

Nineteen Minutes

by Jodi Picoult

About the Book

Jodi Picoult, bestselling author of *My Sister's Keeper* and *The Tenth Circle*, pens her most riveting book yet, with a startling and poignant story about the devastating aftermath of a small-town tragedy.

Sterling is an ordinary New Hampshire town where nothing ever happens — until the day its complacency is shattered by an act of violence. Josie Cormier, the daughter of the judge sitting on the case, should be the state's best witness, but she can't remember what happened before her very own eyes — or can she? As the trial progresses, fault lines between the high school and the adult community begin to show — destroying the closest of friendships and families. *Nineteen Minutes* asks what it means to be different in our society, who has the right to judge someone else, and whether anyone is ever really who they seem to be.

Praise for the Book

“A master of the craft of storytelling.”

— AP Newswire

“Picoult spins fast-paced tales of family dysfunction, betrayal, and redemption. . . . [Her] depiction of these rites of contemporary adolescence is exceptional: unflinching, unjudgmental, utterly chilling.”

— *The Washington Post*

“Jodi Picoult's books explore all the shades of gray in a world too often judged in black and white.”

— *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“Expertly crafted, thought-provoking, and compelling.”

— *Entertainment Weekly*

“Bestseller Picoult (*My Sister's Keeper*) takes on another contemporary hot-button issue in her brilliantly told new thriller. . . . The author's insights into her characters' deep-seated emotions brings this ripped-from-the-headlines read chillingly alive.”

— *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

Courtesy of Simon & Schuster

About the Author

Jodi Picoult

American Novelist (1966–)

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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."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *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 Glimpse*; 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 Glimpse*; 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 Glimpse*; 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).

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2007

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Author Interview

Q: What drew you to the subject of a school shooting for the premise of a novel?

Jodi Picoult: As a mom of three, I've seen my own children struggle with fitting in and being bullied. It was listening to their experiences, and my own frustrations, that led me to consider the topic. I also kept thinking about how it's not just in high school where we have this public persona that might be different from what we truly feel inside . . . everyone wonders if they're good enough, smart enough, pretty enough, no matter how old they are. It's an archetypical moral dilemma: do you act like yourself, and risk becoming an outcast? Or do you pretend to be someone you're not, and hope no one finds out you're faking?

Q: How did you go about conducting research for *Nineteen Minutes*? Given the heart wrenching and emotional topic of the book, in what ways was the research process more challenging than for your previous novels?

JP: This book was VERY hard to research. I actually began through my longtime legal research helper, who had a colleague that had worked in the FBI and put me in touch with the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office — the people who investigated the Columbine shootings. I spoke with them, and they sent me DVDs and material that had never been made available to the public, which helped a bit to get into the mindset of the shooters. The next contact I made was with a woman who served as a grief counselor to the families who lost children at Columbine. However, I really wanted to talk to a school shooting survivor . . . and yet I didn't want to cause anyone undue pain by bringing up what will always be a difficult subject. I was actually in Minneapolis, doing a reading, when the Red Lake shootings occurred. It was the most surreal feeling: there I was in a hotel, writing a scene in the book, and on the TV next to me was a reporter saying exactly what I was typing into my fiction. I went to the bookstore event that night and was telling folks about the way my two worlds had collided . . . and a woman came up to me afterward. She knew someone who'd survived the Rocori shootings in MN and was willing to put me in touch with her. Through that connection, I not only spoke with two teachers who shared with me their story of the shooting . . . but also a young man whose friend died that day. It was his commentary that shook me the most — as a writer and a parent — and that became the most important research I did for this book.

Q: What facts did you uncover during your research that might surprise readers whose knowledge of school shootings comes solely from media coverage?

JP: Although the media is quick to list the “aberrant” characteristics of a school shooter, the truth is that they fit all teens at some point in their adolescence! Or in other words — these kids who resort to violence are not all that different from the one living upstairs in your own house, most likely — as scary as that is to imagine. Two other facts that surprised me: for many of these shooters, there is the thinnest line between suicide and homicide. They go to the school planning to kill themselves and decide at the last minute

to shoot others, too. And that, psychologically, a single act of childhood bullying is as scarring emotionally as a single act of sexual abuse. From the point of view of the survivors, I remember being stunned when this young man I interviewed said that afterward, when his parents were trying to be solicitous and ask him if he needed anything, he turned away from them . . . because he was angry that they hadn't been like that yesterday, BEFORE. Historically, one of the most upsetting things I learned was that after Columbine, more than one family was told that their child was the first to be killed. It was theoretically supposed to offer them comfort ("my child went first, and didn't suffer") but backfired when several families realized they'd been told the same thing.

Q: What appealed to you about bringing back two characters from previous novels: defense lawyer Jordan McAfee and detective Patrick DuCharme? Why the romantic resolution for Patrick this time?

JP: Okay, I'm just going to admit it to the world: I have a crush on Patrick DuCharme. And of course, he DIDN'T get the girl at the end of *Perfect Match*. So I really wanted him to star in another story, where he was front and center. (For those really savvy readers who want to torture themselves with unanswered questions — scroll back to Chapter 1 of *Nineteen Minutes* and do the math: how old is Nina's little girl? And how long ago was *Perfect Match*. Hmm . . .) As for Jordan — as soon as I realized that I had a murder trial in New Hampshire, I started thinking of who might defend Peter. And Jordan happened to be free . . . ! It's always great fun to bring a character back, because you get to catch up on his/her life; and you don't have to reinvent the wheel — you already know how he speaks, acts, thinks.

Q: In *Nineteen Minutes*, Lewis Houghton is a college professor whose area of expertise is the economics of happiness. Does such a profession actually exist? How does Lewis's job relate to the story as a whole?

JP: It does exist! There are economics professors who run statistics about how different elements of a person's life (marriage, sexual orientation, salary, etc.) can add to or detract from overall happiness, by giving those elements a dollar value. Lewis's equation — that happiness equals reality divided by expectations — is from real research. However, I sort of fudged the other equation he devises: that expectation divided by reality equals hope. As for how the profession relates to the story — well, you have to love the irony of a guy who studies happiness for a living and yet isn't aware of the discontent simmering beneath his own roof.

Q: As the mother of three children, was the subject of popularity and the cruel ways in which children often treat one another a difficult one for you to address?

JP: It is always hardest for me to write a book that has kids in it close to my kids' ages — and *Nineteen Minutes* does. I think that every parent has probably experienced bullying in some form — either from the POV of the bully or the victim — so it's a pretty universal subject. But in many ways, watching my children as they struggled to find their own place in the social hierarchy of school did make them guinea pigs for me, as I was writing the book. I know that many of my readers are the age of the young characters in this book, and over the years, some have written me to ask if I'd write a book about bullying. But it wasn't until I began to connect what kids experience in school with how adults treat other adults who are somehow different that I began to piece together the story. Discrimination and difference at the high school level will never end until the adults running these schools can go about their own lives without judging others for their race, religion, sexual orientation, etc. How ridiculous is it that America prides itself on being a melting pot, when — as Peter says in the novel — that just means it makes everyone the same?

Q: Did you have the surprise ending in mind when you began writing *Nineteen Minutes*, or did it evolve later in the process?

JP: As with all my books, I knew the ending before I wrote the first word.

Q: You're the author of fourteen novels. As you write more and more books, is it harder to come up with ideas? How do you know when an idea is the right one?

JP: The right idea is the one you can't stop thinking about; the one that's in your head first thing in the morning. The ideas choose me, not the other way around. And as for a shortage (I'm knocking on wood, here) I haven't faced that yet. I could tell you what the next four books I'm writing will address.

Q: You once remarked about your previous novel, *My Sister's Keeper*, that “there are so many shades of gray in real life.” How might this statement also apply to *Nineteen Minutes*?

JP: It's funny you should compare *Nineteen Minutes* to *My Sister's Keeper* because I see them as very similar books — they are both very emotional, very gut-wrenching, and they're situations that every parent dreads. And like the moral and ethical complications of *MSK*, you have a kid in *Nineteen Minutes* who does something that, on the surface, is absolutely devastating and destructive and will end the lives of others. But — given what these characters have endured — can you blame them? Do I condone school shootings? Absolutely not. But I can understand why a child who's been victimized might feel like he's justified in fighting back. I also think it's fascinating to look at how two good

parents might find themselves with a child they do not recognize — a child who does something they can't swallow. Do you stop loving your son just because he's done something horrible? And if you don't, do you start hating yourself? There are so many questions raised by *Nineteen Minutes* — it's one big gray area to wallow in with your book group!

Q: Many of your books center on topics that are front and center in the headlines. Is it important for you to not only entertain readers with a riveting storyline but to challenge them to think about timely and often controversial topics? Why do you suppose you have gravitated toward this type of storytelling?

JP: I think that sometimes when we don't want to talk about issues that are hard to discuss or difficult to face, it's easier to digest it in fiction instead of nonfiction. I mean, no one goes into their bookstore and says, "Hey, can I read the most recent book about the sexual molestation of kids!?" but if you pick up a novel that has that as its center, you will become involved with the characters and the plot and find yourself dissecting the issue without even realizing it. Fiction allows for moral questioning, but through the back door. Personally, I like books that make you think — books you're still wondering about three days after you finish them; books you hand to a friend and say "Read this, so we can talk about it." I suppose I'm just writing the kind of novel I like to read!

Q: In the Acknowledgements section, you write: "To the thousands of kids out there who are a little bit different, a little bit scared, a little bit unpopular: this one's for you." What might readers, particularly younger readers, take from this book and apply to their own lives?

JP: If I could say one thing to the legions of teens out there who wake up every morning and wish they didn't have to go to school, it would be this — and I'm saying it as both a mom and a writer: Stay the course. You WILL find someone like you; you WILL fit in one day. And know that even the cool kids, the popular kids, worry that someone will find out their secret: that they worry about fitting in, just like you do.

Courtesy of Simon & Schuster

Discussion Questions

1. Alex and Lacy's friendship comes to an end when they discover Peter and Josie playing with guns in the Houghton house. Why does Alex decide that it's in Josie's best interest to keep her away from Peter? What significance is there to the fact that Alex is the first one to prevent Josie from being friends with Peter?
2. Alex often has trouble separating her roles as a judge and a mother. How does this affect her relationship with Josie? Discuss whether or not Alex's job is more important to her than being a mother.
3. A theme throughout the novel is the idea of masks and personas and pretending to be someone you're not. To which characters does this apply, and why?
4. At one point defense attorney Jordan McAfee refers to himself as a "spin doctor," and he believes that at the end of Peter's trial he "will be either reviled or canonized" (250). What is your view of Jordan? As you were reading the book, did you find it difficult to remain objective about the judicial system's standing that every defendant (no matter how heinous his or her crime) has the right to a fair trial?
5. Peter was a victim of bullying for twelve years at the hands of certain classmates, many of whom repeatedly tormented him. But he also shot and killed students he had never met or who had never done anything wrong to him. What empathy, if any, did you have for Peter both before and after the shooting?
6. Josie and Peter were friends until the sixth grade. Is it understandable that Josie decided not to hang out with Peter in favor of the popular crowd? Why or why not? How accurate and believable did you find the author's depiction of high school peer pressure and the quest for popularity? Do you believe, as Picoult suggests, that even the popular kids are afraid that their own friends will turn on them?
7. Josie admits she often witnessed Matt's cruelty toward other students. Why then does it come as such a surprise to Josie when Matt abuses her verbally and physically? How much did you empathize with Josie?
8. Regarding Lacy, Patrick notes that "in a different way, this woman was a victim of her son's actions, too" (53). How much responsibility do Lewis and Lacy bear for Peter's actions? How about Lewis in particular, who taught his son how to handle guns and hunt?

9. At one point during Peter's bullying, Lacy is encouraged by an elementary school teacher to force Peter to stand up for himself. She threatens to cancel his play dates with Josie if he doesn't fight back. How did you feel, when you read that scene? Do you blame Lacy for Peter's future actions because of it? Do you agree or disagree with the idea that it is a parent's job to teach a child the skills necessary to defend himself?
10. Discuss the novel's structure. In what ways do the alternating narratives between past and present enhance the story? How do the scenes in the past give you further insight into the characters and their actions, particularly Peter and Josie?
11. When Patrick arrives at Sterling High after the shooting, "his entire body began to shake, knowing that for so many students and parents and citizens today, he had once again been too late" (24). Why does Patrick blame himself for not preventing an incident he had no way of knowing was going to happen?
12. Dr. King, an expert witness for the defense, states that Peter was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of chronic victimization. "But a big part of it, too," he adds, "is the society that created both Peter and those bullies" (409). What reasons does Dr. King give to support his assertion that society is partly to blame for Peter's actions as well as those of the bullies? Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
13. Why does Josie choose to shoot Matt instead of shooting Peter? Why does Peter remain silent about Josie's role in the shooting? In the end, has justice been satisfactorily dealt to Peter and to Josie?
14. Discuss the very ending of the novel, which concludes on the one-year anniversary of the Sterling High shooting. Why do you suppose the author chose to leave readers with an image of Patrick and Alex, who is pregnant? In what way does the final image of the book predict the future?
15. Shootings have occurred at a number of high schools across the country over the last several years. Did *Nineteen Minutes* make you think about these incidents in a more immediate way than reading about them in the newspaper or seeing coverage on television? How so? In what ways did the novel affect your opinion of the parties generally involved in school shootings — perpetrators, victims, fellow students, teachers, parents, attorneys, and law enforcement officials?
16. What do you think the author is proposing as the root of the problem of school violence? What have you heard, in the media and in political forums, as solutions? Do you think they will work? Why or why not?

Courtesy of Simon & Schuster