



ALLEN & UNWIN


From the international bestselling author of *My Sister's Keeper*

JODI
PICOULT
The Tenth Circle



READING
GROUP NOTES

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About Jodi Picoult

Jodi Picoult is the bestselling author of twelve novels: *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1992), *Harvesting the Heart* (1994), *Picture Perfect* (1995), *Mercy* (1996), *The Pact* (1998), *Keeping Faith* (1999), *Plain Truth* (2000), *Salem Falls* (2001), *Perfect Match* (2002), *Second Glance* (2003), *My Sister's Keeper* (2004), and now her latest novel *The Tenth Circle* (2006). 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 Masters in education. She married Tim Van Leer, whom she had known at Princeton, and it was while she was pregnant with her first child that she wrote her first novel, *Songs of the Humpback Whale*.

Picoult says, 'I found out it was going to be published just before my son was born, and I had this completely idealistic vision of him sitting at my feet, cooing, while I continued to write books. Needless to say, it didn't quite work out that way.' Her struggle to balance motherhood and her own career formed, in part, the basis for her second novel, *Harvesting the Heart*. For a few years, she was either delivering a book or a baby. Now, she's happy to be prolific solely in her writing—and admits wholeheartedly that she moonlights as a writer, but she's really a mom. 'It took me a while to find the balance,' Picoult says, 'but I'm a better mother because I have my writing—and I'm a better writer because of the experiences I've had as a parent that continually remind me how far we are willing to go for the people we love the most.'

She and Tim and their three children live in Hanover, New Hampshire with a dog, a rabbit, two Jersey calves, and the occasional Holstein.

On writing *The Tenth Circle*

When I started *The Tenth Circle*, I was thinking of all the different ways we can tell stories—particularly the ones we tell ourselves, when we don't want to admit the truth. I wanted to look at that moment in a family's collective life when a child learns her parents aren't superheroes ... which is usually just about the same time when a parent learns that being a good parent means letting go, and possibly watching one's child fall. In particular, I wanted to think about what happens when your child grows up, literally, overnight—due to an act of violence.

This blossomed into the story of a Daniel Stone, who grew up as the only white boy in a native Eskimo village, and was teased mercilessly because he was different. He fought back, the baddest of the bad kids: stealing, drinking, robbing and cheating his way out of the Alaskan bush—where he honed his artistic talent, fell in love with a girl and got her pregnant. To become part of a family, he reinvented himself—jettisoning all that anger to become a docile, devoted husband and father. Fifteen years later, when we meet Daniel again, he is a comic book artist. His wife teaches Dante's *Inferno* at a local college. His daughter, Trixie, is the light of his life—and a girl who only knows her father as the even-tempered, mild-mannered man he has been her whole life. Until, that is, she is date raped ... and Daniel finds himself struggling, again, with a powerlessness and a rage that may not just swallow him whole, but destroy his family and his future.

For research, I started with Dante's *Inferno*. I'd read it in college, and didn't really like it, so I decided to give it another chance. Well, to be honest, I still don't like it ... but I'm mature enough now to appreciate some of his timeless themes—such as how the punishment fits the crime, and how you should be careful what you wish for ... lest it come true. The worst thing you can do, according to Dante, is betray someone close to you, which fits very well with the story I was trying to tell in *The Tenth Circle*.

I went from reading Dante to reading comic books. Having never been a 13-year-old boy, this genre was new to me. Not only did I immerse myself in actual comics, I also studied their history. The origin of modern comics traces back to two young Jewish men who couldn't get newspaper jobs during the Depression. Schuster and Seigel instead imagined a world where the loser got the pretty girl and saved the world to boot—and their hero, Superman, greatly appealed to a country that desperately needed a hero. Superheroes evolved—all good guys in tights—until the 1960s when Marvel introduced Spiderman. He wasn't a willing hero; he was moody and angry and resentful and a lot like the teens who were reading him. Now, heroes have grown even more complex; Alan Moore's and Neil Gaiman's works spotlight heroes who don't always win or who enjoy inflicting pain. I spent a great deal of time with my 12-year-old son, Jake, our resident comic book expert, who immersed me in his favorite storylines. The more I learned, the more I realized that the epic poem and the comic book genre have a lot more in common than you'd think, since they both view a man's life as the struggle between good and evil; they both address the vast gap between who we pretend we are and who we truly are.

Since Daniel's struggle in the book was going to be precipitated by his daughter's date rape, I sat down with a group of teenage girls and interviewed them, quite candidly, about sex and dating today. Now, I've done this before—for *The Pact*, for *Salem Falls*—but more than once during this conversation I found myself absolutely stunned. Instead of

relationships, kids have random hookups, or friends with benefits—sexual experiences that they pretend never happened the next day. Oral sex isn't considered sex. At parties, you'll see games like Stoneface and Rainbow, which involve a boy with multiple sex partners, or a girl servicing several guys. The biggest reason to have sex in the first place is to get it over with; the pressure doesn't come from boys, but from within the girl herself—you don't want your girlfriends to find out you're not doing the same things they are.

And perhaps most upsetting, the girls told me that they feel empowered, because they're the ones deciding whether or not to do these things. They pretend it doesn't hurt when they're not valued by the boys they "hook up" with; but then told me stories about cutting themselves with razor blades when the one night stand didn't materialize into something more lasting. It was clear to me that we're turning out a generation of kids who don't know how to have a relationship with someone. We're sending young men to college, who expect to get what they want when they want it (which supports the growing percentage of date rapes on campuses). We're seeing high school girls who don't even realize that what they're "choosing" to do objectifies them, and strips them of any self-esteem.

When I've gone to high schools to speak to students and I mention this research, the looks I get from the student audience are priceless—their jaws drop, because a) I know about it and b) I'm brave enough to tell them I know. Believe me, parents are not sitting around dinner tables talking about this—and this made me think of *The Pact*. Teen suicide, like teen sexuality, is an issue parents would rather not discuss with their kids, fearing that if they bring it up they might plant ideas in their child's mind. But the sad truth is that it's happening whether or not we want to talk to our kids about it . . . and based on my research for this book, it's something we need to start talking about in earnest. Now.

The last bit of research I did, and the most fun, involved going to the Alaskan bush in the middle of winter, so that I could see through Daniel's eyes. The airline reservation clerk laughed when I told her where I wanted to go in January—ultimately, I had to take a cargo plane from Anchorage to Bethel, with a load of sled dogs. It was -40 degrees Fahrenheit when I arrived, and I wore everything in my luggage at once and still had to borrow clothes. First, I helped out at the K300, a sled dog race, just like Trixie (you know you've arrived in Alaska when a lady musher grabs your arm and asks you to hold up a feed bag so that she can drop trou and pee). Then I headed to a Yup'ik Eskimo village. The villages are north of Bethel, and the only way to get there in January is to take a snowmobile up the frozen river (which, in the winter, actually gets its own highway number). Akiak is a village of 300, with no running water. My host was a Yup'ik Eskimo named Moses Owen. As I walked into his house, I tripped over a moose hoof in the Arctic entryway.

I brought him oranges; he gave me dried fish. There are, of course, no toilets, just "honeybuckets," a misnomer if ever there was one. Moses' wife had her grandchild on her knee, and he kept pointing at me and laughing. She explained that he'd never seen anyone with my color hair before. In fact, Moses said, when the first whites came to the Alaskan bush, they were so pale that the Eskimos thought they were ghosts. Moses explained to me that in his world, there's a fluidity between the animal world and the human one. At any moment, a person might turn into an animal, or vice-versa. They also believe that words have remarkable power and that thought is equally as important as action—just because a word isn't said out loud doesn't mean its intention isn't received. For example, if you go hunting and you're thinking of elk, you'll never catch one . . . because it can hear you. You must think of anything but the elk. Likewise, it would be downright rude to change someone's mind by putting your own words into it. So you might say

to a friend, “Tomorrow’s a good day to hunt.” It will be up to your buddy to understand that you’re actually inviting him along. To a Yup’ik Eskimo, then, silence is an act. Words are a weapon. And you don’t have to speak a wish for it to come true. Imagine, then, a case of date rape.











Legally it always comes down to whether or not the girl said no. But to someone who’d grown up among the Yup’ik Eskimos, like Daniel Stone, it wouldn’t have mattered if Trixie said it, or merely thought it. The writing of the book was completely unique to me, because in addition to writing the narrative novel, I was concurrently writing the “script” that would become the embedded graphic novel in *The Tenth Circle*. I had known that Daniel wasn’t going to be a man of words (based on growing up Yup’ik), so I started to think about other ways to let him express himself to the reader. There are, of course, hundreds of artistic forms for storytelling—opera, ballet, film, photography—but something about Dante kept pulling me back to the idea of a graphic novel. His levels of Hell seemed perfect for the genre. And conversely, a man who was struggling to deal with the emotional aftermath of his daughter’s rape might easily invent a character who was, metaphorically, doing the same thing.

That’s how Wildclaw was born—the alter-ego of a man whose daughter is kidnapped by the Devil, so that her father, Duncan, literally has to go through Hell to get her back. I think as you read the graphic novel—particularly the circles where you see adulterers, and the Devil—you understand the psyche of its “creator,” Daniel. You see the same lake of ice he grew up with in the Alaskan bush represented, now, in art form to freeze the Devil up to his waist. You see the shapeshifting between human and animal form, like the Yup’ik Eskimos believe. Duncan’s fear that the animal parts of him will eclipse the human side mirror Daniel’s unspoken worry that the man he becomes in the aftermath of Trixie’s rape will be someone she does not recognize.

Unfortunately, I can’t draw comic books. Fortunately, I knew someone who could. When I was at Princeton, the guy who lived across the hall from me used to spend hours at his drafting table doing just that. Now, Jim Lee is one of the most famous artists in the industry. I got in touch with Jim, told him what I wanted to do, and asked him if he’d be able to find me an artist. He put me in touch with a young man named Dustin Weaver, who was an intern at Jim’s company. When Dustin agreed to help me out, we embarked on a collaboration that was really unlike anything I’d ever done. The narrative novel and the graphic novel were produced simultaneously. I would write him the script for the comic book, on screenwriting software, and then I’d get a few drawn pages back via email. Every now and then Dustin would ask me if I had any thoughts about what a character should look like—for example, the Devil. I said he should think of Jack Nicholson, and I’ll be damned if the art didn’t turn out just that way. I also admit to falling just a little bit in love with the character of Duncan. Luckily, my husband doesn’t find pen-and-ink men a real threat.

I’ve been very touched by the feedback I’ve received from readers of *The Tenth Circle*. Parents who’ve read the book keep pulling me aside to desperately ask, “That teen sex stuff; the parties . . . that’s all fiction, right?” I think that peeling back the surface layer of what teenagers are really doing intimately with each other is startling for adults to blatantly see and hear—I anticipated that reaction. What took me by surprise, however, are the number of young women who’ve written to me to say that they were date raped, and never told anyone, because they were sure it was their fault in some way—they hadn’t expressed NO clearly enough. I think Trixie’s experience mirrors theirs, and validates their feelings, which allows them to open up about something they’ve hidden for years. Things like this are humbling—when you write fiction you don’t expect to make a profound difference in someone’s real life.

Some suggested points for discussion

-  Daniel says, “the real mistake he made ... was believing that you could lose someone you loved in an instant, when in reality, it was a process that took months, years ... a lifetime.” How does this apply to his relationship with his wife? His daughter?
-  In what way does the graphic novel complement the story that’s being told in the narrative novel? Do you believe that there are many different ways to tell a story? To what end does the art in *The Tenth Circle* support this? Are there spots where the drawn story deviates from what you learn in the written narrative, and if so, is this important?
-  In Dante’s *Inferno*, God takes away Lucifer’s ability to make choices—his free will—and this is represented as the ultimate hell. Do you agree? Why or why not? What inaction on the part of Daniel can be compared to this?
-  Each of the main characters in *The Tenth Circle* makes one significant mistake that comes back to haunt them. What are these mistakes? Who do you think suffers the most for this, and who changes the most as a result?
-  In both Yup’ik folklore and graphic art, people have the ability to reinvent themselves by morphing into different forms. Daniel, too, has a history of violent behavior that he’s successfully repressed—until his daughter is raped. Is it realistic to think that this might be a permanent change, or are older incarnations of personality always simmering just beneath the surface?
-  How does Trixie’s rape affect the fragile web of the Stone family? Do you think they would have been able to grow and move on without a catastrophic event like a rape occurring?
-  Dante perceived the circles of hell as a learning process for his central protagonist and for the reader. His nine circles of hell do not include betrayal of self—this is Picoult’s invention of a tenth circle. Do you agree that lying to oneself is the worst betrayal of all? How do Daniel, Trixie and Laura’s actions support or refute this claim? Does this novel suggest ultimately that it is possible, once you’ve crossed into that tenth circle, to seek redemption? Or are we doomed to make the same mistakes over and over?
-  What do you think happens to the Stone family after the book ends?
-  Which character, in your opinion, has learned the most? And which has learned the least?
-  A recurrent theme in many of Picoult’s books involves how far a person will go for the sake of love. Does this theme explain the actions of the three protagonists? Does it excuse their actions?

Further reading

The Pact by Jodi Picoult

Salem Falls by Jodi Picoult

Lost in the Forest by Sue Miller

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

Visit the Jodi Picoult website

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