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Jodi Picoult

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WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1992).
- *Harvesting the Heart* (New York: Viking, 1993).
- *Picture Perfect* (New York: Putnam, 1995).
- *Mercy* (New York: Putnam, 1996).
- *The Pact* (New York: Morrow, 1998; St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1999).
- *Keeping Faith* (New York: Morrow, 1999).
- *Plain Truth* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000).
- *Salem Falls* (New York: Pocket Books, 2001).

- *Perfect Match* (New York: Atria Books, 2002).
- *Second Glance* (New York: Atria Books, 2003).
- *My Sister's Keeper* (New York: Atria, forthcoming)

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS--UNCOLLECTED

- "Keeping Count," *Seventeen*, 46 (February 1987): 126.
- "Road Stop," *Seventeen*, 46 (August 1987): 330.

With ten novels published by the time she was thirty-seven, Jodi Picoult ranks among the more prolific and ambitious young American writers. She has been characterized by critics as a women's fiction author; she contests this label, however, citing her popularity with both male and female fans. Her novels cross many genres, including literary fiction, legal thrillers, psychological portraits, romances, and ghost stories. In reviews, her body of work, themes, and writing style have been compared to authors as diverse as Alice Hoffman, John Grisham, and Daphne du Maurier. As this varied group of comparisons suggests, Picoult creates a new reading experience for her audience with each book.

Jodi Lynn Picoult was born on 19 May 1966 and grew up in Nesconset, Long Island, with her parents, Myron Michel Picoult, a securities analyst on Wall Street, and Jane Ellen Friend Picoult, a nursery-school teacher. She has one younger brother, Jonathan Paul Picoult. On her official website, <<http://www.jodipicoult.com>>, Picoult says jokingly of her childhood, "I had such an uneventful childhood that much later, when I was taking writing classes at college, I called home and yelled at my mother, wishing for a little incest or abuse on the side." She continues, "Good writers, I thought at the time, had to have something to write about. It took me a while to realize that I already did have something to write about--that solid core of family, and of relationships, which seem to form a connective thread through my books." Picoult's happy childhood included writing stories, which her grandmother still keeps as examples of her "early" work, and a job as a library page. These youthful interactions with professional writing compelled Picoult to move toward a career as a novelist. She earned a B.A. in English in 1987 from Princeton University, where she studied creative writing with writers Robert Stone and Mary Morris. Under their guidance, Picoult had her first publishing success. She submitted a short story, "Keeping Count" (February 1987), to *Seventeen*, which published it and a subsequent story, "Road Stop" (August 1987).

Despite these early writing successes, Picoult went to work on Wall Street in New York City after her graduation. She then worked at a publishing company and later at an advertising agency. Finally, Picoult returned to the classroom to pursue a master's degree in education at Harvard University, earning an M.Ed. in 1990. Concomitant with her graduate education, Picoult taught creative writing at the Walnut Hill School for the Arts

in Natick, Massachusetts from 1989 to 1991.

On 18 November 1989, Picoult married Timothy Warren van Leer, whom she met when both were members of the heavyweight men's crew team at Princeton. Picoult jokes, "I was a manager/coxswain, and I was the first person with two X chromosomes to set foot in a men's crew shell at the university!" Picoult's first novel was published following her marriage. Written while Picoult was six months pregnant with the first of her three children, *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1992) establishes Picoult's primary theme for each of her subsequent novels: the love between family and friends. Her novels probe the key idea of what it means to love someone.

Songs of the Humpback Whale tells the same story from the perspectives of five related narrators: Jane Jones, the primary narrator; her daughter, Rebecca; her husband, Oliver; her brother, Joley; and her lover, Sam. The novel begins by following Jane, who decides to leave Oliver, a marine biologist who researches the songs of humpback whales. Jane and Rebecca set out on a cross-country trip to Stow, Massachusetts, where they will visit Joley, who works in an apple orchard. Jane narrates the trip from San Diego to Stow.

Rebecca's narrative follows her mother's, telling the story in reverse after the mother-daughter pair arrives in Stow. The perspectives of the three men play a less central role in the narrative, interwoven into Jane's and Rebecca's narratives and serving to move the plot along by speculating or commenting about Jane's and Rebecca's whereabouts. Picoult explores the relationship of family traditions and stories and the ways in which history is formed from the perspectives of different narrators.

Songs of the Humpback Whale sets the trajectory for Picoult's subsequent novels, which focus on protagonists facing a crucial moment of self-determination in their lives. As these protagonists explore the greater questions of their own subject positions and identities, they engage their immediate communities--groups of relatives or strangers who become parts of a greater narrative--in their considerations of life, love, and future decisions.

Publishers Weekly (10 February 1992) called *Songs of the Humpback Whale* a "powerful and affecting novel that demonstrates there are as many truths to a story as there are people to tell it" and cites Picoult's talent for creating strong, individual characters. The critical reception for this novel, however, was uneven. Susan Spano of *The New York Times Book Review* (6 September 1992) commented, "Picoult has created some characters whose voices ring true, but she doesn't seem to trust them enough to tell a more simply structured and more compelling tale." Critical receptions of some of Picoult's later novels followed a similar pattern: the books largely found favor with industry publications but encountered a more mediocre reception from literary reviewers.

Harvesting the Heart (1993) proves an exception to this trend, however. Karen Ray of

The New York Times Book Review (16 January 1994) lavished praise on Picoult's second book. *Harvesting the Heart* demonstrates Picoult's character-driven angst most poignantly through the coming-of-age story of Paige O'Toole Prescott. Much of Paige's personal struggle stems from the crucial historical detail that Paige's mother deserted her when she was a child; Paige is determined to establish her own life, separate from the father who raised her and from the painful legacy of an absent mother. Told in flashbacks, the novel explores Paige's journey, which begins when she is eighteen, moving from her father's home in Chicago to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she works while saving money to attend the Rhode Island School of Design.

Unable to afford art school, Paige works at the Mercy Diner, where she sketches the customers as part of the "Chicken Doodle Soup Special." Once Paige marries medical student Nicholas Prescott, she still works as a waitress in order to pay Nicholas's school bills. One of the central themes in the book revolves around Paige's struggle to understand and accept her own role as a mother. The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer (13 September 1993) commented, "this is a realistic story of childhood and adolescence, the demands of motherhood, the hard paths of personal growth and the generosity of spirit required by love. Picoult's imagery is startling and brilliant; her characters move credibly through this affecting drama." Paige's marriage to Nicholas leads to her second pregnancy, the first (by a former boyfriend) having ended in an abortion while Paige was still living in Chicago. Overcome with her new responsibilities as a mother to baby Max and as a wife to Nicholas, Paige eventually abandons her child and husband to search for her long-estranged mother. Paige is torn by feelings of inadequacy resulting from her fractured experiences with motherhood on both sides of the relationship. Ultimately, her story becomes a search for self-discovery as she seeks out her own mother for answers about their lives, their separation, and the emotional connections that continue to exist in spite of physical absence. Paige eventually reunites with Nicholas and Max, determined that the best way to interrupt her mother's legacy is to embrace her role as a mother.

Harvesting the Heart was partially inspired by Picoult's own transition to new motherhood. Part of Picoult's craft depends on her ability to fully research her characters and to understand their lives. In order to better comprehend all of her characters and not just rely on the affinity of experience she imagined with Paige, Picoult delved into medical-school research, even observing cardiac surgery to more realistically portray Nicholas's course of study.

The publication of Picoult's third book, *Picture Perfect* (1995), brought the beginning of critical attention to her work. This novel received recognition as a featured alternate selection of the Literary Guild and a Doubleday Book Club selection. In *Picture Perfect* Picoult demonstrates a clear commitment to exploring social issues that are prominent in cultural discussions, such as divorce, child custody, AIDS, rape, abuse, media culture, and in the case of *Picture Perfect*, domestic violence.

Protagonist Cassie Barrett, an anthropologist on location in Kenya as a scientific

consultant to a movie, enters a world of glamour and high society when she marries movie star Alex Rivers. As with previous novels, Picoult uses flashbacks as a stylistic tool to unravel her story, so *Picture Perfect* begins with Cassie wandering through the streets of Los Angeles with amnesia. After her husband arrives at the police station to identify her, Cassie tries to reconcile her privileged lifestyle with the feelings of apprehension she has about her home and husband. The plot moves from California to a Native American reservation in South Dakota as Cassie flees memories of an abusive relationship. With a compassion common to Picoult's women characters, Cassie eventually returns to Los Angeles from the perceived safety of the reservation and her relationships there, to try to reconcile with Alex. His inability to face his violence and rage, however, lead Cassie to publicly expose his secret life as an abusive spouse. In a 1 January 1995 review, Dawn L. Anderson of the *Library Journal* praised the novel highly as "an important book from a talented writer we hope to hear from again and again."

Picoult's fourth book, *Mercy* (1996), is another story testing the bounds of love and compassion, and it illustrates her growth as a writer. *Mercy* places two cousins, Cameron and Jamie McDonald, at opposite ends of the spectrum of love and sacrifice. Set in Wheelock, Massachusetts, a town where the largely Scottish inhabitants adhere to clan law and their clan leader, police chief Cameron, the novel begins as Jamie arrives at the police station in his truck with his dead wife, Maggie, beside him. He confesses that he has killed his wife, as she wished, rather than letting her suffer with terminal cancer. This opening scene sets the tone for a novel in which the main characters confront the conflict between law and morality as they struggle with ethics, social taboos, and desire.

Cameron struggles with his conflict of interest in investigating a murder case in which the accused is his cousin. As Jamie stands trial for killing his wife out of love and dedication, however, Cameron practices selective ethics as he begins an affair with his wife's new assistant, Mia. Ultimately, Picoult argues that love is never an equally shared venture; in *Mercy*, Jamie and his cousin-in-law--Cameron's wife, Allie--serve to represent those who love more in their respective relationships, because their love forgives and endures despite the extraordinary pain of death and betrayal.

Booklist critic Donna Seaman (July 1996) wrote: "A graceful stylist, Picoult entertains her readers not only with feel-good story-telling and irresistible characters but with consideration of such serious moral dilemmas as euthanasia and forgiveness." Seaman praised Picoult's ability to interrogate human weakness and desire in *Mercy*, observing that one of Picoult's strengths as a writer lies in her ability to confront difficult social issues through powerful characters.

The transformative power of relationships between people--both the renewing possibilities of love and support and the dangers of deception and hurt--remains a constant thematic focus for Picoult. *The Pact* (1998), her fifth novel, exposes the power in a relationship between two teenagers who enter a suicide pact. As with *Harvesting the Heart*, Picoult relied heavily on research to better understand her characters. While

Picoult spent a day in jail researching *The Pact*, her brief incarceration is not the most interesting element of her preparation to write this novel. Her interview with a policeman proved to be a crucial part of the development of the novel, leading to a radical reconceptualization of the entire plot. Picoult explains on her website:

I was going to write a character-driven book about the female survivor of an unfinished suicide pact, and I went to the local police chief to do some preliminary research. "Huh," he said, "it's the girl who survives? Because if it was the boy, who was physically larger, he'd automatically be suspected of murder until cleared by the evidence."

With this revelation, Picoult focuses on Chris Harte, who survives an alleged suicide pact that leaves his girlfriend, Emily Gold, dead.

Picoult alternates the timeline of the narrative between Chris and Emily's love story and the aftermath of Emily's death. The novel follows their childhood friendship, which leads to young love, intimacy, pregnancy, the suicide pact, the eventual breakdown in the friendship between the Harte and the Gold families, the police investigation, and the suspicion of murder eventually facing Chris. Considered Picoult's "breakout novel" by *People Weekly* (8 June 1998) because of its sales (it has sold more than three hundred thousand copies), *The Pact* led to further accolades, including critical attention as a featured alternate selection of the Literary Guild, a selection of the Doubleday Book Club, and an Australian edition of the book, published by Allen and Unwin in 1999, which reached the best-seller list in that country. Since *The Pact*, her novels have been translated into a variety of languages. *The Pact* was made into a Lifetime television movie that aired in November 2002, with screenplay by Will Scheffer; it starred Megan Mullally and Juliet Stevenson.

The critically pleased reception of *The Pact* extended to *Keeping Faith* (1999), Picoult's sixth novel, which was also selected as a featured alternate selection of the Book of the Month Club. In a 15 May 1999 review, Margaret Flanagan of *Booklist* wrote: "Picoult blends elements of psychology and spirituality into a mesmerizing morality play, where conventional notions of faith and honesty are put to the test." *Keeping Faith* develops the relationships between protagonist Mariah White, her mother, her lover, her estranged husband, and their child, Faith. The crux of this novel lies in Faith, who talks with her "guard," a being invisible to those around Faith but who allows the child to help and heal other people. Raised in a nonreligious household, young Faith begins to quote from the Bible, to exhibit stigmata on her hands, and to demonstrate the ability to heal people--of AIDS-related complications, of heart attacks, and of any other ailment they suffer--despite her lack of religious training and her lack of a substantive belief system.

Keeping Faith again demonstrates Picoult's keen ability to focus on human relationships and their sustaining power. The novel begins with the devastating affair of Colin, Mariah's husband, which results in the disintegration of their marriage. As the public

becomes aware of Faith's new power to heal, the Whites' front lawn becomes a postmodern carnival of news media, the ill, and the curious. In a fierce custody battle for Faith, Colin uses the media spectacle to accuse Mariah of Munchausen syndrome by proxy, a condition in which parents hurt their children for attention. During this difficult period, Mariah finds that her relationships with her mother, child, and new lover sustain her and lead her to self-confidence and independence.

Picoult's fifth and sixth novels attest to her regional appeal; her work is often cited as New England fiction because of its geographic specificity. In *The Concord Monitor* (24 December 2000), Rebecca Mahoney observed that "Both *The Pact* and *Keeping Faith* take place in fictional New Hampshire towns, her characters often drive on Route 4 and Interstate 93, and legal scenes are played out in state courts, including a custody battle in Carroll County in *Keeping Faith*." While the New England landscape has been an important part of Picoult's fictional landscape, she has also demonstrated experimentalism in her approach to each new novel. She tries different genres, different contemporary social issues, and with the publication of her seventh book, a new geography.

Continuing Picoult's exploration into issues of faith, *Plain Truth* (2000) takes readers to Pennsylvania Amish country. Picoult became interested in the Amish and posted a message on an Internet message board. A woman who read Picoult's query arranged for her to visit and stay with an Amish family as part of the research for her seventh novel, which included milking cows, attending Bible study, and participating in the life of the Amish household.

In this novel Picoult delves into the story of Katie Fisher, a young Amish woman who is accused of killing her newborn child. Ellie Nathaway, a Philadelphia defense attorney vacationing in Paradise, Pennsylvania, defends Katie. The novel becomes both the gripping tale of the collision of Katie's past and future and also of Ellie's growth as she enters a new culture and has to find ways of integration and assimilation. A review in the *Christian Science Monitor* (22 June 2000) demonstrates the critical praise for *Plain Truth*: "The solidly drawn cast of characters and supporting story lines boost the mounting cultural tension initiated by the criminal trial. There's the rigid father, an outcast son, and a hidden love. And through Katie's Amish community, Picoult creates a poignant portrait of the nature of deeply held beliefs." Patty Engelmann, in *Booklist* (15 April 2000), agreed that "Picoult does a wonderful job describing the Amish world and the desires these two different women share while presenting a gripping legal murder mystery." A 20 March 2000 *Publishers Weekly* reviewer offered the only mixed review, commenting that "Perhaps the story's quietude is appropriate, given its magnificently painted backdrop and distinctive characters, but one can't help wishing that the spark igniting the book's opening pages had built into a full fledged blaze." *Plain Truth*, like *The Pact*, has attracted considerable cross-over attention and is also under development as a television movie for Lifetime.

Picoult's next novel, *Salem Falls* (2001), also explores relationships in small-town America. *Salem Falls*, a contemporary revision of Arthur Miller's historical drama *The Crucible* (1953), pits the individual against the community. Picoult introduces Jack St. Bride, a teacher and soccer coach fleeing his tarnished reputation after a rape accusation. A group of young women in the town of Salem Falls, notably Gillian Duncan, whose father is a powerful local mogul, target St. Bride as the object of their pubescent curiosity. At a Wiccan ceremony in the woods late one evening, Gillian is assaulted. The ensuing story finds St. Bride at the center of accusations reminiscent of the ones that brought him to Salem Falls seeking anonymity and a chance to start his life over. In a *Denver Post* review (22 April 2001), Robin Vidimos observed:

Not the least of Picoult's story-telling gifts is her ability to convey the natural tension in a small town between knowing enough to care and knowing so much as to be fearful. Much of her plot turns on the townspeople's blind distrust of Jack once they realize that he's been convicted and jailed as a sexual predator. It's a label he is unable to avoid, given the requirements of Megan's law. In this case, the label is unjust, but he's facing a conflict built on sly whispers and supposition. He is left with no way to respond.

Vidimos's commentary demonstrates that Picoult's power comes from her ability to understand small towns and how they operate.

St. Bride is both enigma and obvious victim. Jeff Zaleski, in a 19 February 2001 *Publishers Weekly* review, questioned Picoult's attempt to elucidate St. Bride's situation and offered mixed praise for the novel: "Genuinely suspenseful and at times remarkably original, this romance-mystery-morality play will gain Picoult new readers although her treatment of the aftermath of rape may also make her a few enemies." Picoult uses St. Bride's situation to reveal the relationships around him as well as the true nature of the town and its citizens.

Picoult's ninth novel, *Perfect Match* (2002), also examines the relationship between the individual and the community, focusing upon a timely character--a child-molesting priest. Picoult narrates from the perspective of attorney Nina Frost of York County, Maine. Nina and Caleb Frost are happy parents to their young son, Nathaniel. Early in the novel, the child is molested, and the trauma of the incident prevents the five-year-old child from speaking. He indicates that "father" committed the crime, so initially his father, Caleb, is arrested. After Nathaniel regains his power of speech, however, he reveals that his abuser is "Father Gwen"--and Father Glen Szyszynski heads the local Catholic church. DNA evidence corroborates Nathaniel's story.

As Nina struggles with this crime, she realizes that the only way to convict Father Szyszynski is to put Nathaniel on the stand, compelling him to relive the horrific incidents that drove him into prolonged speechlessness. Nina acts on her sense of rage against the injustice of a legal system that would revictimize her son, and she shoots

Father Szyszynski in public before his arraignment. After she kills Father Szyszynski, she stands trial, and during the trial, further DNA tests (thus the title, *Perfect Match*) show that Father Szyszynski is not the molester. Suspicion then falls on Father Szyszynski's half-brother, Father Gwynn. Nina is found guilty of manslaughter, is given probation, and loses her license to practice law.

Denver Post reviewer Vidimos commented that Picoult's novel was begun long before the 2002 public scandal about Catholic clergy and pedophilia. Vidimos wrote in her 21 April 2002 review that "The danger of focusing on the sensationalized part of the novel is that its deeper, more difficult, questions will be ignored. Nina is sure she is doing the best for those she cares about when she kills the alleged perpetrator. She is certain she has the right man and that the testimony needed to convict him would destroy her son." As with other Picoult novels, *Perfect Match* is an exploration of social mores and personal responsibility in the context of intense personal relationships. Nancy Pearl of the *Library Journal* (1 May 2002) disagreed, however, arguing, "the usually reliable Picoult fails to deliver. . . . Nina is a truly dislikable heroine (her justifications for the murder are both laughable and frightening), and the truly meaningless subplots distract from, rather than add to, the main story." At the heart of *Perfect Match*, as with most of her novels, Picoult questions the ways in which people come to know one another in a community and within their relationships. She presents the main character in conflict with society in order to explore the depths of her character's convictions.

Picoult's tenth novel, *Second Glance* (2003), a featured selection of the Literary Guild, is set in Comtosook, Vermont, and follows the story of ghost hunter Ross Wakeman. Mourning the loss of his fiancée, Aimee, in a car accident, Ross tries unsuccessfully to commit suicide. His desperation is replaced by his fascination with the paranormal as a way to contact Aimee. As with other novels, Picoult weaves in real-life controversies, such as eugenics projects carried out in Vermont in the 1930s, as a way of exploring deeper issues of truth. Following the publication of this novel, Picoult was awarded the 2003 New England Bookseller Association Award in fiction.

My Sister's Keeper (2004) also explores real-life controversies as well as the bonds between siblings. Thirteen-year-old Anna was conceived by her parents specifically as a bone-marrow donor for her sister, Kate, who has leukemia. Anna's life is dictated by her sister's ill health. The novel focuses on Anna's search for identity in a life that was predetermined by her genetic ability to help her sister. In an author's note on her website, Picoult writes that "Today's political and scientific battles over cloning and DNA and gene replacement therapy led me to think about some of what the future might hold, on a personal level, for people." She asks, "If you use one of your children to save the life of another, are you being a good mother . . . or a very bad one?" Picoult is currently at work on her twelfth novel, "Vanishing Acts," due in 2005.

Picoult's novels rely on her ability to engage the reader with "what if" situations. In each of her novels, ordinary characters face the kinds of events that readers and characters

think will never happen to them. The ability of readers to connect with Picoult's wide range of characters is evident in Picoult's wide popular appeal. She is a featured author in many public libraries; the virtual community of the Internet has embraced her work with chat rooms and messages posted about her latest books; and her fans stave off their impatience for new books by sending her e-mail, which she answers faithfully.

Given Picoult's prolific career, her contribution to the American literary canon as a twenty-first-century novelist promises to be significant. Picoult offers her readers a look inside relationships, inside communities, and inside the hearts and minds of characters with whom they share common ground. Picoult focuses on the collision between the everyday and the unexpected; she renders her characters capable survivors in the midst of tragedy, imperfect creations in an imperfect world.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Interviews:

- Rebecca Mahoney, *Concord Monitor*, 24 December 2000.
- "An Interview with Jodi" and "Frequently Asked Questions"
<<http://www.jodipicoult.com>>□.

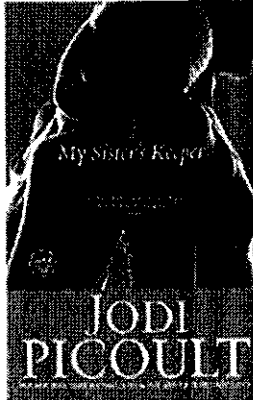
About this Essay: J. Elizabeth Clark, LaGuardia Community College.

Source: *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 292: Twenty-First-Century American Novelists*. A Bruccoli Clark Layman Book. Edited by Lisa Abney, Northwestern State University, and Suzanne Disheroon-Green, Northwestern State University. Gale, 2004. pp. 278-284.

Source Database: Dictionary of Literary Biography

My Sister's Keeper **A Novel** **by Jodi Picoult**

List Price: \$14.00
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About this Book

New York Times bestselling author Jodi Picoult is widely acclaimed for her keen insights into the hearts and minds of real people. Now she tells the emotionally riveting story of a family torn apart by conflicting needs and a passionate love that triumphs over human weakness.

Anna is not sick, but she might as well be. By age thirteen, she has undergone countless surgeries, transfusions, and shots so that her older sister, Kate, can somehow fight the leukemia that has plagued her since childhood. The product of preimplantation genetic diagnosis, Anna was conceived as a bone marrow match for Kate -- a life and a role that she has never challenged...until now. Like most teenagers, Anna is beginning to question who she truly is. But unlike most teenagers, she has always been defined in terms of her sister - and so Anna makes a decision that for most would be unthinkable, a decision that will tear her family apart and have perhaps fatal consequences for the sister she loves.

My Sister's Keeper examines what it means to be a good parent, a good sister, a good person. Is it morally correct to do whatever it takes to save a child's life, even if that means infringing upon the rights of another? Is it worth trying to discover who you really are, if that quest makes you like yourself less? Should you follow your own heart, or let others lead you? Once again, in **My Sister's Keeper**, Jodi Picoult tackles a controversial real-life subject with grace, wisdom, and sensitivity.

Discussion Questions

1. One of this novel's strengths is the way it skillfully demonstrates the subjectivity people bring to their interactions with others. The motivations of individual characters, the emotions that pull them one way or another, and the personal feelings that they inject into professional situations becomes achingly clear as we explore many different viewpoints. For example, despite Julia and Campbell's attempts to remain calm, unemotional and businesslike when they deal with one another, the past keeps seeping in, clouding their interaction. The same goes for the interaction between Sara and Anna during the trial. Is there such a thing as an objective decision in the world of this story? Is anyone capable of being totally rational, or do emotions always come into play?

2. What do you think of this story's representation of the justice system? What was your opinion of the final outcome of the trial?

3. What is your opinion of Sara? With her life focused on saving Kate, she sometimes neglects her other children. Jesse is rapidly becoming a juvenile delinquent, and Anna is invisible -- a fact that the little girl knows only too well. What does this say about Sara's role as a mother? What would you have done in her shoes? Has she unwittingly forgotten Jesse and Anna, or do you think she has consciously chosen to neglect them -- either as an attempt to save a little energy for herself, or as some kind of punishment? Does Sara resent her other children for being healthy? Did you find yourself criticizing Sara, empathizing with her, or both?

4. During a conversation about Kate, Zanne tells Sara, "No one has to be a martyr 24/7." When she mistakenly hears the word "mother" not "martyr" and is corrected by Zanne, Sara smiles and asks, "Is there a difference?" In what ways does this moment provide insight into Sara's state of mind? Do you think it strange that she sees no difference between motherhood and martyrhood?

5. Campbell is certainly a fascinating character: guarded, intelligent, caring and yet selfish at the same time. Due to these seemingly contradictory traits, it can be difficult to figure him out. As he himself admits, "motivations are not what they seem to be." At one point he states, "Out of necessity -- medical and emotional -- I have gotten rather skilled at being an escape artist." Why do you think Campbell feels that he needs to hide his illness? Is it significant that Anna is the first to break down his barriers and hear the truth? Why, for example, does he flippantly dismiss all questions regarding Judge with sarcastic remarks?

6. At one point, Campbell thinks to himself: "There are two reasons not to tell the truth -- because lying will get you what you want, and because lying will keep someone from getting

hurt." With this kind of thinking, Campbell gives himself an amazingly wide berth; he effectively frees himself from speaking any semblance of the truth as long as the lie will somehow benefit himself or anyone else. Did it concern you that a lawyer would express an opinion like this? Do you think, by the end of the story, that Campbell still thinks this moral flexibility is okay? In what ways might this kind of thinking actually wind up hurting Campbell?

7. It is interesting that Campbell suffers seizures that only his dog can foresee. How might this unique relationship mirror some of the relationships between humans in this novel? In what ways does Judge introduce important ideas about loyalty and instinct?

8. On page 149, Brian is talking to Julia about astronomy and says, "Dark matter has a gravitational effect on other objects. You can't see it, you can't feel it, but you can watch something being pulled in its direction." How is this symbolic of Kate's illness? What might be a possible reason for Brian's fascination with astronomy?

9. Near the end of the novel, Anna describes "Ifspeak" -- the language that all children know, but abandon as they grow older -- remarking that "Kids think with their brains cracked wide open; becoming an adult, I've decided, is only a slow sewing shut." Do you believe this to be true? What might children teach the adults in this novel? Which adults need lessons most?

10. "It's more like we're astronauts, each wearing a separate helmet, each sustained by our own source of air." This quote comes from Anna, as she and her parents sit in silence in the hospital cafeteria. Besides being a powerful image of the family members' isolation, this observation shows Anna to be one of the wisest, most perceptive characters in this novel. Discuss the alienation affecting these characters. While it is obvious that Anna's decision to sue her parents increases that sense of alienation throughout the novel (especially for Anna herself), do you think that she has permanently harmed the family dynamic?

11. During the trial, when Dr. Campbell takes the stand, he describes the rules by which the medical ethics committee, of which he is a part, rules their cases. Out of these six principles (autonomy, veracity, fidelity, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice), which apply to Anna's lawsuit? Moreover, which of these should be applied to Anna's home situation? In other words, do you think a parent might have anything to learn from the guidelines that the doctors follow? Are there family ethics that ought to be put into place to ensure positive family dynamics? If so, what should they be?

12. Early in the legal proceedings, Anna makes a striking observation as she watches her mother slip back into her lawyer role, noting, "It is hard to believe that my mother used to

do this for a living. She used to be someone else, once. I suppose we all were." Discuss the concept of change as it is presented in this story. While most of the characters seem to undergo a metamorphosis of sorts -- either emotionally or even physically (in the case of Kate), some seem more adept at it than others. Who do you think is ultimately the most capable of undergoing change and why?

13. Discuss the symbolic role that Jesse's pyromania plays in this novel, keeping in mind the following quote from Brian: "How does someone go from thinking that if he cannot rescue, he must destroy?" Why is it significant that Jesse has, in many respects, become the polar opposite of his father? But despite this, why is Jesse often finding himself in the reluctant hero position (saving Rat, delivering the baby at boot camp)? Brian himself comes to realize, in the scene where he confronts Jesse, that he and his son aren't so different. Talk about the traits that they share and the new understanding that they gain for each other by the end of the story.

14. *My Sister's Keeper* explores the moral, practical and emotional complications of putting one human being in pain or in danger for the well being of another. Discuss the different kinds of ethical problems that Anna, as the "designer baby," presents in this story? Did your view change as the story progressed? Why or why not? Has this novel changed any of your opinions about other conflicts in bioethics like stem cell research or genetically manipulated offspring?

From: <http://www.jodipicoult.com/my-sisters-keeper-chat.html>

A conversation with Jodi Picoult about My Sister's Keeper

Your novels are incredibly relevant because they deal with topics that are a part of the national dialogue. Stem cell research and "designer babies" are issues that the medical community (and the political community) seem to be torn about. Why did you choose this subject for My Sister's Keeper? Did writing this novel change any of your views in this area?

JP: I came about the idea for this novel through the back door of a previous one, *Second Glance*. While researching eugenics for that book, I learned that the American Eugenics Society -- the one whose funding dried up in the 1930s when the Nazis began to explore racial hygiene too -- used to be housed in Cold Spring Harbor, NY. Guess who occupies the same space, today? The Human Genome Project... which many consider "today's eugenics". This was just too much of a coincidence for me, and I started to consider the way this massive, cutting edge science we're on the brink of exploding into was similar... and different from... the eugenics programs and sterilization laws in America in the 1930s. Once again, you've got science that is only as ethical as the people who are researching and implementing it -- and once again, in the wake of such intense scientific advancement, what's falling by the wayside are the emotions involved in the case by case scenarios. I heard about a couple in America that successfully conceived a sibling that was a bone marrow match for his older sister, a girl suffering from a rare form of leukemia. His cord blood cells were given to the sister, who is still (several years later) in remission. But I started to wonder... what if she ever, sadly, goes out of remission? Will the boy feel responsible? Will he wonder if the only reason he was born was because his sister was sick? When I started to look more deeply at the family dynamics and how stem cell research might cause an impact, I came up with the story of the Fitzgeralds. I personally am pro stem-cell research - there's too much good it can do simply dismiss it. However, clearly, it's a slippery slope... and sometimes researchers and political candidates get so bogged down in the ethics behind it and the details of the science that they forget completely we're talking about humans with feelings and emotions and hopes and fears... like Anna and her family. I believe that we're all going to be forced to think about these issues within a few years... so why not first in fiction?

In *Jesse*, you've done an amazing job of bringing the voice of the "angry young man" alive with irreverent originality. Your ability to transcend gender lines in

your writing is seemingly effortless. Is this actually the case, or is writing from a male perspective a difficult thing for you to do?

JP: I have to tell you - writing Jesse is the most fun I've had in a long time. Maybe at heart I've always wanted to be a 17 year old juvenile delinquent... but for whatever reason, it was just an absolute lark to take someone with so much anger and hurt inside him and give him voice. It's always more fun to pretend to be someone you aren't, for whatever reason -- whether that means male, or thirteen, or neurotic, or suicidal, or any of a dozen other first person narrators I've created. Whenever I try on a male voice - like Jesse's or Campbell's or Brian's - it feels like slipping into a big overcoat. It's comfortable there, and easy to get accustomed to wearing... but if I'm not careful, I'll slip and show what I've got on underneath.

On page 190, Jesse observes, while reminiscing on his planned attempt to dig to China, that, "Darkness, you know, is relative." What does this sentiment mean and why did you choose to express it through Jesse, who in some ways is one of the least reflective characters in the novel?

JP: Well, that's exactly why it has to be Jesse who says it! To Jesse, whatever injustices he thinks he's suffered growing up will always pale to the Great Injustice of his sister being sick. He can't win, plain and simple... so he doesn't bother to try. When you read Jesse, you think you see exactly what you're getting: a kid who's gone rotten to the core. But I'd argue that in his case, you're dealing with an onion... someone whose reality is several layers away from what's on the surface. The question isn't whether Jesse's bad... it's what made him that way in the first place... and whether that's really who he is, or just a facade he uses to protect a softer self from greater disappointment.

How did you choose which quotes would go at the beginning of each section? Milton, Shakespeare, D.H. Lawrence -- are these some of your favorite authors, or did you have other reasons for choosing them?

JP: I suppose I could say that all I ever read are the Masters... and that these quotes just popped out of my memory... but I'd be lying! The bits I used at the beginning of the sections are ones that I searched for, diligently. I was looking for allusions to fire, flashes, stars -- all imagery that might connect a family which is figuratively burning itself out.

Sisterhood, and siblinghood for that matter, is a central concept in this work. Why did you make Isobel and Julia twins? Does this plot point somehow

correspond with the co-dependence between Kate and Anna? What did you hope to reveal about sisterhood through this story?

JP: I think there is a relationship between sisters that is unlike other sibling bonds. It's a combination of competition and fierce loyalty, which is certainly evident in both sets of sisters in this book. The reason Izzy and Julia are twins is because they started out as one embryo, before splitting in utero... and as they grew their differences became more pronounced. Kate and Anna, too, have genetic connections... but unlike Izzy and Julia, aren't able to separate from each other to grow into distinct individuals. I wanted to hold up both examples to the reader, so that they could see the difference between two sisters who started out as one and diverged; and two sisters who started out distinct from each other, and somehow became inextricably tangled.

Anyone who has watched a loved one die (and anyone with a heart in their chest) would be moved by the heartfelt, realistic and moving depiction of sickness and death that is presented in this story. Was it difficult to imagine that scenario? How did you generate the realistic details?

JP: It's always hard to imagine a scenario where a family is dealing with intense grief, because naturally, you can't help but think of your own family going through that sort of hell. When researching the book, I spoke to children who had cancer, as well as their parents -- to better capture what it felt like to live day by day, and maintain a positive attitude in spite of the overwhelming specter of what might be just around the corner. To a lesser extent, I also drew on my own experience, as a parent with a child who faced a series of surgeries: when my middle son Jake was 5, he was diagnosed with bilateral cholesteatomas in his ears -- benign tumors that will eventually burrow into your brain and kill you, if you don't manage to catch them. He had ten surgeries in three years, and he's tumor free now. Clearly, I wasn't facing the same urgent fears that the mom of a cancer patient faces... but it's not hard to remember how trying those hospitalizations were. Every single time I walked beside his gurney into the OR, where I would stay with him while he was anesthetized, I'd think, "Okay, just take my ear; if that keeps him from going through this again." That utter desperation and desire to make him healthy again became the heart of Sara's monologues... and is the reason that I cannot hate her for making the decisions she did.

Sara is a complicated character, and readers will probably both criticize and empathize with her. How do you see her role in the story?

JP: Like Nina Frost in Perfect Match, Sara's going to generate a bit of controversy, I think. And yet, I adore Nina... and I really admire Sara too. I think that she's the easy culprit to blame in this nightmare... and yet I would caution the reader not to rush to judgment. As Sara says at the end of the book, it was never a case of choosing one child over the other - it was a case of wanting BOTH. I don't think she meant for Anna to be at the mercy of her sister... I think she was only intent on doing what had to be done to keep that family intact. Now... that said... I don't think she's a perfect mom. She lets Jesse down - although she certainly was focused on more pressing emergencies, it's hard for me to imagine giving up so completely on a child, no matter what. And she's so busy fixating on Kate's shaky future that she loses sight of her family in the here and now -- an oversight, of course, that she will wind up regretting forever at the end of the book.

The point of view of young people is integral in your novels. In fact, more wisdom, humor and compassion often comes from them than anywhere else. What do you think adults could stand to learn from children? What is it about children that allows them to get to the truth of things so easily?

JP: Kids are the consummate radar devices for screening lies. They instinctively know when someone isn't being honest, or truthful, and one of the really hard parts about growing up is learning the value of a white lie... for them, it's artifice that has to be acquired... remember how upset Holden Caulfield got at all the Phonies? Anna sees things the way they are because mentally she's still a kid - in spite of the fact that she's pretty much lost her childhood. The remarkable thing about adolescents, though, that keeps me coming back to them in fiction... is that even when they're on the brink of realizing that growing up means compromising and letting go of those ideals, they still hold fast to hope. They may not want to admit to it (witness Jesse!) but they've got it tucked into their back pockets, just in case. It's why teens make such great and complicated narrators.


The ending of My Sister's Keeper is surprising and terribly sad. Without giving too much away, can you share why you choose to end the novel this way? Was it your plan from the beginning, or did this develop later on, as you were writing?

JP: My Sister's Keeper is the first book one of my own kids has read. Kyle, who's twelve, picked it up and immediately got engrossed in it. The day he finished the book, I found him weeping on the couch. He pushed me away and went up to his room and told me that he really didn't want to see me or talk to me for a while - he



was THAT upset. Eventually, when we did sit down to discuss it, he kept asking, "Why? Why did it have to end like that?" The answer I gave him (and you) is this: because this isn't an easy book, and you know from the first page, that there are no easy answers. Medically, this ending was a realistic scenario for the family -- and thematically, it was the only way to hammer home to all the characters what's truly important in life. Do I wish it could have had a happy ending? You bet -- I even gave a 23rd hour call to a oncology nurse to ask if there was some other way to end the book -- but finally, I came to see that if I wanted to be true to the story, this was the right conclusion.

All of your books to date have garnered wonderful press. In what ways, if any, does this change your writing experience?

JP: Um, are you reading the same reviews that I am?!? I'm kidding - well, a little. I've had overwhelmingly good reviews, but I think the bad reviews always stick with you longer, because they sting so much (no matter how many times I tell myself I'm going to ignore them, I read them anyway). I am fortunate to write commercially marketed books that still manage to get review coverage -- too often in this industry books are divided by what's reviewed and literary, or what's advertised and commercial. It's incredibly fun to have a starred review in a magazine -- photographers come out and take fancy pictures of you, and people are forever seeing your face and a description of your novel when they hang out in doctor's and dentist's waiting rooms. But the best thing about good press is that it makes people who might not otherwise have a clue who you are want to go and pick up your book. I never write a book thinking of reviewers (in fact, if I did, I'd probably just hide under my desk and never type another letter!) but I certainly think about whether it will hold the interest of a reader as well as it's holding my own.

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Jodi Picoult

1966-

Entry updated: 04/04/2007

Birth Place: New York

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Personal Information: Surname is pronounced "pee- koe"; born May 19, 1966, in NY; daughter of Myron Michel (a securities analyst) and Jane Ellen (a nursery school director; maiden name, Friend) Picoult; married Timothy Warren van Leer (a technical sales representative), November 18, 1989; children: Kyle Cameron, Jacob Matthew, Samantha Grace. **Education:** Princeton University, B.A., 1987; Harvard University, M.Ed., 1990. **Addresses:** Home: P.O. Box 508, Etna, NH 03750. **E-mail:** c/o agent Laura Gross,

lglitag@aol.com.

Career: Allyn & Bacon, Inc., Newton, MA, developmental editor, 1987-88; junior high school teacher of English and creative writing in Concord and Natick, MA, 1989-91; writer, 1991--.

Awards: New England Book Award Winner for Fiction, New England Booksellers Association, 2003, for her entire body of work; Best Mainstream Fiction Novel designation, Romance Writers of America, 2003, for *Second Glance*.

WRITINGS:

NOVELS

- *Songs of the Humpback Whale*, Faber & Faber (London, England), 1992.
- *Harvesting the Heart*, Viking (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Picture Perfect*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1995.
- *Mercy*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1996.
- *The Pact: A Love Story*, Morrow (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Keeping Faith*, Morrow (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Plain Truth*, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Salem Falls*, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Perfect Match*, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Second Glance*, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2003.
- *My Sister's Keeper*, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Vanishing Acts*, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2005.
- *The Tenth Circle*, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Nineteen Minutes*, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2007.

Media Adaptations: Picoult's novels *The Pact* and *Plain Truth* were

adapted for television and aired on the Lifetime network, 2002 and 2004. *My Sister's Keeper* was optioned by Fine Line Films for theatrical release.

"Sidelights"

Since her first success with *Songs of the Humpback Whale* in 1992, novelist Jodi Picoult has produced several other books in quick succession, often working on two books simultaneously. While she did tell an interviewer for the *Allen-Unwin* Web site that "I moonlight as a writer. My daylight hours are spent with my three children," her writing time has become more constant since her husband chose to be a stay-at-home dad. Picoult's themes center on women's issues, family, and relationships. According to Donna Seaman in *Booklist*, the author is "a writer of high energy and conviction."

Picoult's second work, *Harvesting the Heart*, concerns Paige O'Toole, an Irish Catholic with some artistic talent. The product of an unhappy childhood and adolescence, Paige leaves home after high school and lands a job at a diner where she sketches customers. There she meets her future husband, the egocentric Nicholas Prescott, whom she eventually puts through medical school after his parents disown him. After their first child is born, Paige becomes frustrated with the pressures of motherhood and increasingly estranged from the busy Nicholas. At the end of her patience, she decides to leave her family and seek her own mother, who left her when Paige was only five. Paige's heartwrenching decision leads her to deal with her own identity as she discovers she is not like her irresponsible mother. A happy ending ensues, with Paige returning to her family and Nicholas learning to take on more family responsibilities. A *Kirkus Reviews* critic found that the book had "some good writing, but not enough to sustain a concept-driven and rather old-fashioned story."

After producing *Harvesting the Heart*, Picoult published *Picture Perfect*, a study of wife abuse, and *Mercy*, a story dealing with euthanasia. In 1998 she published *The Pact: A Love Story*, a legal thriller set in a New Hampshire town. The novel concerns the Hartes and the Golds, neighbors and close friends. Their teenaged children, Chris and Emily, who grew up almost as brother and sister, become romantically involved and enter into a suicide pact. However, Chris survives and is charged with murder. After an investigation, he is jailed, and the friendship between the two families dissolves.

According to a *Kirkus Reviews* critic, the trial scenes in *The Pact* are "powerful," and the novel itself is "an affecting study of obsession, loss, and some of the more wrenching varieties of guilt." Seaman, writing in *Booklist*, dubbed Picoult's book "a finely honed, commanding, and cathartic drama."

The author's 1999 novel, *Keeping Faith*, also concerns characters in a small town struggling to maintain their concepts of honesty and faith. The protagonist, Mariah White, discovers that her husband has been unfaithful and subsequently sinks into depression. Her seven-year-old daughter, Faith, is upset by her mother's behavior and begins conversing with an imaginary friend, as well as acting as if she has newfound religious powers. Their lives enter a state of increasing upheaval as more and more of the faithful and the curious come to partake of Faith's supposed healing powers. Faith's father sues for custody of the girl, and an emotional court scene ensues. Margaret Flanagan, in *Booklist*, called the novel "a mesmerizing morality play."

Picoult's novel *Plain Truth* is set in the Pennsylvania Amish country. When a dead infant is discovered in the barn of an Amish farmer, a police investigation suggests that the mother is an eighteen-year-old Amish girl and that the baby did not die of natural causes. Although the teen denies responsibility, she is arrested and charged with murder. She is defended by a Philadelphia attorney, Ellie Hathaway, who soon clashes both with the will of her client and with the cultural values of Amish society. In the process of building her client's difficult defense, Ellie discovers more and more about her own inner life and personal values, while also learning to appreciate the values of the "plain people." Many reviewers praised the novel's suspenseful plot, its characterization, and its skillful portrait of Amish culture. *Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service* contributor Linda DuVal said that in *Plain Truth* Picoult writes with "clarity" and "depicts a simple, yet deceptively complex, society of people who share a sense of compassion and the unshakable belief in the goodness of their fellow men and women."

In *My Sister's Keeper*, Picoult uses her characters to explore the ramifications of cloning and gene replacement therapy, asking whether birthing one child to save the life of another child makes one a good mother--or a very bad one. A *Kirkus Reviews* critic declared that in *My Sister's Keeper* the novelist "vividly evokes the physical and psychic toll a desperately sick child imposes on a family, even a close and loving one." Noting that there are "no easy outcomes in a

tale about individual autonomy clashing with a sibling's right to life," the reviewer explained that "Picoult thwarts our expectations in unexpected ways" and dubbed *My Sister's Keeper* "a telling portrait" of a modern American family under stress.

Picoult once noted of her work: "I am particularly concerned with what constitutes the truth--how well we think we know the people we love and the lives we live. I also write about the intricacies of family ties and connections, which often unearth questions that have no easy answers."



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




























- *Booklist*, April 1, 1998, Donna Seaman, review of *The Pact: A Love Story*; May 15, 1999, Margaret Flanagan, review of *Keeping Faith*; December 15, 2002, Kristine Huntley, review of *Second Glance*; January 1, 2004, Kristine Huntley, review of *My Sister's Keeper*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, August 15, 1993, review of *Harvesting the Heart*; March 15, 1998, review of *The Pact*; April 15, 2002, review of *Perfect Match*; January 1, 2003, review of *Second Glance*; January 15, 2004, review of *My Sister's Keeper*.
- *Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service*, June 15, 2000, Linda DuVal, review of *Plain Truth*, p. K239.
- *Library Journal*, May 1, 2002, Nancy Pear, review of *Perfect Match*; February 15, 2003, Diana McRae, review of *Second Glance*; March 15, 2004, Kim Uden Rutter, review of *My Sister's Keeper*.
- *Publishers Weekly*, May 6, 2002, review of *Perfect Match*; February 16, 2004, review of *My Sister's Keeper*.

ONLINE

- *Allen-Unwin Web site*, [http:// www.allen-unwin.com/](http://www.allen-unwin.com/) (October 2, 2000), interview with Picoult.
- *Jodi Picoult Web site*, [http:// www.jodipicoult.com](http://www.jodipicoult.com) (August 23, 2004).*



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Jodi Picoult

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WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1992).
- *Harvesting the Heart* (New York: Viking, 1993).
- *Picture Perfect* (New York: Putnam, 1995).
- *Mercy* (New York: Putnam, 1996).
- *The Pact* (New York: Morrow, 1998; St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1999).
- *Keeping Faith* (New York: Morrow, 1999).

- *Plain Truth* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000).
- *Salem Falls* (New York: Pocket Books, 2001).
- *Perfect Match* (New York: Atria Books, 2002).
- *Second Glance* (New York: Atria Books, 2003).
- *My Sister's Keeper* (New York: Atria, forthcoming 2004).

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS--UNCOLLECTED

- "Keeping Count," *Seventeen*, 46 (February 1987): 126.
- "Road Stop," *Seventeen*, 46 (August 1987): 330.

With ten novels published by the time she was thirty-seven, Jodi Picoult ranks among the more prolific and ambitious young American writers. She has been characterized by critics as a women's fiction author; she contests this label, however, citing her popularity with both male and female fans. Her novels cross many genres, including literary fiction, legal thrillers, psychological portraits, romances, and ghost stories. In reviews, her body of work, themes, and writing style have been compared to authors as diverse as Alice Hoffman, John Grisham, and Daphne du Maurier. As this varied group of comparisons suggests, Picoult creates a new reading experience for her audience with each book.

Jodi Lynn Picoult was born on 19 May 1966 and grew up in Nesconset, Long Island, with her parents, Myron Michel Picoult, a securities analyst on Wall Street, and Jane Ellen Friend Picoult, a nursery-school teacher. She has one younger brother, Jonathan Paul Picoult. On her official website, <<http://www.jodipicoult.com>>□, Picoult says jokingly of her childhood, "I had such an uneventful childhood that much later, when I was taking writing classes at college, I called home and yelled at my mother, wishing for a little incest or abuse on the side." She continues, "Good writers, I thought at the time, had to have something to write about. It took me a while to realize that I already did have something to write about--that solid core of family, and of relationships, which seem to form a connective thread through my books." Picoult's happy childhood included writing stories, which her grandmother still keeps as examples of her "early" work, and a job as a library page. These youthful interactions with professional writing compelled Picoult to move toward a career as a novelist. She earned a B.A. in English in 1987 from Princeton University, where she studied creative writing with writers Robert Stone and Mary Morris. Under their guidance, Picoult had her first publishing success. She submitted a short story, "Keeping Count" (February 1987), to *Seventeen*, which published it and a subsequent story, "Road Stop" (August 1987).

Despite these early writing successes, Picoult went to work on Wall Street in New York City after her graduation. She then worked at a publishing company and later at an advertising agency. Finally, Picoult returned to the classroom to pursue a master's degree in education at Harvard University, earning an M.Ed. in 1990. Concomitant with her graduate education, Picoult taught creative writing at the Walnut Hill School for the Arts in Natick, Massachusetts from 1989 to 1991.

On 18 November 1989, Picoult married Timothy Warren van Leer, whom she met when both were members of the heavyweight men's crew team at Princeton. Picoult jokes, "I was a manager/coxswain, and I was the first person with two X chromosomes to set foot in a men's crew shell at the university!" Picoult's first novel was published following her marriage. Written while Picoult was six months pregnant with the first of her three children, *Songs of the*

Humpback Whale (1992) establishes Picoult's primary theme for each of her subsequent novels: the love between family and friends. Her novels probe the key idea of what it means to love someone.

Songs of the Humpback Whale tells the same story from the perspectives of five related narrators: Jane Jones, the primary narrator; her daughter, Rebecca; her husband, Oliver; her brother, Joley; and her lover, Sam. The novel begins by following Jane, who decides to leave Oliver, a marine biologist who researches the songs of humpback whales. Jane and Rebecca set out on a cross-country trip to Stow, Massachusetts, where they will visit Joley, who works in an apple orchard. Jane narrates the trip from San Diego to Stow.

Rebecca's narrative follows her mother's, telling the story in reverse after the mother-daughter pair arrives in Stow. The perspectives of the three men play a less central role in the narrative, interwoven into Jane's and Rebecca's narratives and serving to move the plot along by speculating or commenting about Jane's and Rebecca's whereabouts. Picoult explores the relationship of family traditions and stories and the ways in which history is formed from the perspectives of different narrators.

Songs of the Humpback Whale sets the trajectory for Picoult's subsequent novels, which focus on protagonists facing a crucial moment of self-determination in their lives. As these protagonists explore the greater questions of their own subject positions and identities, they engage their immediate communities--groups of relatives or strangers who become parts of a greater narrative--in their considerations of life, love, and future decisions.

Publishers Weekly (10 February 1992) called *Songs of the Humpback Whale* a "powerful and affecting novel that demonstrates there are as many truths to a story as there are people to tell it" and cites Picoult's talent for creating strong, individual characters. The critical reception for this novel, however, was uneven. Susan Spano of *The New York Times Book Review* (6 September 1992) commented, "Picoult has created some characters whose voices ring true, but she doesn't seem to trust them enough to tell a more simply structured and more compelling tale." Critical receptions of some of Picoult's later novels followed a similar pattern: the books largely found favor with industry publications but encountered a more mediocre reception from literary reviewers.

Harvesting the Heart (1993) proves an exception to this trend, however. Karen Ray of *The New York Times Book Review* (16 January 1994) lavished praise on Picoult's second book. *Harvesting the Heart* demonstrates Picoult's character-driven angst most poignantly through the coming-of-age story of Paige O'Toole Prescott. Much of Paige's personal struggle stems from the crucial historical detail that Paige's mother deserted her when she was a child; Paige is determined to establish her own life, separate from the father who raised her and from the painful legacy of an absent mother. Told in flashbacks, the novel explores Paige's journey, which begins when she is eighteen, moving from her father's home in Chicago to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she works while saving money to attend the Rhode Island School of Design.

Unable to afford art school, Paige works at the Mercy Diner, where she sketches the customers as part of the "Chicken Doodle Soup Special." Once Paige marries medical student Nicholas Prescott, she still works as a waitress in order to pay Nicholas's school bills. One of the central themes in the book revolves around Paige's struggle to understand and accept her own role as a mother. The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer (13 September 1993) commented, "this is a realistic story of childhood and adolescence, the demands of motherhood, the hard paths of personal growth and the generosity of spirit required by love. Picoult's imagery is startling and brilliant; her characters move credibly through this affecting drama." Paige's marriage to Nicholas leads to her second pregnancy, the first (by a former boyfriend) having ended in an abortion while

Paige was still living in Chicago. Overcome with her new responsibilities as a mother to baby Max and as a wife to Nicholas, Paige eventually abandons her child and husband to search for her long-estranged mother. Paige is torn by feelings of inadequacy resulting from her fractured experiences with motherhood on both sides of the relationship. Ultimately, her story becomes a search for self-discovery as she seeks out her own mother for answers about their lives, their separation, and the emotional connections that continue to exist in spite of physical absence. Paige eventually reunites with Nicholas and Max, determined that the best way to interrupt her mother's legacy is to embrace her role as a mother.

Harvesting the Heart was partially inspired by Picoult's own transition to new motherhood. Part of Picoult's craft depends on her ability to fully research her characters and to understand their lives. In order to better comprehend all of her characters and not just rely on the affinity of experience she imagined with Paige, Picoult delved into medical-school research, even observing cardiac surgery to more realistically portray Nicholas's course of study.

The publication of Picoult's third book, *Picture Perfect* (1995), brought the beginning of critical attention to her work. This novel received recognition as a featured alternate selection of the Literary Guild and a Doubleday Book Club selection. In *Picture Perfect* Picoult demonstrates a clear commitment to exploring social issues that are prominent in cultural discussions, such as divorce, child custody, AIDS, rape, abuse, media culture, and in the case of *Picture Perfect*, domestic violence.

Protagonist Cassie Barrett, an anthropologist on location in Kenya as a scientific consultant to a movie, enters a world of glamour and high society when she marries movie star Alex Rivers. As with previous novels, Picoult uses flashbacks as a stylistic tool to unravel her story, so *Picture Perfect* begins with Cassie wandering through the streets of Los Angeles with amnesia. After her husband arrives at the police station to identify her, Cassie tries to reconcile her privileged lifestyle with the feelings of apprehension she has about her home and husband. The plot moves from California to a Native American reservation in South Dakota as Cassie flees memories of an abusive relationship. With a compassion common to Picoult's women characters, Cassie eventually returns to Los Angeles from the perceived safety of the reservation and her relationships there, to try to reconcile with Alex. His inability to face his violence and rage, however, lead Cassie to publicly expose his secret life as an abusive spouse. In a 1 January 1995 review, Dawn L. Anderson of the *Library Journal* praised the novel highly as "an important book from a talented writer we hope to hear from again and again."

Picoult's fourth book, *Mercy* (1996), is another story testing the bounds of love and compassion, and it illustrates her growth as a writer. *Mercy* places two cousins, Cameron and Jamie McDonald, at opposite ends of the spectrum of love and sacrifice. Set in Wheelock, Massachusetts, a town where the largely Scottish inhabitants adhere to clan law and their clan leader, police chief Cameron, the novel begins as Jamie arrives at the police station in his truck with his dead wife, Maggie, beside him. He confesses that he has killed his wife, as she wished, rather than letting her suffer with terminal cancer. This opening scene sets the tone for a novel in which the main characters confront the conflict between law and morality as they struggle with ethics, social taboos, and desire.

Cameron struggles with his conflict of interest in investigating a murder case in which the accused is his cousin. As Jamie stands trial for killing his wife out of love and dedication, however, Cameron practices selective ethics as he begins an affair with his wife's new assistant, Mia. Ultimately, Picoult argues that love is never an equally shared venture; in *Mercy*, Jamie and his cousin-in-law--Cameron's wife, Allie--serve to represent those who love more in their respective relationships, because their love forgives and endures despite the extraordinary pain of death and betrayal.

Booklist critic Donna Seaman (July 1996) wrote: "A graceful stylist, Picoult entertains her readers not only with feel-good story-telling and irresistible characters but with consideration of such serious moral dilemmas as euthanasia and forgiveness." Seaman praised Picoult's ability to interrogate human weakness and desire in *Mercy*, observing that one of Picoult's strengths as a writer lies in her ability to confront difficult social issues through powerful characters.

The transformative power of relationships between people--both the renewing possibilities of love and support and the dangers of deception and hurt--remains a constant thematic focus for Picoult. *The Pact* (1998), her fifth novel, exposes the power in a relationship between two teenagers who enter a suicide pact. As with *Harvesting the Heart*, Picoult relied heavily on research to better understand her characters. While Picoult spent a day in jail researching *The Pact*, her brief incarceration is not the most interesting element of her preparation to write this novel. Her interview with a policeman proved to be a crucial part of the development of the novel, leading to a radical reconceptualization of the entire plot. Picoult explains on her website:

I was going to write a character-driven book about the female survivor of an unfinished suicide pact, and I went to the local police chief to do some preliminary research. "Huh," he said, "it's the girl who survives? Because if it was the boy, who was physically larger, he'd automatically be suspected of murder until cleared by the evidence."

With this revelation, Picoult focuses on Chris Harte, who survives an alleged suicide pact that leaves his girlfriend, Emily Gold, dead.

Picoult alternates the timeline of the narrative between Chris and Emily's love story and the aftermath of Emily's death. The novel follows their childhood friendship, which leads to young love, intimacy, pregnancy, the suicide pact, the eventual breakdown in the friendship between the Harte and the Gold families, the police investigation, and the suspicion of murder eventually facing Chris. Considered Picoult's "breakout novel" by *People Weekly* (8 June 1998) because of its sales (it has sold more than three hundred thousand copies), *The Pact* led to further accolades, including critical attention as a featured alternate selection of the Literary Guild, a selection of the Doubleday Book Club, and an Australian edition of the book, published by Allen and Unwin in 1999, which reached the best-seller list in that country. Since *The Pact*, her novels have been translated into a variety of languages. *The Pact* was made into a Lifetime television movie that aired in November 2002, with screenplay by Will Scheffer; it starred Megan Mullally and Juliet Stevenson.

The critically pleased reception of *The Pact* extended to *Keeping Faith* (1999), Picoult's sixth novel, which was also selected as a featured alternate selection of the Book of the Month Club. In a 15 May 1999 review, Margaret Flanagan of *Booklist* wrote: "Picoult blends elements of psychology and spirituality into a mesmerizing morality play, where conventional notions of faith and honesty are put to the test." *Keeping Faith* develops the relationships between protagonist Mariah White, her mother, her lover, her estranged husband, and their child, Faith. The crux of this novel lies in Faith, who talks with her "guard," a being invisible to those around Faith but who allows the child to help and heal other people. Raised in a nonreligious household, young Faith begins to quote from the Bible, to exhibit stigmata on her hands, and to demonstrate the ability to heal people--of AIDS-related complications, of heart attacks, and of any other ailment they suffer--despite her lack of religious training and her lack of a substantive belief system.

Keeping Faith again demonstrates Picoult's keen ability to focus on human relationships and their sustaining power. The novel begins with the devastating affair of Colin, Mariah's husband, which results in the disintegration of their marriage. As the public becomes aware of Faith's

new power to heal, the Whites' front lawn becomes a postmodern carnival of news media, the ill, and the curious. In a fierce custody battle for Faith, Colin uses the media spectacle to accuse Mariah of Munchausen syndrome by proxy, a condition in which parents hurt their children for attention. During this difficult period, Mariah finds that her relationships with her mother, child, and new lover sustain her and lead her to self-confidence and independence.

Picoult's fifth and sixth novels attest to her regional appeal; her work is often cited as New England fiction because of its geographic specificity. In *The Concord Monitor* (24 December 2000), Rebecca Mahoney observed that "Both *The Pact* and *Keeping Faith* take place in fictional New Hampshire towns, her characters often drive on Route 4 and Interstate 93, and legal scenes are played out in state courts, including a custody battle in Carroll County in *Keeping Faith*." While the New England landscape has been an important part of Picoult's fictional landscape, she has also demonstrated experimentalism in her approach to each new novel. She tries different genres, different contemporary social issues, and with the publication of her seventh book, a new geography.

Continuing Picoult's exploration into issues of faith, *Plain Truth* (2000) takes readers to Pennsylvania Amish country. Picoult became interested in the Amish and posted a message on an Internet message board. A woman who read Picoult's query arranged for her to visit and stay with an Amish family as part of the research for her seventh novel, which included milking cows, attending Bible study, and participating in the life of the Amish household.

In this novel Picoult delves into the story of Katie Fisher, a young Amish woman who is accused of killing her newborn child. Ellie Nathaway, a Philadelphia defense attorney vacationing in Paradise, Pennsylvania, defends Katie. The novel becomes both the gripping tale of the collision of Katie's past and future and also of Ellie's growth as she enters a new culture and has to find ways of integration and assimilation. A review in the *Christian Science Monitor* (22 June 2000) demonstrates the critical praise for *Plain Truth*: "The solidly drawn cast of characters and supporting story lines boost the mounting cultural tension initiated by the criminal trial. There's the rigid father, an outcast son, and a hidden love. And through Katie's Amish community, Picoult creates a poignant portrait of the nature of deeply held beliefs." Patty Engelmann, in *Booklist* (15 April 2000), agreed that "Picoult does a wonderful job describing the Amish world and the desires these two different women share while presenting a gripping legal murder mystery." A 20 March 2000 *Publishers Weekly* reviewer offered the only mixed review, commenting that "Perhaps the story's quietude is appropriate, given its magnificently painted backdrop and distinctive characters, but one can't help wishing that the spark igniting the book's opening pages had built into a full fledged blaze." *Plain Truth*, like *The Pact*, has attracted considerable cross-over attention and is also under development as a television movie for Lifetime.

Picoult's next novel, *Salem Falls* (2001), also explores relationships in small-town America. *Salem Falls*, a contemporary revision of Arthur Miller's historical drama *The Crucible* (1953), pits the individual against the community. Picoult introduces Jack St. Bride, a teacher and soccer coach fleeing his tarnished reputation after a rape accusation. A group of young women in the town of Salem Falls, notably Gillian Duncan, whose father is a powerful local mogul, target St. Bride as the object of their pubescent curiosity. At a Wiccan ceremony in the woods late one evening, Gillian is assaulted. The ensuing story finds St. Bride at the center of accusations reminiscent of the ones that brought him to Salem Falls seeking anonymity and a chance to start his life over. In a *Denver Post* review (22 April 2001), Robin Vidimos observed:

Not the least of Picoult's story-telling gifts is her ability to convey the natural tension in a small town between knowing enough to care and knowing so much as to be fearful. Much of her plot turns on the townspeople's blind distrust of Jack once they realize that he's been convicted and jailed as a sexual predator. It's a label

he is unable to avoid, given the requirements of Megan's law. In this case, the label is unjust, but he's facing a conflict built on sly whispers and supposition. He is left with no way to respond.

Vidimos's commentary demonstrates that Picoult's power comes from her ability to understand small towns and how they operate.

St. Bride is both enigma and obvious victim. Jeff Zaleski, in a 19 February 2001 *Publishers Weekly* review, questioned Picoult's attempt to elucidate St. Bride's situation and offered mixed praise for the novel: "Genuinely suspenseful and at times remarkably original, this romance-mystery-morality play will gain Picoult new readers although her treatment of the aftermath of rape may also make her a few enemies." Picoult uses St. Bride's situation to reveal the relationships around him as well as the true nature of the town and its citizens.

Picoult's ninth novel, *Perfect Match* (2002), also examines the relationship between the individual and the community, focusing upon a timely character--a child-molesting priest. Picoult narrates from the perspective of attorney Nina Frost of York County, Maine. Nina and Caleb Frost are happy parents to their young son, Nathaniel. Early in the novel, the child is molested, and the trauma of the incident prevents the five-year-old child from speaking. He indicates that "father" committed the crime, so initially his father, Caleb, is arrested. After Nathaniel regains his power of speech, however, he reveals that his abuser is "Father Gwen"--and Father Glen Szyszynski heads the local Catholic church. DNA evidence corroborates Nathaniel's story.

As Nina struggles with this crime, she realizes that the only way to convict Father Szyszynski is to put Nathaniel on the stand, compelling him to relive the horrific incidents that drove him into prolonged speechlessness. Nina acts on her sense of rage against the injustice of a legal system that would revictimize her son, and she shoots Father Szyszynski in public before his arraignment. After she kills Father Szyszynski, she stands trial, and during the trial, further DNA tests (thus the title, *Perfect Match*) show that Father Szyszynski is not the molester. Suspicion then falls on Father Szyszynski's half-brother, Father Gwynn. Nina is found guilty of manslaughter, is given probation, and loses her license to practice law.

Denver Post reviewer Vidimos commented that Picoult's novel was begun long before the 2002 public scandal about Catholic clergy and pedophilia. Vidimos wrote in her 21 April 2002 review that "The danger of focusing on the sensationalized part of the novel is that its deeper, more difficult, questions will be ignored. Nina is sure she is doing the best for those she cares about when she kills the alleged perpetrator. She is certain she has the right man and that the testimony needed to convict him would destroy her son." As with other Picoult novels, *Perfect Match* is an exploration of social mores and personal responsibility in the context of intense personal relationships. Nancy Pearl of the *Library Journal* (1 May 2002) disagreed, however, arguing, "the usually reliable Picoult fails to deliver. . . . Nina is a truly dislikable heroine (her justifications for the murder are both laughable and frightening), and the truly meaningless subplots distract from, rather than add to, the main story." At the heart of *Perfect Match*, as with most of her novels, Picoult questions the ways in which people come to know one another in a community and within their relationships. She presents the main character in conflict with society in order to explore the depths of her character's convictions.

Picoult's tenth novel, *Second Glance* (2003), a featured selection of the Literary Guild, is set in Comtosook, Vermont, and follows the story of ghost hunter Ross Wakeman. Mourning the loss of his fiancée, Aimee, in a car accident, Ross tries unsuccessfully to commit suicide. His desperation is replaced by his fascination with the paranormal as a way to contact Aimee. As with other novels, Picoult weaves in real-life controversies, such as eugenics projects carried out in Vermont in the 1930s, as a way of exploring deeper issues of truth. Following the

publication of this novel, Picoult was awarded the 2003 New England Bookseller Association Award in fiction.

My Sister's Keeper (2004) also explores real-life controversies as well as the bonds between siblings. Thirteen-year-old Anna was conceived by her parents specifically as a bone-marrow donor for her sister, Kate, who has leukemia. Anna's life is dictated by her sister's ill health. The novel focuses on Anna's search for identity in a life that was predetermined by her genetic ability to help her sister. In an author's note on her website, Picoult writes that "Today's political and scientific battles over cloning and DNA and gene replacement therapy led me to think about some of what the future might hold, on a personal level, for people." She asks, "If you use one of your children to save the life of another, are you being a good mother . . . or a very bad one?" Picoult is currently at work on her twelfth novel, "Vanishing Acts," due in 2005.

Picoult's novels rely on her ability to engage the reader with "what if" situations. In each of her novels, ordinary characters face the kinds of events that readers and characters think will never happen to them. The ability of readers to connect with Picoult's wide range of characters is evident in Picoult's wide popular appeal. She is a featured author in many public libraries; the virtual community of the Internet has embraced her work with chat rooms and messages posted about her latest books; and her fans stave off their impatience for new books by sending her e-mail, which she answers faithfully.

Given Picoult's prolific career, her contribution to the American literary canon as a twenty-first-century novelist promises to be significant. Picoult offers her readers a look inside relationships, inside communities, and inside the hearts and minds of characters with whom they share common ground. Picoult focuses on the collision between the everyday and the unexpected; she renders her characters capable survivors in the midst of tragedy, imperfect creations in an imperfect world.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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- Rebecca Mahoney, *Concord Monitor*, 24 December 2000.
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My Sister's Keeper

A Novel

by Jodi Picoult

About this Book

New York Times bestselling author Jodi Picoult is widely acclaimed for her keen insights into the hearts and minds of real people. Now she tells the emotionally riveting story of a family torn apart by conflicting needs and a passionate love that triumphs over human weakness.

Anna is not sick, but she might as well be. By age thirteen, she has undergone countless surgeries, transfusions, and shots so that her older sister, Kate, can somehow fight the leukemia that has plagued her since childhood. The product of preimplantation genetic diagnosis, Anna was conceived as a bone marrow match for Kate -- a life and a role that she has never challenged...until now. Like most teenagers, Anna is beginning to question who she truly is. But unlike most teenagers, she has always been defined in terms of her sister -- and so Anna makes a decision that for most would be unthinkable, a decision that will tear her family apart and have perhaps fatal consequences for the sister she loves.

My Sister's Keeper examines what it means to be a good parent, a good sister, a good person. Is it morally correct to do whatever it takes to save a child's life, even if that means infringing upon the rights of another? Is it worth trying to discover who you really are, if that quest makes you like yourself less? Should you follow your own heart, or let others lead you? Once again, in **My Sister's Keeper**, Jodi Picoult tackles a controversial real-life subject with grace, wisdom, and sensitivity.

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Discussion Questions

1. One of this novel's strengths is the way it skillfully demonstrates the subjectivity people bring to their interactions with others. The motivations of individual characters, the emotions that pull them one way or another, and the personal feelings that they inject into professional situations becomes achingly clear as we explore many different viewpoints. For example, despite Julia and Campbell's attempts to remain calm, unemotional and businesslike when they deal with one another, the past keeps seeping in, clouding their interaction. The same goes for the interaction between Sara and Anna during the trial. Is there such a thing as an objective decision in the world of this story? Is anyone capable of being totally rational, or do emotions always come into play?
2. What do you think of this story's representation of the justice system? What was your opinion of the final outcome of the trial?
3. What is your opinion of Sara? With her life focused on saving Kate, she sometimes

neglects her other children. Jesse is rapidly becoming a juvenile delinquent, and Anna is invisible -- a fact that the little girl knows only too well. What does this say about Sara's role as a mother? What would you have done in her shoes? Has she unwittingly forgotten Jesse and Anna, or do you think she has consciously chosen to neglect them -- either as an attempt to save a little energy for herself, or as some kind of punishment? Does Sara resent her other children for being healthy? Did you find yourself criticizing Sara, empathizing with her, or both?

4. During a conversation about Kate, Zanne tells Sara, "No one has to be a martyr 24/7." When she mistakenly hears the word "mother" not "martyr" and is corrected by Zanne, Sara smiles and asks, "Is there a difference?" In what ways does this moment provide insight into Sara's state of mind? Do you think it strange that she sees no difference between motherhood and martyrhood?

5. Campbell is certainly a fascinating character: guarded, intelligent, caring and yet selfish at the same time. Due to these seemingly contradictory traits, it can be difficult to figure him out. As he himself admits, "motivations are not what they seem to be." At one point he states, "Out of necessity -- medical and emotional -- I have gotten rather skilled at being an escape artist." Why do you think Campbell feels that he needs to hide his illness? Is it significant that Anna is the first to break down his barriers and hear the truth? Why, for example, does he flippantly dismiss all questions regarding Judge with sarcastic remarks?

6. At one point, Campbell thinks to himself: "There are two reasons not to tell the truth -- because lying will get you what you want, and because lying will keep someone from getting hurt." With this kind of thinking, Campbell gives himself an amazingly wide berth; he effectively frees himself from speaking any semblance of the truth as long as the lie will somehow benefit himself or anyone else. Did it concern you that a lawyer would express an opinion like this? Do you think, by the end of the story, that Campbell still thinks this moral flexibility is okay? In what ways might this kind of thinking actually wind up hurting Campbell?

7. It is interesting that Campbell suffers seizures that only his dog can foresee. How might this unique relationship mirror some of the relationships between humans in this novel? In what ways does Judge introduce important ideas about loyalty and instinct?

8. On page 149, Brian is talking to Julia about astronomy and says, "Dark matter has a gravitational effect on other objects. You can't see it, you can't feel it, but you can watch something being pulled in its direction." How is this symbolic of Kate's illness? What might be a possible reason for Brian's fascination with astronomy?

9. Near the end of the novel, Anna describes "Ifspeak" -- the language that all children know, but abandon as they grow older -- remarking that "Kids think with their brains cracked wide open; becoming an adult, I've decided, is only a slow sewing shut." Do you believe this to be true? What might children teach the adults in this novel? Which adults need lessons most?

10. "It's more like we're astronauts, each wearing a separate helmet, each sustained by our own source of air." This quote comes from Anna, as she and her parents sit in silence in the hospital cafeteria. Besides being a powerful image of the family members' isolation, this observation shows Anna to be one of the wisest, most perceptive characters in this novel. Discuss the alienation affecting these characters.

While it is obvious that Anna's decision to sue her parents increases that sense of alienation throughout the novel (especially for Anna herself), do you think that she has permanently harmed the family dynamic?

11. During the trial, when Dr. Campbell takes the stand, he describes the rules by which the medical ethics committee, of which he is a part, rules their cases. Out of these six principles (autonomy, veracity, fidelity, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice), which apply to Anna's lawsuit? Moreover, which of these should be applied to Anna's home situation? In other words, do you think a parent might have anything to learn from the guidelines that the doctors follow? Are there family ethics that ought to be put into place to ensure positive family dynamics? If so, what should they be?

12. Early in the legal proceedings, Anna makes a striking observation as she watches her mother slip back into her lawyer role, noting, "It is hard to believe that my mother used to do this for a living. She used to be someone else, once. I suppose we all were." Discuss the concept of change as it is presented in this story. While most of the characters seem to undergo a metamorphosis of sorts -- either emotionally or even physically (in the case of Kate), some seem more adept at it than others. Who do you think is ultimately the most capable of undergoing change and why?

13. Discuss the symbolic role that Jesse's pyromania plays in this novel, keeping in mind the following quote from Brian: "How does someone go from thinking that if he cannot rescue, he must destroy?" Why is it significant that Jesse has, in many respects, become the polar opposite of his father? But despite this, why is Jesse often finding himself in the reluctant hero position (saving Rat, delivering the baby at boot camp)? Brian himself comes to realize, in the scene where he confronts Jesse, that he and his son aren't so different. Talk about the traits that they share and the new understanding that they gain for each other by the end of the story.

14. *My Sister's Keeper* explores the moral, practical and emotional complications of putting one human being in pain or in danger for the well being of another. Discuss the different kinds of ethical problems that Anna, as the "designer baby," presents in this story? Did your view change as the story progressed? Why or why not? Has this novel changed any of your opinions about other conflicts in bioethics like stem cell research or genetically manipulated offspring?

April 9, 2004

Jodi Picoult, author of ***MY SISTER'S KEEPER***, talks to Bookreporter.com's Bethanne Kelly Patrick and Carol Fitzgerald about why she chose the plot, her thoughts on her characters and what made her cry while she was writing. She also shares a glimpse at her next book, which is a work-in-progress.

BRC: What made you choose to write a book with a plot that concerns genetic planning, namely with one child being conceived as a possible donor for another?

JP: I stumbled over this idea by accident while I was researching my last novel, *SECOND GLANCE*. That book involved the VT eugenics project --- namely, how Vermont was one of twenty-six states in the US in the 1920s and 1930s that had a law on the books to sterilize people they felt were degenerate. When Hitler praised these laws during WWII, funding dried up --- as did the American Eugenics Society.

Up close and personal with Jodi Picoult

Describe a typical day.

I get up at 5:30 AM and go walking with girlfriends - that's the only time of day I have to exercise, but I really do it for the gossip. By 7 AM I'm back home, helping to get the kids ready for school. They're 14, 12, and 10, now. My husband, who is half antiques dealer/half stay-at-home-dad, is fully responsible for making my life run smoothly - whether that means carpooling the kids, packing their lunches, or being the sole parent when I'm off for months at a time on tour. Oh, and he brings me coffee and lunch. (Yes, you all should be quite jealous!) I answer my emails for about 1 hour in the morning. Then I write, research, or edit until around 4 PM.

What's the best part of the job?

The fans. Who wouldn't want to wake up to daily emails telling you how fantastic your writing is? Also, the fact that I do what I absolutely love to do. I don't think many people can say that about their jobs.

What's the worst part of the job?

The actual world of publishing. Mergers between companies, tightfisted marketing departments, and a bizarre fascination with Hollywood makes the publishing world a very difficult place to forge a career. For reasons that are still a mystery to me, companies will throw promotional dollars at books that aren't selling (they say it's a last ditch effort) but they will ignore some wonderful books by writers who are just starting out and could use the boost.

What was your worst pre-novelist job?

I worked at a two-person ad agency (I was the second person).

If you could invite five people, living or dead, to a dinner party, who would they be?

Ernest Hemingway, Alice Hoffman, William Shakespeare, Johnny Depp, and Emeril Lagasse, because someone's got to cook!

What would you take with you to a deserted island?

My husband Tim. He's great company, he's gorgeous, and he could keep us alive with nothing more than a shoelace and a coconut.

What are you incapable of living without?

My children. My contact lenses. And quite possibly, a phone.

What do you drive?

A Ford Expedition.

What do you consider your greatest literary accomplishment?

I have quite literally worn the letters off two consecutive computer keyboards.

What could your husband tell us about you that no one knows?

Lots, I'm sure, but then I'd have to kill him. Just kidding. Actually, he'd tell you that I sleep with teddy bears.

What talent do you wish you had?

Oh, singing. I think I sing better than I actually do. Not that this keeps me from rocking out in the car when I'm alone.

What singer's work are your novels most like?

Aimee Mann. She's a poet masquerading as a songwriter, who far more people should be listening to.

Speaking of that, what's on your iPod?

Aimee takes up a lot of it. You'll also see Jack Johnson, Wilco, Queen, the Rolling Stones, my son Kyle's piano concertos, and Hilary Duff - for when my daughter borrows it.

Say you are dragged to a karaoke bar. What music do you pick?

Interestingly, when I was doing research for Perfect Match, the attorney I was working with and I went to dinner at a karaoke bar. The lady there tried to make us sing "Summer Nights" from Grease, but it wasn't happening. I actually wrote about this in the book, it was that bizarre a moment.

You didn't really answer my question

Yes, that's because I'm smarter than I look. All right. I'm pretty good at "O-Bla-Di," by the Beatles. My kids sing backup.

Are you jealous of other writers and their success?

Well, I think by nature writers are jealous. There's only so much shelf space at the front of the bookstore, and if you only have \$25 to spend, you have to pick one hardcover... you know? I think certain writers show an extreme lack of grace in the face of success - don't even get me started on Jonathan Franzen, for example. But others - like J.K. Rowling - I celebrate what she's done. I think that Jo Rowling and Oprah Winfrey have double-handedly managed to put publishing back on a consumer's steady diet. Indirectly, the work of those two women has helped my career.

What sort of dog would you be?

I would like to think I'd be something as sleek as a greyhound, but the truth is I'd probably be a lot like Gus, my Springer spaniel - curly ears, sedentary nature, and all.

from www.jodipicoult.com

Jodi Picoult, 39, is the bestselling author of thirteen novels. In 2003 she was awarded the New England Bookseller Award for Fiction.

She was born and raised —happily—on Long Island... something that she believed at first was a detriment to a girl who wanted to be a writer. "I had such an uneventful childhood that when I was taking writing classes at college, I called home and asked my mother if maybe there might have been a little incest or domestic abuse on the side that she'd forgotten about," Picoult recalls. "It took me a while to realize that I already did have something to write about — that solid core of family, and the knotty tangle of relationships, which I keep coming back to in my books."

Picoult studied creative writing with Mary Morris at Princeton, and had two short stories published in *Seventeen* magazine while still a student. "The first time the editor called me to say she wanted to pay me for something I'd written," Picoult says, "I immediately called my mom and said, 'I'm going to be a writer!' 'That's great,' she said. 'Who's going to support you?'" Realism - and a profound desire to be able to pay the rent - led Picoult to a series of different jobs following her graduation: as a technical writer for a Wall Street brokerage firm, as a copywriter at an ad agency, as an editor at a textbook publisher, and as an 8th grade English teacher - before entering Harvard to pursue a master's in education. She and [*her husband*] Tim and their three children live in Hanover, New Hampshire with a dog, a rabbit, the occasional Holstein, and are imminently awaiting the arrival of a donkey named Hoté. Think about it for a second, and say it out loud: Donkey Hoté. :-)

From: http://us.penguinroup.com/static/rguides/us/memory_keeper.html

Memory Keeper's Daughter by Kim Edwards

INTRODUCTION

It is 1964 in Lexington, Kentucky, and a rare and sudden winter storm has blanketed the area with snow. The roads are dangerous, yet Dr. David Henry is determined to get his wife, Norah, to the hospital in time to deliver their first child. But despite David's methodical and careful driving, it soon becomes clear that the roads are too treacherous, and he decides to stop at his medical clinic instead. There, with the help of his nurse, Caroline, he is able safely to deliver their son, Paul. But unexpectedly, Norah delivers a second child, a girl, Phoebe, in whom David immediately recognizes the signs of Down syndrome.

David is a decent but secretive man—he has shared his difficult past with no one, not even his wife. It is a past that includes growing up in a poor, uneducated family and the death of a beloved sister whose heart defect claimed her at the age of twelve. The painful memories of the past and the difficult circumstances of the present intersect to create a crisis, one in which his overriding concern is to spare his beloved Norah what he sees as a life of grief. He hands the baby girl over to Caroline, along with the address of a home to which he wants her taken, not imagining beyond the moment, or anticipating how his actions will serve to destroy the very things he wishes to protect. Then he turns to Norah, telling her, "Our little daughter died as she was born."

From that moment forward, two families begin their new, and separate, lives. Caroline takes Phoebe to the institution but cannot bear to leave her there. Thirty-one, unmarried, and secretly in love with David, Caroline has been always been a dreamer, waiting for her real life to begin. Now, when she makes her own split-second decision to keep and raise Phoebe as her own, she feels as if it finally has.

As Paul grows to adulthood, Norah and David grow more and more distant from each other. Norah, always haunted by the daughter she lost, takes a job that becomes an all-consuming career, and seeks the intimacy that eludes her with her own husband through a series of affairs. Feeling as if he's a disappointment to his father, Paul is angry and finds his only release through music. David, tormented by his secret, looks for solace through the lens of his camera, the "Memory Keeper," trying to make sense of his life through the images he captures.

But as **The Memory Keeper's Daughter** so eloquently shows, life is a moving image, unfolding and changing beyond our control. Despite our desire to freeze a moment or to go back into the past and alter events, time presses us forward. With her heart-wrenching yet ultimately hopeful novel, Kim Edwards explores the elusive mysteries of grief and love, and the power of the truth both to shatter and to heal.

ABOUT KIM EDWARDS

Kim Edwards is the author of a short story collection, **The Secrets of a Fire King**, which was an alternate for the 1998 PEN/Hemingway Award, and has won both a Whiting Award and the Nelson Algren Award. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she currently teaches writing at the University of Kentucky.



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

The Memory Keeper's Daughter is a powerful combination of a tragic and poignant family story as well as riveting page-turner, due primarily to the fact that it centers on such a shocking act by one individual that affects everyone he cares about. How did the idea for this novel come to you?

A few months after my story collection, **The Secrets of a Fire King**, was published, one of the pastors of the Presbyterian church I'd recently joined said she had a story to give me. I was pleased that she'd thought of me, if a bit surprised—I was back in church after a twenty-some-year absence, and still quite skeptical of it all. Yet even to my critical eye it was clear that good things were happening: the congregation was vibrant and progressive and engaged; the co-pastors, a married couple who had both once been university professors, gave sermons that were beautifully crafted and thought-provoking, both intellectual and heartfelt. I'd already come to admire them very much. Still, it happens fairly often that people want to give me stories, and invariably those stories are not mine to tell. So I thanked my pastor, but didn't think much more about her offer.

The next week she stopped me again. *I really have to tell you this story*, she said, and she did. It was just a few sentences, about a man who'd discovered, late in life, that his brother had been born with Down syndrome, placed in an institution at birth, and kept a secret from his family, even from his own mother, all his life. He'd died in that institution, unknown. I remember being struck by the story even as she told it, and thinking right away that it really would make a good novel. It was the secret at the center of the family that intrigued me. Still, in the very next heartbeat, I thought: *Of course, I'll never write that book.*

And I didn't, not for years. The idea stayed with me, however, as the necessary stories do. Eventually, in an unrelated moment, I was invited to do a writing workshop for adults with mental challenges through a Lexington group called Minds Wide Open. I was nervous about doing this, I have to confess. I didn't have much experience with people who have mental challenges, and I didn't have any idea of what to expect. As it turned out, we had a wonderful morning, full of expression and surprises and some very fine poetry. At the end of the class, several of the participants hugged me as they left.

This encounter made a deep impression on me, and I found myself thinking of this novel idea again, with a greater sense of urgency and interest. Still, it was another year before I started to write it. Then the first chapter came swiftly, almost fully formed, that initial seed having grown tall while I wasn't really

paying attention. In her **Paris Review** interview, Katherine Anne Porter talks about the event of a story being like a stone thrown in water—she says it's not the event itself that's interesting, but rather the ripples the event creates in the lives of characters. I found this to be true. Once I'd written the first chapter, I wanted to find out more about who these people were and what happened to them as a consequence of David's decision; I couldn't stop until I knew.

Human motivation, the simple question of why we do what we do, is often very complex, as it is here with David and his fateful decision. As his creator, were you able to sympathize in any way with his motives?

Oh, yes, certainly. Even though none of us may ever experience a moment this dramatic, nonetheless we all have similar experiences, times when we react powerfully to an event in ways we may not completely understand until much later, if at all.

I knew from the beginning that David wasn't an evil person. He makes absolutely the wrong decision in that first chapter, but even so he acts out of what he believes are good intentions—the desire to protect Norah from grief, and even the desire to do what the medical community in that time and place had deemed best for a child with Down syndrome.

There's much more to this, of course. David's own grief at the loss of his sister is something he's never confronted, never resolved. I don't think this was unusual in that era. Grief counselors, after all, are relatively new. I remember stories, growing up, of adults in my town who had suffered terrible losses. There was a kind of silence around such people. Everyone knew their history, and the imprint of the loss was visible in the unfolding of their lives, but no one ever mentioned the person who had died.

So it was with David. His way of coping with the loss of his sister, and with the greater loss of his family that resulted, was to try to move on; to take control of his life and to push forward; to become a success in the eyes of the world. Yet even so, his grief was never far below the surface, and when Phoebe was born with Down syndrome, an event he could not anticipate or control, his old grief welled up. David's response in that moment is as much to the past as to the present, but it takes him decades, and a trip back to the place where he grew up, to understand this.

The novel begins in 1964. Do you think our attitudes toward people with disabilities have changed since then? Are we more enlightened or accepting now?

Yes, things have changed for the better over the past decades, but I'd say also that it's an ongoing process, with much more progress yet to be made.

Certainly, writing this novel was a process of enlightenment for me. When I began this book, I didn't know how to imagine Phoebe. I was compelled by the secret and its impact on the family, but I wasn't very knowledgeable about Down syndrome. To create a convincing character, one who was herself and not a stereotype, without being either sentimental or patronizing, seemed a daunting task.

I started reading and researching. Also, tentatively, I started having conversations. The first couple I spoke with has a daughter whom they'd raised during the time period of this book. They were a terrific help, candid and straightforward and wise. When I showed them the opening chapter, their immediate response was that I'd gotten the doctor exactly right: the attitudes David has about Down syndrome may seem outrageous to us now, but there was a time, not all that long ago, when these ideas were widely held.

The reason attitudes have changed, quite simply, is because the parents of children with Down syndrome refused, as Caroline does in this novel, to accept imposed limitations for their children. The fight that Caroline fights during this book is emblematic of struggles that took place all over the country during this era to change prevailing attitudes and to open doors that had been slammed shut.

The changes did not and do not happen easily, or without personal costs for those who struggled—and struggle still—to make their children visible to the world. Time and again as I researched this book I heard stories of both heartbreak and great courage. Time and again, also, I was impressed with the expansive generosity of people with Down syndrome and their families, who met with me, shared their life journeys and perceptions, their joys and struggles, and were eager to help me learn. Many of them have read the book and loved it, which for me is a profound measure of its success.

Your use of photography as a metaphor throughout the book is artfully done. Do you have a personal interest in photography, or did you educate yourself about it as part of the writing process?

I'm not a photographer, but for several years in college I was very good friends with people who were, some of whom, in fact, had darkrooms set up in their houses. Photography was woven into many of our conversations, and I sometimes went with my friends when they were seeking particular shots. I wasn't at all interested in the mechanics—apertures and f-stops left me cold—but I was always fascinated by the photographs appearing in the developer, what was invisible coaxed into image by the chemical bath. It's a slow emergence, a kind of birth, really; a moment of mystery. I was intrigued by the use of light, as well, the way too much light will erase an image on both film and paper.

I also remember being annoyed, more than once, when my friends' need to get a photo right interfered with the moment the photo was meant to capture: at a family reunion, for instance, or a birthday party. How did the presence of the photographer change the nature of the moment? What was gained and what was lost by having the eye of the camera present?

During the very early stages of writing this novel, I read a New Yorker essay about the photographer Walker Evans that discussed many of these questions quite eloquently, reminding me of my photographer friends. Norah gave David a camera, and from there I started doing quite a lot of research. Amid many other explorations, I spent time at Eastman Kodak Museum in Rochester and read Susan Sontag's fascinating and inspiring **On Photography**.

The city of Pittsburgh figures quite prominently in the story and is described in very affectionate terms. ("The city of Pittsburgh gleaming suddenly before her . . . so startling in

its vastness and its beauty that she had gasped and slowed, afraid of losing control of the car," p. 91.) This is not a city that usually captures the imagination nor has it been a common setting for novels. Would you talk a bit about why you chose Pittsburgh and your personal connection, if any, to it?

I moved to Pittsburgh sight unseen—my husband and I were teaching in Cambodia when he was accepted into a Ph.D. program at The University of Pittsburgh. This was before e-mail; there were no telephones in Phnom Penh, and even electricity was often sporadic. With no clear image of Pittsburgh, we agreed to move there, visions of steel smoke and gritty industrialism hanging like a shadow when he sent in his acceptance.

Caroline's experience crossing the Fort Pitt bridge is my own. It's a spectacular moment: one emerges from the endless Fort Pitt tunnel onto a bridge spanning the Monongahela River, just before it merges with the Allegheny River and forms the Ohio River. Water gleams everywhere, and the buildings of the city narrow to the point between the rivers, and in the middle distance the greening hills rise up, studded with houses. The director of the MFA program at the University of Pittsburgh once confided to me how much he liked to drive visitors in from the airport, because they were invariably astonished by this view.

I spent four years in Pittsburgh and would have happily stayed there had circumstances allowed. It's a fascinating city, rich with history and parks. It's a wonderful city for walking, too, with beautiful old neighborhoods and places where you find yourself suddenly standing on a bluff again, gazing out over the ever-changing rivers.

The Memory Keeper's Daughter, while ultimately redemptive and hopeful, reveals much of the dark side of the human experience. Actors often talk about how working on a very painful role can affect their psyche; others speak of being able simply to let it go and not have the work affect their daily lives. As a writer, how does working on such a heart-wrenching story affect your own state of mind? When you stop writing, are you able to let it go?

Well, the characters all struggle, don't they? They walk through a lot of darkness. Yet I never found writing this book painful. In part, I think, because I identified with all the characters in this book: the one who keeps a secret and the one from whom secrets have been kept; the parent who longs for a child and the child who longs for harmony and wholeness; the wanderer and the one who stays in place. I recognized their journeys of self-discovery, in any case. I was interested in them, and I wanted to know what happened to them, and who they were. The only way to discover all that was to write the book. Also, because the novel is told through four different points of view, moving from one character's mind to another, I was able step back from one point of view and work on another whenever I was stuck. This was very liberating, and allowed me to attain a certain level of detachment from one character while working on another.

As an award-winning short story writer, you are best known for your critically acclaimed collection *The Secrets of a Fire King*. Would you talk a bit about how you came to write a novel, and the difference between working on a novel and a short story?

When my story collection was published, several reviewers remarked that each one contained the scope of a novel. That interested me, because the stories always felt like stories; I couldn't imagine them being a word longer than they were. Likewise, **The Memory Keeper's Daughter** was a novel from the moment I started writing. Yet despite the difference in complexity and length, writing a novel was very much like writing stories. There's a bigger canvas in a novel, and thus more room to explore, but it's still a process of discovery, a leap into the unknown, and an intuitive seeking of the next moment, and the next. For me, writing is never linear, though I do believe quite ardently in revision. I think of revision as a kind of archeology, a deep exploration of the text to discover what's still hidden and bring it to the surface.

Who are some of your favorite authors, and what are you currently reading?

I read a great deal. Alice Munro and William Trevor are authors whose work I return to again and again. I have just finished Marilynne Robinson's **Gilead** and I will read it again soon simply to savor the beauty of the language. New books by both Ursula Hegi and Sue Monk Kidd are on my desk, along with the poems of Pablo Neruda. During the writing of **The Memory Keeper's Daughter** I returned to classic novels with secrets at their center, especially Dostoevsky's extraordinary **Crime and Punishment** and Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter**. I'm also midway through Thomas Mann's quartet of novels based on the story of Joseph and his brothers; these archetypal stories are informing the next novel I plan to write, as well.

What are you working on now?

I have begun a new novel, called **The Dream Master**. It's set in the Finger Lakes area of upstate New York where I grew up, which is stunningly beautiful, and which remains in some real sense the landscape of my imagination. Like **The Memory Keeper's Daughter**, this new novel turns on the idea of a secret—that seems to be my preoccupation as a writer—though in this case the event occurred in the past and is a secret from the reader as well as from the characters, so structurally, and in its thematic concerns, the next book is an entirely new discovery.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When David hands his baby girl over to Caroline and tells Norah that she has died, what was your immediate emotional reaction? At this early point, did you understand David's motivations? Did your understanding grow as the novel progressed?
2. David describes feeling like "an aberration" within his own family (p. 7) and describes himself as feeling like "an imposter" in his professional life as a doctor (p. 8). Discuss David's psyche, his history, and what led him to make that fateful decision on the night of his children's birth.
3. When David instructs Caroline to take Phoebe to the institution, Caroline could have flatly refused or she could have gone to the authorities. Why doesn't she? Was she right to do what she did and raise Phoebe as her own? Was Caroline morally obligated to tell Norah the truth right from the beginning? Or was her moral obligation simply to take care of Phoebe at whatever cost? Why does she come to Norah after David's death?
4. Though David wanted no part of her, Phoebe goes on to lead a full life, bringing much joy to Caroline and Al. Her story calls into question how we determine what kind of life is worth living. How would you define such a life? In contrast to Phoebe's, how would you describe the quality of Paul's life as he grew up?
5. Throughout the novel, the characters often describe themselves as feeling as if they are watching their own lives from the outside. For instance, David describes the moment when his wife is going into labor and says "he felt strangely as if he himself were suspended in the room . . . watching them both from above" (p. 10). What do you think Edwards is trying to convey here? Have you ever experienced similar feelings in your own life?
6. There is an obvious connection between David and Caroline, most aptly captured by a particular moment described through David's point of view: "Their eyes met, and it seemed to the doctor that he knew her—that they knew each other—in some profound and certain way" (p. 12). What is the significance of this moment for each of them? How would you describe the connection between them? Why do you think David married Norah and not Caroline?
7. After Norah has successfully destroyed the wasps' nest, Edwards writes that there was something happening in Norah's life, "an explosion, some way in which life could never be the same" (p. 139). What does she mean, and what is the significance of Norah's "fight" with these wasps?
8. When David meets Rosemary (p. 267) it turns out to be a cathartic experience for him. What is it about her that enables David to finally speak the truth? Why does he feel compelled to take care of her?
9. The secret that David keeps is enormous and ultimately terribly destructive to himself and his family. Can you imagine a circumstance when it might be the right choice to shield those closest to you from the truth?
10. What do you think Norah's reaction would have been if David had been honest with her from the beginning? How might Norah have responded to the news that she had a daughter with Down syndrome? How might each of their lives have been different if David had not handed Phoebe to Caroline that fateful day?