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Small Great Things (Picoult)

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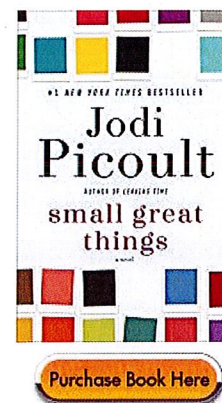
Small Great Things

Jodi Picoult, 2016

Random House

480 pp.

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Summary

Ruth Jefferson is a labor and delivery nurse at a Connecticut hospital with more than twenty years' experience. During her shift, Ruth begins a routine checkup on a newborn, only to be told a few minutes later that she's been reassigned to another patient.

The parents are white supremacists and don't want Ruth, who is African American, to touch their child. The hospital complies with their request, but the next day, the baby goes into cardiac distress while Ruth is alone in the nursery. Does she obey orders or does she intervene?

Ruth hesitates before performing CPR and, as a result, is charged with a serious crime.

Kennedy McQuarrie, a white public defender, takes her case but gives unexpected advice: Kennedy insists that mentioning race in the courtroom is not a winning strategy. Conflicted by Kennedy's counsel, Ruth tries to keep life as normal as possible for her family—especially her teenage son—as the case becomes a media sensation.

As the trial moves forward, Ruth and Kennedy must gain each other's trust, and come to see that what they've been taught their whole lives about others—and themselves—might be wrong.

With incredible empathy, intelligence, and candor, Jodi Picoult tackles race, privilege, prejudice, justice, and compassion—and doesn't offer easy answers. *Small Great Things* is a remarkable achievement from a writer at the top of her game. (From the publisher.)

Author Bio

- Birth—May 19, 1966
- Where—Nesconset (Long Island), New York, USA

- Education—B.A., Princeton University; M.Ed., Harvard University
- Currently—lives in Hanover, New Hampshire

Jodi Lynn Picoult is an American author. She was awarded the New England Bookseller Award for fiction in 2003. Picoult currently has approximately 14 million copies of her books in print worldwide.

Early life and education

Picoult was born and raised in Nesconset on Long Island in New York State; when she was 13, her family moved to New Hampshire. Even as a child, Picoult had a penchant for writing stories: she wrote her first story— "The Lobster Which Misunderstood"—when she was five.

While still in college—she studied writing at Princeton University—Picoult published two short stories in *Seventeen* magazine. To pay the bills, after graduation she worked at a variety of jobs, including copy writing and editing textbooks; she even taught eighth-grade English and attained a Masters in Education from Harvard University.

In 1989, Picoult married Timothy Warren Van Leer, whom she met in college, and while pregnant with their first child, wrote her first book. *Song of the Humpbacked Whale*, her literary debut, came out in 1992. Two more children followed, as did a string of bestseller novels. All told, Picoult has more than 20 books to her name.

Writing

At an earlier time in her life, Picoult believed the tranquility of family life in small-town New England offered little fodder for writing; the truly interesting stuff of fiction happened elsewhere. Ironically, it is small-town life that has ended up providing the settings for Picoult's novels. Within the cozy surroundings of family and friends, Picoult weaves complex webs of relationships that strain, even tear apart, under stress. She excels at portraying ordinary people who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances. Disoriented by some accident of chance, they stumble, whirl, and attempt to regain a footing in what was once their calm, ordered world.

Nor has Picoult ever shied from tackling difficult, controversial issues: school shooting, domestic violence, sexual abuse, teen suicide, and racism. She approaches painful topics with sympathy—and her characters with respect—while shining a light on individual struggles. Her legions of readers have loved and rewarded her for that compassion—and her novels have been consistent bestsellers.

Personal life

Picoult and her husband Timothy live in Hanover, New Hampshire. They have three children and a handful of pets. (*Adapted from a 2003 Barnes and Noble interview and from Wikipedia. Retrieved 9/28/2016.*)

Book Reviews

Leave it to Jodi Picoult to tackle the explosive subject of race—as she does in *Small Great Things*—with her signature stroke of compassion. In alternating chapters, Picoult uses those lovely, fluid sentences of hers to limn her characters and bring them to life. She even manages, surprisingly, to give a white supremacist his due.

READ MORE.

Molly Lundquist - LitLovers

A compelling, can't-put-it-down drama with a trademark [Jodi] Picoult twist.

Good Housekeeping

It's Jodi Picoult, the prime provider of literary soul food. This riveting drama is sure to be supremely satisfying and a bravely thought-provoking tale on the dangers of prejudice.

Redbook

Jodi Picoult is never afraid to take on hot topics, and in *Small Great Things*, she tackles race and discrimination in a way that will grab hold of you and refuse to let you go.... This page-turner is perfect for book clubs.

Popsugar

[I]nspired by a Flint, Mich., event.... The author's comprehensive research brings veracity to Ruth's story as a professional black woman trying to fit into white society.... Unfortunately, the author undermines this richly drawn and compelling story with a manipulative final plot twist as well as a Pollyannaish ending.

Publishers Weekly

Picoult delivers what her fans expect with a controversial topic that includes plenty of courtroom drama and a surprise twist. The novel is well researched, although it raises the question: can a person of one race write authentically about being another race? —Amy Stenftenagel, *Washington Cty. Lib., Woodbury, MN*

Library Journal

[T]he pervasiveness of American racism...is the real story here—and the novel would have been stronger if it had been written from this perspective throughout.... [But] Picoult's conclusion occurs in a separate fairy-tale world where racism suddenly does not exist, resulting in a rather juvenile portrayal of racial politics in America.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. Which of the three main characters (Ruth, Turk, or Kennedy) do you most relate to and why? Think about what you have in common with the other two characters as well—how can you relate to them?
2. The title of the book comes from the Martin Luther King, Jr. quote that Ruth's mother mentions on p. 173: "If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way." What does this quote mean to you? What are some examples of small great things done by the characters in the novel?
3. Discuss Ruth's relationship with her sister, Adisa. How does the relationship change over the course of the novel?
4. Kennedy seeks out a neighborhood in which she is the only white person to help her gain some perspective. Can you think of an example of a time when something about your identity made you an outsider? How were you affected by that experience?
5. All of the characters change over the course of the novel, but Turk's transformation is perhaps the most extreme. What do you think contributed to that change?
6. Discuss the theme of parenthood in the novel. What does being a parent mean to Ruth, to Kennedy, and to Turk? What does it mean to you?
7. Why do you think Ruth lies to Kennedy about touching Davis when he first starts seizing? What would you have done in her position?
8. Why do you think Kennedy decides to take Ruth's case? What makes it so important to her?
9. Discuss the difference between "equity" and "equality" as Kennedy explains it on p. 427. Do you think Ruth gets equity from the trial?
10. Was your perspective on racism or privilege changed by reading this book? Is there anything you now see differently?
11. Did the ending of *Small Great Things* surprise you? If so, why? Did you envision a different ending?
12. Did the Author's Note change your reading experience at all?
13. Have you changed anything in your daily life after reading *Small Great Things*?
14. Whom would you recommend *Small Great Things* to? Why?
(Questions issued by the publisher.)

Jodi Picoult

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Updated: Jan. 9, 2017

Born: May 19, 1966 in New York, New York, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Novelist

Updated: Jan. 9, 2017

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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Surname is pronounced "Pee-koe;" born May 19, 1966, in New York, NY; daughter of Myron Michel (a securities analyst) and Jane Ellen (a nursery school director) 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.

Avocational Interests: Baking, kayaking, reading. **Addresses:** Home: Hanover, NH. **E-mail:** jodi@jodipicoult.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 Advisory board member, VIDA: Women in Literary Arts.

AWARDS:

New England Book Award Winner for Fiction, New England Booksellers Association, 2003, for body of work; Best Mainstream Fiction Novel designation, Romance Writers of America, 2003, for *Second Glance*, and a lifetime achievement award; Top Ten Women's Fiction list, *Booklist*, 2005, Alex Award, 2005, and Abraham Lincoln Award for YA fiction in Illinois, all for *My Sister's Keeper*; Book Browse Diamond Award for novel of the year; "Fearless Fiction" Award, *Cosmopolitan* magazine, 2007; Author of the Year in the United Kingdom, Waterstone; Vermont Green Mountain Book Award; New Hampshire Literary Award for Outstanding Literary Merit, 2013-14. Honorary Doctor of Letters, Dartmouth College, 2010, and University of New Haven, 2012.

WORKS:**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, illustrated by Dustin Weaver, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2006.
(Author of introduction) S.E. Hinton, *The Outsiders*, Penguin Books (New York, NY), 2006.
Nineteen Minutes, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2007.
Change of Heart, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2008.
Handle with Care, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2009.
House Rules, Atria Books (New York, NY), 2010.
Sing You Home, Atria (New York, NY), 2011.
Lone Wolf, Emily Bestler (New York, NY), 2012.
(With daughter, Samantha van Leer) *Between the Lines*, Simon Pulse/Emily Bestler Books/Atria (New York, NY), 2012.
The Storyteller, Emily Bestler Books/Atria (New York, NY), 2013.
Leaving Time, Ballantine Books (New York, NY), 2014.
(With Samantha van Leer) *Off the Page*, illustrated by Yvonne Gilbert, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 2015.
Small Great Things, Random House Canada (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2016.

OTHER

(With Terry Dodson and Drew Johnson) *Wonder Woman: Love and Murder* (comic collection), DC Comics (New York, NY), 2007.
(With son, Jake van Leer, and Ellen Wilber) *Over the Moon* (musical play), Simon Pulse (New York, NY), 2011.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:

Picoult's novels *The Pact* and *Plain Truth* were adapted for television and aired on the Lifetime network in 2002 and 2004, respectively. New Line Cinema adapted *My Sister's Keeper* for a film starring Cameron Diaz, Elle Fanning, and Dakota Fanning, 2009; *Salem Falls* was adapted as a Lifetime Original Movie, 2011.

Sidelights

Beginning with the success of *Songs of the Humpback Whale* in 1992, novelist Jodi Picoult has produced many books in quick succession, often working on two books simultaneously. She told an interviewer on the Allen-Unwin website: "I moonlight as a writer. My daylight hours are spent with my three children." However, 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. Having reached the limits of her patience, she decides to leave her family and seek out her own mother, who left her when Paige was only five. Paige's heart-wrenching 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* contributor 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 wrote *Picture Perfect*, a study of wife abuse, and *Mercy*, a story dealing with euthanasia. Her 1998 novel, *The Pact: A Love Story*, is a legal thriller set in a New Hampshire town. The novel concerns the Hartes and the Golds, neighbors and close friends. Their teenage 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* contributor, 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 again for *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 and 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, writing 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, for instance, commented 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."

Salem Falls features Jack St. Bride, a teacher who spent eight months in jail because of an affair with an underage student. Although he was innocent of the crime, St. Bride is a marked man and moves to Salem Falls, where he works as a dishwasher and begins an affair with the diner's owner, which is subsequently threatened when townspeople learn of his past. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor called the novel "genuinely suspenseful and at times remarkably original."

Perfect Match deals with child abuse and an assistant district attorney who prosecutes such cases but fails to see signs of abuse in her own child. The title refers to DNA testing to find the abuser. In *Library Journal* Diana McRae noted that the novel's "memorable visual images and evocative language [make] *Perfect Match* a success." McRae's review was focused on *Second Glance*, which the critic called equally strong. In *Second Glance* Ross Wakemen has been swindled by fake ghost hunters. They claim they can help him find his lost love, who died in a car crash. Eventually, Ross moves to Vermont, becomes involved in the tearing down of an old house that may be haunted, and ultimately helps solve a decades-old mystery. Kristine Huntley wrote in *Booklist* that the author "mixes shocking fact and compelling fiction to produce a mesmerizing tale of love and second chances."

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 bad one. A *Kirkus Reviews* critic declared that 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.

Commenting on Picoult's 2005 novel, *Vanishing Acts*, a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor wrote: "As usual, Picoult ... spins a terrifically suspenseful tale by developing just the right human-interest elements to make a workable story." The story revolves around Delia Hopkins, who conducts search-and-rescue missions with her bloodhound, Greta. However, Delia suddenly discovers that she is, in fact, a missing person when her father is arrested for kidnapping. It turns out that her father had taken her from a drunken woman in Arizona when Delia was only four years old. The novel follows Delia as the case is slowly fleshed out and it is discovered that she is at least partially a Hopi Indian. Karen Karbo, writing in *Entertainment Weekly*, noted the novel's "multiple narrators ... who cunningly reflect different versions of the truth." "Picoult weaves together plot and characterization in a landscape that is fleshed out in rich, journalistic detail," concluded a *Publishers Weekly* contributor.

In *The Tenth Circle*, which refers to one of Dante's circles of hell, Picoult tells the story of the comic artist Daniel Stone, who writes a graphic novel that parallels the real-life story of his teenage daughter, Trixie, who was raped by Jason Underhill while on a date with the teenager. To make his life even more of a hell, Daniel learns of his wife's affair the same night his daughter is raped. In the novel, Daniel's artwork from his graphic novel is illustrated by Dustin Weaver. "Picoult had this reader up until the very end of this fast-paced tale," wrote Bette-Lee Fox in the *Library Journal*. *Booklist* contributor Huntley noted that the "sad, complex novel should appeal to the many readers who have enjoyed her previous works."

The author turns to a troubling modern phenomenon in *Nineteen Minutes*, which *Entertainment Weekly* contributor Tina Jordan called "expertly crafted, thought-provoking, and compelling." The novel revolves around a high school shooting carried out by alienated teenager Peter Houghton. Bullied in school, Peter spends much of his spare time playing violent games on his computer and ultimately takes a gun to school and kills ten people. As Peter's story is told in flashbacks, the novel focuses on Judge Alex Cormier and his daughter, another troubled child who witnessed the shootings. Noting that the author "knows how to hook" the reader, Jocelyn McClurg commented in *USA Today* that the novel's "very ordinariness gives it surprising power." Writing in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Jackie Loohaus reported that "Picoult's questions have all been asked before, but never with such skill, sensitivity and depth in novel form."

Change of Heart, Picoult's 2008 release, delves into the human condition through the eyes of Shay Bourne, an inmate sentenced to death for the murder of a police officer and his stepdaughter. The book has five different narrators, and each one offers a unique perspective on the novel's action. Shay has been imprisoned for eleven years, and now the surviving daughter of the murdered cop needs a heart transplant. Shay wants to donate his after he is put to death. *Change of Heart* traverses a web of complex issues relevant to contemporary society. After Shay is imprisoned, a series of strange

occurrences, like water faucets running wine instead of water, begin happening at the prison. Shay is viewed as a messiah-like figure as he spouts the Gospel and seeks a type of redemption for his foul deeds. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor pointed out: "Picoult moves the story along with lively debates about prisoner rights and religion." *Booklist* contributor Seaman said: "Picoult's bold story of loss, justice, redemption, and faith reminds us how tragically truth can be concealed and denied."

Picoult returns to subject matter that pushes social norms while questioning complicated issues in *Handle with Care*. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor noted: "Picoult's strengths are evident in her exhaustively researched and gut-wrenching demonstration of Ol's devastating effects." Willow is a six-year-old with a disease (osteogenesis imperfecta) that has made her bones brittle. Thus she is subject to frequent broken bones, sixty-eight in all, seven that took place while she was still in her mother's womb. Eventually, Charlotte, Willow's mother, is persuaded to file a wrongful birth suit against her obstetrician. The failure to diagnose Willow has resulted in a life of pain that could have been avoided. The lawsuit pushes Willow's family to the breaking point. Her half-sister turns to self-mutilation in a desperate attempt for attention. Her father files for divorce after Charlotte begins to go through with the lawsuit. Willow is left at the center of a family in disarray. *Booklist* contributor Deborah Donovan noted that "Picoult probes these sensitive issues with empathy and compassion."

Picoult followed *Handle with Care* with *House Rules*, *Sing You Home*, and *Lone Wolf*. In the latter, Picoult introduces readers to Edward Warren and Luke Warren. Edward has been living abroad for six years, but he returns to his native New Hampshire when his father and seventeen-year-old sister are in a terrible car accident. Cara will survive, but Luke is in a coma. Luke is a world-renowned wolf expert, but now Edward must step forward and make decisions about his famous father's health care. As he grapples with extended life support and the question of whether or when to pull the plug, all Edward can think about is the last time he saw his father, an encounter that ended in a heated argument. The family drama heats up when Cara heals and decides to fight for her father's life in court and gain legal guardianship over Luke to prevent Edward from removing their father's life support. Luke's connection to wolves underscores the narrative as the family disintegrates.

Discussing the novel on her home page, Picoult remarked that *Lone Wolf* "looks at the intersection between medical science and moral choices. If we can keep people who have no hope for recovery alive artificially, should they also be allowed to die artificially? Does the potential to save someone else's life with a donated organ balance the act of hastening another's death? And finally, when a father's life hangs in the balance, which sibling should get to decide his fate?" Some reviewers responded positively to this aim, but others took issue with the execution. For instance, *Booklist* contributor Carol Haggas felt that the book's "medical and moral issues are often eclipsed by overwrought teenage melodrama and heavy-handed working of the 'lone wolf/Luke Warren' trope." Echoing this sentiment in *Kirkus Reviews*, a critic observed that "the thoroughly researched wolf lore is fascinating; the rest of the story is a more conventional soap opera of hospital, and later courtroom histrionics." Stating the opposite in *Publishers Weekly*, a columnist declared: "You can always count on Picoult for a terrific page-turner about a compelling subject." As Deirdre Donahue declared in her *USA Today* assessment: "Picoult captures Luke's destructive but magnificent obsession with these shy predators, weaving in details about how these mysterious creatures live, hunt, love and die. Always insightful about human families, Picoult proves to be equally perceptive about animal ones."

Picoult next teamed with her teenage daughter, Samantha van Leer, to write the young-adult novel *Between the Lines*. The story features high-school outcast Delilah, who finds all her friends in books. She also finds a love interest there when she discovers a fairy tale in the school library. The handsome prince, Oliver, can see and hear her and even talk to her. Together, they try to find a way to break Oliver out of his book and into Delilah's world.

Picoult resisted writing a young-adult novel for years, and she remarked on her home page that she finally agreed "because my daughter Sammy conceived the idea and suggested we write it together. But also because I'd like to give young readers who aren't ready for my 'heavier' novels a chance to still enjoy my fiction." The author added: "To me, *Between the Lines* is a great fit for preteens and

younger teens who may not be quite ready to tackle moral and ethical dilemmas in fiction. There are characters their own age, feeling feelings they have probably felt. As in my other novels, the teens in the book seem very real--they talk and act like adolescents (I know this, because I had a bonafide one co-writing with me!)."

Most reviewers found that the young-adult novel is a delightful and imaginative tale, but *School Library Journal* correspondent Misti Tidman complained: "While the writing style is polished and the pacing is good, the characters lack depth and the ending falls flat." On the other hand, *Novelicious.com* writer Amanda Keats announced that "the book is instantly magical, transporting the reader into a world where fiction is reality and the divide between reader and book has been crossed. ... *Between the Lines* will have you guessing to the very end and devouring each page at great speed." Offering similar praise in her *Voice of Youth Advocates* review, Barbara Allen called the novel "a multilayered universe where what is real is in the eye of the beholder." Furthermore, a *Kirkus Reviews* critic advised: "Book lovers in particular are likely to get a kick out of the blurring of the lines between character and reader, fact and fiction." Debbie Carton, writing in *Booklist*, was also impressed, stating that "the tender, positive tone and effective pacing that builds to a satisfying finish will inspire readers." According to a *Publishers Weekly* columnist, *Between the Lines* is a "clever YA romance" with "snappy chapter endings."

Picoult published *The Storyteller* in 2013. New Hampshire retreat center baker Sage is estranged from her family, with the exception of her Holocaust survivor grandmother, Minka. After the ninety-five-year-old German teacher Josef reveals to her that he was a former SS officer and Auschwitz guard, Sage contacts FBI Nazi hunter Leo to see if Minka's stories can place Josef at the camp.

Writing in *USA Today*, McClurg found that "at its best moments, *The Storyteller* thoughtfully, even powerfully, grapples with complex moral questions. But too much of this novel just seems forced and frivolous, leaving an unpleasant aftertaste--like a gooey pastry you know is bad for you but just keep eating." A *California Bookwatch* contributor labeled it "a gripping, vivid" novel. *Booklist* contributor Huntley stated: "Based on extensive research, this is a powerful and riveting, sometimes gut-wrenching, read." A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* thought that the work was "uneven." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor described the novel as being "a fictional testament as horrifying as it is suspenseful."

In 2014 Picoult published the novel *Leaving Time*. Once she is old enough, young Jenna decides to scour her mother's notes to find out what may have happened to her when she disappeared from the elephant sanctuary where she worked when Jenna was only three years old. Her father has been in a mental institute since the time her mother disappeared. Jenna teams up with psychic Serenity Jones and ex-police detective Virgil Stanhope to consider new evidence she found.

Reviewing the novel in *Washington Post Book World*, Karin Gillespie remarked that "poignant moments are often flecked with Jenna's authentic-sounding teen voice Unfortunately, though, Jenna's witty voice is interspersed with passages narrated by less engaging characters. Alice in particular comes across as clinical, and the entries from her journal, though informative, occasionally read like a zoology textbook." In a review in the *Boston Globe*, Karen Campbell commented that "*Leaving Time* is a little uneven. Jenna seems too wise and street savvy to be totally believable. And one pivotal scene midway and the novel's shocker of an ending require considerable suspension of disbelief. But that doesn't stop it from both piercing and uplifting the hearts of those willing go along for the ride." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor said that "the ending borrows unforgivably from a source it would be equally unforgivable to reveal." Reviewing the novel in *Library Journal*, Chelsie Harris described it as being "a truly engaging read that crosses through the genres of mystery and the supernatural." *Booklist* contributor Haggas observed that the novel "combines a poignant tale of human loss with a perplexing crime story that delivers a powerhouse ending." A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* opined that "the pachyderms are as complex as the humans, making the journey memorable and poignant."

Small Great Things explores the travails of Ruth Jefferson, an African American nurse who specializes in labor and delivery. Ruth's supervisors and coworkers are white, which doesn't bother Ruth; she believes in treating people according to their merits and believes that the people around her will do the same. This belief is shattered when Turk and Brittany Bauer give birth to a son in the delivery ward. The Bauers are white supremacists, and they don't want Ruth to touch their newborn son. The hospital agrees to their request, leaving Ruth heartbroken, and the situation continues to unravel from there: Ruth is the only nurse present when the Bauers' son suddenly dies. She is arrested and tried for murder, but her public defender Kennedy McQuarrie, refuses to address the matter of race during the trial.

Sharing her inspiration for the story in an NPR Web site interview, Picoult told Scott Simon: "In 2012, I read a news story that came out of Flint, Mich., and there was an African American nurse there with twenty years of labor and delivery experience who helped deliver a baby. And in the aftermath, the father called her supervisor into the room and asked that she not touch the baby nor anyone who looked like her. He pulled up his sleeve to reveal a swastika tattoo. There was a Post-it note left on the baby's file that said no African American personnel to touch this infant." Picoult's resulting novel is "a thought-provoking examination of racism in America today, both overt and subtle," Huntley stated in *Booklist*. Amy Stenftenagel, writing in *Library Journal*, was also impressed, and she announced that Picoult "delivers what her fans expect with a controversial topic that includes plenty of courtroom drama and a surprise twist." Offering further applause in the *Washington Post Book World*, Eleanor Brown announced that "*Small Great Things* is the most important novel Jodi Picoult has ever written. Frank, uncomfortably introspective and right on the day's headlines, it will challenge her readers."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

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'Small Great Things' Author Jodi Picoult Talks About Inspired The Novel

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October 8, 2016 · 8:29 AM ET

Heard on Weekend Edition Saturday

Jodi Picoult's new novel "Small Great Things" tells the story of an African American labor and delivery nurse and the racism surrounding her care of a white supremacist couple's newborn son. She tells NPR's Scott Simon what compelled her to write this story.

SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

Ruth Jefferson, a labor and delivery nurse at a hospital in Connecticut, says every baby is born beautiful. It's what we project on them that makes them ugly. Ruth is barred from tending to a newborn baby by the baby's parents. Ruth Jefferson is African-American. Brittany and Turk Bauer are white supremacists. But Davis, their baby, goes into cardiac distress while Ruth is on duty, briefly alone in the nursery. Should she disobey the order she's been given by the hospital or touch the baby to try to save him? And does her slight hesitation doom the newborn boy?

"Small Great Things" is the latest novel by Jodi Picoult, whose bestsellers have sold more than 14 million copies around the world. She joins us from WGBH in Boston. Thanks so much for being with us.

JODI PICOULT: Thanks for having me.

SIMON: What made you want to tell a story like this?

PICOULT: I'd wanted to write about racism. I've wanted to do that for a very long time. Twenty years ago, I started a book after reading a news story about an African-American undercover cop who was shot four times in the back on the subway by his white colleagues. And I started that book, and I tried very hard to write it, and ultimately I failed. I just couldn't write an authentic story. And I really second-guessed myself. I thought, you know, do I even have the right to write this story? I am a white woman. I have not lived this life. This is not my story to tell.

And then in 2012, I read a news story that came out of Flint, Mich., and there was an African-American nurse there with 20 years of labor and delivery experience who helped deliver a baby. And in the aftermath, the father called her supervisor into the room and asked that she not touch the baby nor anyone who looked like her. He pulled up his sleeve to reveal a swastika tattoo. There was a Post-it note left on the baby's file that said no African-American personnel to touch this infant. And the nurse wound up suing the hospital. She settled out of court. I hope she got a very large payout.

But it became a seed for me that grew, and I began to push the envelope a little bit, wondering what would happen if that nurse had been left alone with the baby? What would happen if she had to make a decision that could result on her going to trial and being defended by a white public defender who, like me and like many people I know, would never consider herself to be a racist? And I began to think about trying to tell the story from three different points of view - the African-American nurse, the white public defender and the skinhead father - as they all confronted their beliefs about power and privilege and race.

SIMON: I made note of a - can I call it an insight? - Turk Bauer, your skinhead, has about Kennedy McQuarrie, who is Ruth's attorney. And he says, I bet she drinks pumpkin spice lattes, voted for Obama and donates after watching those commercials with sad dogs. I have to admit that made me laugh.

PICOULT: (Laughter) Well, you know, there's a good point for humor in a very heavy book. I think that in that particular case what Turk is doing is making a snap judgment about Kennedy the way he would make a snap judgment about a person of color as

well. We are all subject to that. We all have implicit biases, and we can't even help to act on those. It's like it's in the air we breathe. It's - as Beverly Daniel Tatum says, it's like smog. You're constantly just taking it in without realizing what it's doing to you and how it's making you think. And, you know, I would not go to Turk for his great insights and judgments (laughter). I think he has a little learning to do before the book is up.

But yeah, he in a way is just exhibiting once again even with someone of his own race, a white woman who he would consider to be a race traitor because she is defending Ruth who is African-American, you know, he is exhibiting his prejudice. And the interesting thing is that it's very easy to look at the skinhead and understand that's a racist, but racism goes beyond that. One of the things that I really learned while writing this novel was that racism is really about power, too. It's about prejudice plus power, and when you're white in America, you hold all the advantages. You hold all the cards. And so even if you are not talking actively about racism, that doesn't mean you're not part of the problem.

SIMON: 2016 a particularly good year for this novel to come out?

PICOULT: Well (laughter), it certainly is an interesting season for it to come out in. I would argue that although every reviewer, every interview that I've done has mentioned the timeliness of this novel, I would argue that any time in the past 200 years would have been timely. It's not that racism hasn't existed in our society. I think it's that in today's day and age with the 24/7 news cycle and with the internet, we see microaggressions and acts of racism being played out in real time. And that's what makes this feel so incredibly immediate.

SIMON: Jody Picoult - her novel - "Small Great Things." Thanks so much for being with us.

PICOULT: It was my honor. Thank you so much, Scott.

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Nurse sues after hospital grants dad's racial request

Robin Erb, Detroit Free Press Published 2:28 p.m. ET Feb. 18, 2013 | Updated 8:12 p.m. ET Feb. 18, 2013

Father asked supervisor not to allow any African-American nurses to care for his newborn.



(Photo: File photo via Thinkstock)

FLINT, Mich. -- An African-American nurse who is suing a Michigan hospital because she said it agreed to a man's request that no African-American nurses care for his newborn (<http://www.freep.com/article/20130218/NEWS06/130218038/Man-requests-No-African-American-nurse-care-for-baby-nurse-sues-hospital>) recalled Monday that she was stunned by her employer's actions.

"I didn't even know how to react," said Tonya Battle, 49, a veteran of the neonatal intensive care unit and a nearly 25-year employee of the Hurley Medical Center (<http://www.hurleymc.com/>) in Flint.

Battle's lawsuit states (<http://www.freep.com/assets/freep/pdf/C4201054218.PDF>) a note was posted on the assignment clipboard reading "No African American nurse to take care of baby," according to the eight-page complaint against the medical center.

Hurley, which according to its website was founded in 1908 and is a 443-bed teaching hospital, released a brief statement Monday, saying that it "does not comment on past or current litigation."

Battle said she was working as a registered nurse in Hurley's neonatal intensive care unit Oct. 31, when a man walked into the NICU, where Battle was at an infant's bedside. He reached toward the child, according to the lawsuit filed in Genesee County (Mich.) Circuit Court last month.

"I introduced myself to him. 'Hi, I'm Tonya and I'm taking care of your baby. Can I see your (identification) band?,' " Battle said, referring to the hospital-issued identification used to identify infants' parents. "And he said in return, 'And I need to see your supervisor.' "

Perplexed by his curtness, she asked for the charge nurse, who spoke separately to the man.

When the charge nurse returned, she told Battle that the father didn't want African Americans to care for his child. Further, the charge nurse told Battle that he had rolled up his sleeve to expose what appeared to be a swastika.

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"I felt like I froze," Battle said. "I just was really dumbfounded. I couldn't believe that's why he was so angry (and) that's why he was requesting my charge nurse. I think my mouth hit the floor. It was really disbelief."

The charge nurse passed the request to her supervisor, and Battle was reassigned, according to the complaint.

Even after hospital officials removed the sign that had been placed for a short time on the assignment chart, Battle and other black nurses were not assigned to care for the baby for about a month "because of their race," according to the lawsuit. Battle is seeking punitive damages for emotional stress, mental anguish, humiliation and damage to her reputation.

Battle said colleagues have told her they were surprised at the hospital's stand and they have been supportive. But she said she felt the issue was important enough to pursue the matter legally because she expected Hurley to have turned down such a request.

"What flashed in my mind is, 'What's next? A note on the water fountain that says 'No blacks?' Or a note on the bathroom that says 'No blacks?'" she said.

Larry Dubin, a law professor at University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, called the hospital's actions, if true, "morally repugnant."

"The patient's father has the right to select the hospital to treat the child. The father does not have the right to exercise control over the hospital in discrimination of its employees," he said.

The case "puts into tension two different facets of the law," said Lance Gable, an associate professor specializing in health law at Wayne State University Law School.

Patients choose their doctors, he said. Some women prefer to see female gynecologists, for example.

"But there are also laws prohibiting discrimination," he added, citing the 1964 Civil Rights Act, among others.

"The bottom line is that the law is not clear about this, although I suspect the nurse will have a pretty strong case," Gable said.

One in three doctors in a 2007 survey said they felt patients believed they got better care if they matched their doctor's race. Patients' requests were more likely to be honored if the request came from someone who was female, non-white or Muslim, according to a report on the survey written in part by a University of Michigan researcher.

But just how often hospitals receive requests based on race is unclear.

Vickie Winn, a spokeswoman for Children's Hospital of Michigan (<http://www.childrensdmc.org/>), said the hospital may try to accommodate a patient's request for providers with a certain religion or gender, but a request for a doctor based on race is different, she said.

"It has come up in the past, but generally speaking, we don't accommodate that. ... We have a very diverse population, and we just don't feed into those kinds of beliefs," Winn said.

Julie Gafkay, an employment discrimination and civil rights lawyer in Frankenmuth, Mich., who is representing Battle, said medical personnel might receive such requests from time to time, but employers must guard against racial discrimination.

"I don't doubt that people have made requests like this in the past. You're not going to control the prejudices and biases of people. That's not my client's issue. The problem she has ... is that her employer of 25 years granted" the request.

She added: "We made a decision in this country that that kind of discrimination is wrong."

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