pride—even awe—for our soldiers. They are making life-and-death decisions under enormous pressure and amidst incredible confusion over just who the enemy really is.



Despite this, most of them seem to maintain an idealism about their mission and about trying to help the people of these countries who never asked for these wars.

I also learned that loyalty is a tricky thing. That it is essential for soldiers living in a perpetual state of threat—and that it can blind you from seeing the truth about the people you trust and care about.

What do you most hope readers will take away from the novel?

I don't have a political agenda for this book. My hope is that readers will see that this is a war often being fought by young people, like the ten-year-old Iraqi boy who finds himself in harm's way and the two eighteen-year-old soldiers who must cope with his death and their part in it. All of them are children under pressures no one—adult or child—should ever have to face.



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Discussion Questions

1. It is often said that old men make wars; young men carry them out. Do you think this is true? How does age affect a person's view of war and his or her role in war?
2. At some point, most kids play at war. What is the allure of playing war? How has your view of war changed as you've grown older? How has it been changed by *Purple Heart* and by other things you've read or seen about current wars?
3. Matt's letters to and from his girlfriend, Caroline, serve to powerfully contrast the life of an average high school student with that of a soldier just out of high school. Discuss how experience can often age a person more than years do.
4. There are only a few female characters in *Purple Heart*. How does gender play a role in the story? Are the women stronger, weaker, or equal to the men? Or is it that the expectations for the women are different? Explain.
5. Consider what Francis says about asking his wife to have everyone they know use the side door of their house (pp. 59–60). Can you imagine what it must be like to live in constant fear for your loved ones? What other details from the story capture this sense of dread?
6. Brody says, "These people . . . just don't value life here the way we do" (p. 120). Reread the incident that prompts this comment and then discuss the reasons behind the officer's stereotype of the Iraqi people. What prompts someone to become a suicide bomber? What does that say about the way he or she values life versus the way you might value it?
7. Francis contrasts the penalties for the death of a civilian and the death of a soldier: "Twenty years for killing a haji and a demotion for getting my buddy killed" (p. 84). Discuss the relationship between the American soldiers and the Iraqi people. How does the injustice and irony that Francis describes complicate that relationship?
8. How do the soldiers in *Purple Heart* struggle with their consciences? Compare and contrast the strategies Matt, Wolf, Charlene, Figueroa, and Justin each use.
9. These soldiers are also constantly required to face their own mortality. What effect do you think this has on them? What effect would it have on you?
10. So much of *Purple Heart* is about wordless communications: the way that soccer creates a bond where there is no common language, the importance of things that the soldiers *don't* say. How does the language difference complicate matters between the soldiers and the people of Iraq? Why do you think that the soldiers don't talk about certain matters? What is the role of humor in the soldiers' lives?
11. The revelation about Ali answers some of the questions that plague Matt. How do you think Matt would have coped with the uncertainty if he had not learned that critical piece of information? How does it change his view of Justin?
12. "Support the troops" is a popular slogan. What does it really mean? How do we live up to this commitment when soldiers come home with painful reminders of an unpopular war, such as brain injuries, amputations, and psychological stress?
13. Do you think Matt is a hero? Why does he harbor doubts about his courage and heroism?
14. Traumatic brain injury is called the "signature wound" of the Iraq War. What is it? Research its causes and symptoms. What has the government done to help? Where have the government's efforts fallen short?
15. Solid information can be hard to come by in war times. Reporters often can't get safe access to the battle sights, while each side of a conflict tends to portray the situation to its advantage. Try to find estimates of the number of civilian casualties in Iraq—from U.S. sources; from foreign media sources, such as Al Jazeera; and from more impartial sources, such as the Red Cross, the Red Crescent, or Doctors Without Borders. How do the estimates vary? What is the impact of statistics versus individual stories?



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Extension Activities

- Care Packages** The soldiers in *Purple Heart* treasure care packages from home. Identify a soldier serving abroad and make a care package for him or her. You can find information about items to include and ways to reach deployed soldiers at www.ustroopcarepackage.com or www.anysoldier.com. Don't worry about sending the wrong things—remember that bartering is the main economy among soldiers. Write a letter and include it with your care package. Describe how Patricia McCormick's novel has affected your perception of war.
- Not Enough Information** Here's an exercise you can do to better understand the amnesia that afflicts Matt. With your reading group, brainstorm a list of nouns and write each one on its own index card. Then add five supporting words that would most likely describe or be associated with each noun on the same index card. Divide into two teams, and take turns randomly selecting a card and trying to get your teammates to guess the noun by describing it without using any of the supporting words.
- From Newspaper to Broadcast** In a long, protracted war, news often gets downgraded from front page headlines; yet important things are still happening, both at home and abroad. Follow a given newspaper's war coverage for one week and then make a simulated radio or television broadcast about the current state of affairs. As an alternative, contrast a week's worth of reporting from a U.S. source with a week of reporting from a foreign source, such as the English version of Al Jazeera.
- Army Acronyms** Army jargon includes a lot of acronyms: IED, RPG, SOP, and TBI, among others. Make a list of acronyms mentioned in *Purple Heart* and see how many you can identify. Then move on to other acronyms you might know, including ones commonly used in texting. Why do you think people use acronyms?
- Oral History** Interview a war veteran about his or her experiences. Be considerate with your questioning, though you might want to ask about combat, camaraderie, and life lessons learned. If your timing coincides with Veteran's Day or Independence Day, arrange a celebration honoring your war veteran.



About the Author

Patricia McCormick, a young adult novelist and former journalist, has won critical acclaim for her compassionate approach to hard-hitting subjects. Her novel *Sold* was a National Book Award Finalist and a national bestseller. She is also the author of *My Brother's Keeper*, *Cut*, and most recently, *Purple Heart*. Patricia McCormick lives with her family in New York. Please visit her online at www.pattymccormick.com.

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