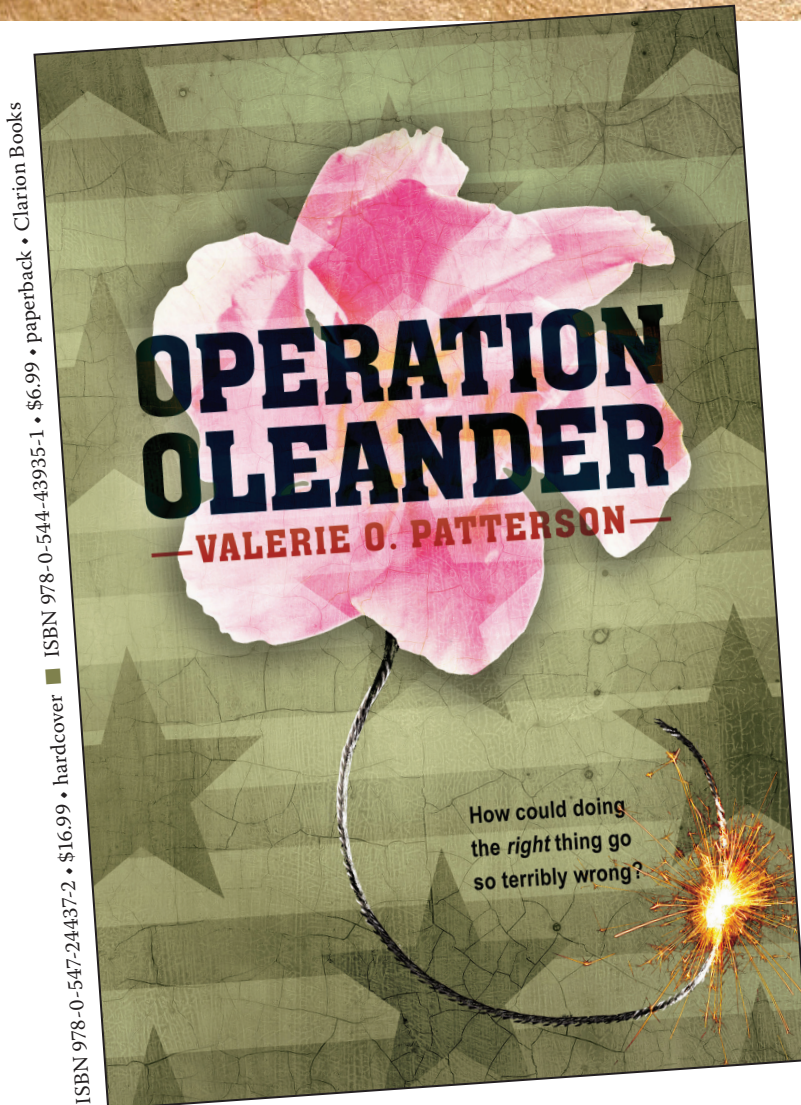


# DISCUSSION GUIDE



## OPERATION OLEANDER

By Valerie O. Patterson

**W**hen Jess's dad ships out to Afghanistan, she wants nothing more than to feel close to him. They share an interest in an Afghan orphanage near where her father serves, so Jess rounds up her friends, Sam and Meriwether, to form Operation Oleander, a club that collects school supplies for the orphans. But Jess's delight in the operation's success turns to horror when breaking news reveals that as the soldiers unloaded the latest shipment of supplies, a bomb went off near the orphanage, killing troops and civilians alike. Jess's father was gravely injured, and worse, Meriwether's mother was killed . . . and Meriwether is blaming Jess.

Abandoned by her best friend, shunned by the community, and instructed by the commander to shut down the operation, Jess is suddenly thrust into a political and media firestorm with no backup but the life lessons her father has taught her. Were they doing good work by helping the orphanage, or did that attention make the children and soldiers a target?

Valerie O. Patterson's heartfelt and thought provoking novel evokes stirring questions about the nature of duty, honor, loyalty, and human and constitutional rights and responsibilities.

*"Full of detail about Army life, Patterson's elegant prose brings readers deep inside Jess's conflicted point of view and the many stresses she is under, as she reevaluates her role as a member of a military family."*








—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ★ What motivates Jess to help the Afghan orphans? Does her motivation change over the course of the book?
- ★ After the bombing, how do people on post and overseas react to what happened? How do Sam and Meriwether respond? The Commander? Mrs. Johnson? Jess?
- ★ The book explores the unintended consequences of trying to do something to help others. Do you think Jess and her father should have helped the orphans?
- ★ Have you ever had something go wrong that you hoped would turn out for good? How did you respond?
- ★ The oleander flower is a symbol Jess uses for her charity drive. What does it mean, and how is it used elsewhere in the novel?
- ★ Day lilies are another flower appearing in the book. What do day lilies symbolize for Jess? For Meriwether? For Meriwether's mom?
- ★ How does the novel depict cultural differences in the U. S. military between enlisted and officer personnel? What impact do they have on Jess, Sam, and Meriwether?
- ★ Re-read chapters fifteen and sixteen—Corporal Scott's funeral scene. Discuss the Angustus Church protestors at the funeral. What do you think of Jess's reaction to the protestors? How would you react? Do they have a right to be there?
- ★ How is religion portrayed in the book? How does the protest march demonstrate the Angustus Church members' beliefs? In what ways does Jess find comfort in the Church of the Nativity? What is prayer to Jess?
- ★ How does being on the opposite side of an issue affect friendships? How can you disagree without being disagreeable?
- ★ Toward the end of the book the new girl, Aria, tells Jess a story she read on the Internet about a boy who picks up starfish on the beach and throws them back one at a time into the sea to save them. What do you think of the story? Do you think one person can make a difference?
- ★ "Duty, honor, country" is the motto of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point. Jess, her dad, and Sam use these words, too. How do the characters understand these words? What do they mean to you?
- ★ Do you know of someone who has lost a loved one? How do you respond to them to show you care?
- ★ Do you think people within the military handle grief differently than those outside the military?



# TOPICS FOR WRITING

-  Write the scene in which Jess' father arrives home from the hospital in Germany. How would Jess tell him about her actions at Corporal Scott's funeral?
-  *Operation Oleander* depicts living on a U. S. Army post. Research life for children and teens living on a military installation and write about an aspect you find interesting.
-  Jess responds with anger to the protestors at the funeral. How do you think you would have responded in her place? If you would have responded differently, rewrite that scene.
-  Protesting against war is a protected free speech right under the U. S. Constitution. Free speech is not absolutely limitless: the government may regulate a march in a large city to certain areas or times to limit traffic congestion, for example. However, restrictions may not be based on the content of speech. Unpopular speech can't be discriminated against, in other words. How would you draw the line between the freedom of expression of the Angustans and the rights of those attending the funeral to honor their loved ones? Write an Op-Ed piece expressing your views.
-  What metaphors and similes does the author use in the book to depict war or violence? What other literary devices does the author use to convey mood or emotion? Make a detailed list.
-  Write an essay expounding on the character in the book with whom you most identify and why.
-  Write a review of *Operation Oleander*. Does Jess change over the course of the novel? What does she discover about herself and the world? Would you recommend the novel to your friends? Why or why not?

**VALERIE O. PATTERSON** grew up near a military base on the Gulf Coast of Florida. She often draws inspiration for her writing from that place of her childhood. In thinking about Jess's story, she wondered "what if . . . ." What if a plan to do something for others were to go very wrong? How would Jess respond? How would each of us? Ms. Patterson holds an MFA in Children's Literature from Hollins University. Her first novel for teens, *The Other Side of Blue*, was published by Clarion/HMH in 2009. She is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Mystery Writers of America, the Children's Literature Association, and the Authors Guild. An attorney by day, she lives with her husband in Leesburg, Virginia. For more information about her life and work, visit her website: [www.valerieopatterson.com](http://www.valerieopatterson.com).