

A portrait of Jodi Picoult, a woman with long, curly, light brown hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a red cardigan over a white top and a black necklace with a circular pendant. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a window with white trim.

# Jodi Picoult

BY JESSICA TEISCH

**IN JODI PICOULT'S NEWEST NOVEL, *Handle with Care*** (see review on page 39), Charlotte and Sean O'Keefe are devastated when they give birth to a daughter with a rare genetic bone disease. With their child's health and lifestyle severely compromised, they must make a decision that raises questions about medical ethics and morality, friendship, family responsibility, and the value of human life.

In *Handle with Care*, Picoult, the best-selling author of 16 novels, has once again chosen an emotional, controversial subject and examined the extraordinary choices that can suddenly confront ordinary people. In her page-turning, ripped-from-the-headlines novels, no issue remains taboo. Picoult addresses topics that are often argued about in the abstract—teen suicide, sexual abuse, domestic violence, abortion, religion, and genetic manipulation—and integrates them into very real, very human stories. Her books usually feature multiple narrators, allowing the reader to experience the nuances of conflicting points of view and the individual aftermaths of decisions—decisions often culminating in classic courtroom showdowns.

To gain immediacy into her characters' plights, Picoult literally puts herself in their shoes. She lived with an Amish dairy farmer for a week for *Plain Truth*, observed cardiac surgery for *Harvesting the Heart*, sat in jail for *The Pact*, went ghost hunting for *Second Glance*, and spent time with families whose children have osteogenesis imperfecta for *Handle with Care*. Picoult's keen intuition into the hearts and minds of men, women, and children and her deep social commentary, no matter the issue, bring her novels close to home.

Although she often focuses on family dynamics in her work, Picoult grew up in a well-adjusted home in suburban Long Island. She studied creative writing with Mary Morris at Princeton and then earned a master's degree in education from Harvard. While pregnant with her first child, she wrote her first novel, *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1992). Since then, Picoult has received the 2003 New England Book Award, the Alex Award from the Young Adult Library Services, a lifetime achievement award for mainstream fiction from the Romance Writers of America, and *Cosmopolitan* magazine's "Fearless Fiction" Award, among other honors. Picoult lives with her husband and three children in New Hampshire.

## DOES GOD EXIST?

### Keeping Faith (1999)



Picoult's sixth novel casts a critical eye on family dynamics and motherhood. Its dramatic courtroom finale frames Picoult's big questions about God, religion, love, faith, and forgiveness.

**THE STORY:** In New Canaan, New Hampshire, Mariah White catches her husband, Colin, having an affair—again. When Colin moves out, their seven-year-old daughter, Faith—who witnessed the infidelity—acquires an imaginary friend, God. With this

female deity at her side, Faith starts to spout passages from the Bible, to show stigmata, and to enact miraculous healings. Could Faith actually be seeing God? Soon, the clergy—from the local rabbi to the Catholic priest—take an interest as religious controversy surrounds the family and a vicious custody fight begins.

**"Such a plot could easily fall into the realm of gothic melodrama, but instead ... it's addictively readable, raising valid questions about religion without getting maudlin. For a novel, that in itself is a miracle."**

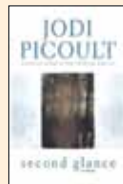
VANESSA V. FRIEDMAN, ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY, 6/11/99

**"Picoult does a spectacular job at weaving in all sorts of spiritual elements: religious history and hoaxes, faith healing, how the media and Americans would respond to a possible miracle. The story makes you wonder about God. And that is a rare moment, indeed, in modern fiction."**

DEIRDRE DONAHUE, USA TODAY, 5/27/99

## THE AUTHOR'S PERSONAL FAVORITE

### Second Glance (2003)



*Second Glance*, Picoult's tenth book, features one of her trademark styles: each chapter breaks down into short, fast-paced vignettes. Though a tale of supernatural happenings, the book has very serious themes at its core, including the ethics of Vermont's 1930s eugenics project.

**THE STORY:** When ghost hunter Ross Wakeman's fiancée dies, he strives to reconnect with her spirit. His attempts fail, and he turns up at the home of his sister, who, because of her son's rare genetic sensitivity to sunlight, keeps the same night hours as the ghosts that haunt their town of Comtosook, Vermont. Ross soon meets a lovely but extraordinary young woman—one who died in 1932, from mysterious causes. Take the local Abenaki Indian tribe, who oppose development of a mall; an elderly eugenics expert; and a genetic diagnostician whose daughter sees ghosts—and past and present, love and loss, collide.

**"Ghosts and scientists who believe it is possible to control a person's genes seem subjects at the opposite ends of the spectrum, but they come together seamlessly because of the strength of Jodi Picoult's characters, from an ancient Indian wise man trying to protect an Abenaki burial ground to an aging, arrogant scientist withering away in a nursing home, disturbed only by a child's imaginary cry."**

SUSAN DOOLEY, WASHINGTON POST, 5/18/03

**"Building on a foundation of a forgotten past, Jodi Picoult creates a novel that raises an unsettling mix of questions about what was, what is and what could be. ... *Second Glance* is a mix of ghost, mystery and love stories, but it is also a sharp social commentary."**

ROBIN VIDIMOS, DENVER POST, 4/20/03

## BIOMEDICAL DILEMMAS

### My Sister's Keeper (2004)

◆ BOOKBROWSE DIAMOND AWARD, BEST READ BY THE RICHARD & JUDY BOOK CLUB (BRITAIN)



In her 11th novel, Picoult, ever fearless in raising ethical questions, tackles a biomedical controversy: is it fair to create a life to save a life? With seven first-person narrators and shifting perspectives, the novel offers no easy answers. (★★★★ July/Aug 2004)

**THE STORY:** Anna Fitzgerald was conceived as a genetically perfect donor for her older sister Kate, who suffers from leukemia. After donating blood, bone marrow, and other body parts, Anna rebels at age 13, fleeing yet another painful operation (a kidney transplant) for her sister's benefit. She hires a brash lawyer and sues for "medical emancipation"—control of her body. Desperate for freedom, Anna is all too aware of the price—her beloved sibling's death. The courtroom drama escalates as their mother Sara, a former civil defense attorney, fights the case.

**"This book may be Picoult's breakout book, moving her from a book-group favorite to a wider audience. ... My Sister's Keeper is arguably her best and most accessible effort to date."** ROBIN VIDIMOS, DENVER POST, 4/4/04

**"My Sister's Keeper is a thrill to read, and it winds up asking a final, important question: Can a child born to save another ever really be free?"** KATHERINE ARIE, WASHINGTON POST, 4/4/04

**THE MOVIE:** 2009, starring Cameron Diaz, Abigail Breslin, and Alec Baldwin, and directed by Nick Cassavetes.

## THE FIRST #1 BEST SELLER

### Nineteen Minutes (2007)



In this emotional page-turner and exploration of popularity, power, alienation, and social mores, Picoult presents the perpetrator as the victim of circumstances. At its core, the book examines the costs of remaining true to oneself. (★★★★ SELECTION May/June 2007)

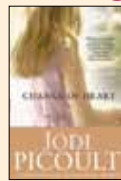
**THE STORY:** One morning, 17-year-old Peter Houghton sets off for school with a small arsenal in his backpack. His lethal rampage takes only 19 minutes, but he kills nine students and one teacher, wounds many others, and changes the lives of the inhabitants of Sterling, New Hampshire, forever. Moving back and forth through time, Picoult reveals the daily humiliation that Peter suffered at the hands of bullies while following the drama of Peter's trial. As the survivors and their families struggle to make sense of the tragedy, the parents wonder just how well they know their children.

**"Ms. Picoult tells this story in healing mode, emphasizing the slights and taunts and oversights that made Peter go wrong. ... However doggedly she belabors the obvious, she writes articulately and clearly, making her all too much of a rarity among popular authors."** JANET MASLIN, NEW YORK TIMES, 3/16/07

**"Impressively, Picoult doesn't make anything about Nineteen Minutes neat or easy or comfortable. Part of what makes the novel so difficult to set down, besides Picoult's smooth prose and driving narrative pace, is that so many of the characters' emotional battles strike unquestionably close to home."** JENNIE A. CAMP, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, 3/2/07

## THE SECOND #1 BEST SELLER

### Change of Heart (2008)



In her 15th novel, Picoult poses thought-provoking questions about capital punishment, organ donation, religion, redemption, and justice. To research the book and explore the ethics of execution, she visited an Arizona prison's death row.

**THE STORY:** Eleven years after Shay Bourne was sentenced to death for killing young Elizabeth Nealon, her sister, Claire, needs a heart transplant. Attempting to make amends for his crime and achieve salvation, Shay volunteers to donate his heart. Not only does Shay's request stymie the state's execution plans; it also puts Claire's mother in a difficult situation: can she overcome her hatred and her desire for vengeance to save her other daughter? As she grapples with this dilemma, an inmate's pet is brought back to life, wine flows where there once was water, and more supernatural events occur.

**"While Change of Heart is a compelling page-turner, it is more than just a suspenseful countdown to an execution. ... Picoult is a skilled wordsmith, and she beautifully creates situations that not only provoke the mind but touch the flawed souls in all of us."** KAREN CAMPBELL, BOSTON GLOBE, 4/3/08

**"Her latest novel is a good example of how an often winning formula can go awry. ... Sensational but not surprising, Change of Heart manages to lose its humanity in a maelstrom of life-and-death issues."** DONNA RIFKIND, WASHINGTON POST, 3/19/08

## PICOULT'S OTHER NOVELS

*Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1992), *Harvesting the Heart* (1993), *Picture Perfect* (1995), *Mercy* (1996), *The Pact* (1998), *Plain Truth* (1999), *Salem Falls* (2001), *Perfect Match* (2002), *Vanishing Acts* (★★★★ May/June 2005), *The Tenth Circle* (★★★★ May/June 2006) ■

## INSIDE PICOULT'S NOVELS

**Bookmarks:** What hands-on/site research did you do for *Handle with Care*?

*JP:* In order to learn more about osteogenesis imperfecta (OI), I spent time with multiple families who have children with OI. I changed diapers and went to physical therapy and the playground and followed the kids around school, to see what they were capable of doing and what was difficult for them. I remember at one home, the mom pulled into the driveway and told me to take her son out of the car seat. He had Type III OI—very severe—and for a moment, I completely panicked. What if I broke his arm trying to get him out of there? Then I realized this was exactly what these parents go through every moment. I also rode with a local police officer to get myself in the mind-set of Sean's character. At one point, we were called to a college office to investigate a FedEx package that had about two pounds of marijuana in it. We confiscated the drugs, and as we were driving back, the officer was joking around, trying to convince me to have my picture taken with the drugs and then to put it on my Web site. I told him I didn't think that was a particularly great idea!

**Bookmarks:** What was the most unusual research you conducted for a novel?

*JP:* Ghost hunting for *Second Glance*. I did it several times with a group called The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS), and each time, I experienced something I cannot explain even now—from pennies appearing out of nowhere to temperature changes in a matter of seconds to sealed boxes of clothing in an empty room that somehow became unsealed, with the clothing strewn all over the place, even though no one was present.

**Bookmarks:** What did you uncover in your research for *Handle with Care* that may surprise readers?

*JP:* That although we tend to be quick to judge people who initiate wrongful birth suits, not a single parent I interviewed truly wished that his/her child had never been born. On the contrary, these parents love their kids so much they want the best life possible for them, and since insurance can't cover the health expenses, they find this other legal loophole in the hopes of getting a payout that can help them provide for their kids. I also discovered that lawsuits have been brought by parents whose child was born with a genetic abnormality that had never been diagnosed before (and therefore could not have been prenatally screened)—and yet these parents have still won wrongful birth suits alleging that the OB/GYN should have told them prior to the child's birth that the child would be disabled. And on a totally unrelated note, I discovered that bulimia in teens often goes hand in hand with cutting!

**Bookmarks:** The subjects for each of your novels are very topical. How did you become interested in the medical (and ethical) issues addressed in *Handle with Care*?

*JP:* I read an article in the *New York Times* about wrongful birth suits, and it got me wondering. The crux of that kind of lawsuit involves a mother standing up in court and saying that if she had known the child was going to be disabled, she would have terminated the pregnancy: as a result, if the mother wins the suit, she gets millions of dollars in damages. I thought, what if the mother's child is disabled physically but mentally aware that the mother is suing and saying these things? How would the child feel to hear the mother say that because the child was not born healthy, he or she isn't wanted? The fascinating thing about a wrongful birth lawsuit is that from the plaintiff's point of view, it's a medical malpractice suit. But from the defendant's perspective, it's about who has the right to decide what kind of life is worth living. The OB? The parent? The child herself?

**Bookmarks:** You have a wonderful talent for transforming ethical dilemmas into very human stories—without taking sides or judging your characters. Why do you think it's important to challenge readers to think about the "answers"?

*JP:* I don't have the answers, so I have no right to tell a reader what's right or wrong. But I find we tend to form opinions without ever asking ourselves why our opinions are what they are. My books, I hope, encourage readers to explore that tendency—and perhaps to hear the opinion of the other side. I don't think having readers think about the answers to hard questions is nearly as important as getting them to admit that there's room for discussion.

**Bookmarks:** Please share with us which books you've recently enjoyed.

*JP:* *The Story of Forgetting* by Stefan Merrill Block. It's a terrific first novel about a boy whose mother has early onset Alzheimer's and an old man who can't forget the things he wishes he could. I loved the way the two story lines meshed.

*You're Not You* by Michelle Wildgen. People rarely write about the disabled in a way that isn't clichéd, but in this book, told through the eyes of a caregiver, we see the disintegration of a woman with ALS and how, by speaking for this woman who has literally lost her voice, the caregiver adopts some of her personality traits and goes through a blossoming of mind while her patient goes through a slow death of body.

*The Art of Racing in the Rain* by Garth Stein. I thought a book narrated by a dog was going to be a bit of a cliché; instead, I found myself completely absorbed. Anyone who has ever loved a pet and wondered what he's thinking behind those liquid eyes will be moved by this story of a dog—and of the family he tries to care for through a crisis. ■