

ALLEN & UNWIN

FROM THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JODI  
PICOULT

*MY SISTER'S KEEPER*



# READING GROUP NOTES

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## About Jodi Picoult

Jodi Picoult, 37, is the bestselling author of eleven 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) and her newest novel, *My Sister's Keeper* (2004). In 2003 she was awarded the New England Book 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 realise that I already did have something to write about—that solid core of family, and the knotty tangle of relationships, which I keep coming back to in my books.'

Picoult studied creative writing with Mary Morris at Princeton, and had two short stories published in *Seventeen* magazine while still a student. 'The first time the editor called me to say she wanted to pay me for something I'd written,' Picoult says, 'I immediately called my mom and said, "I'm going to be a writer!" "That's great," she said. "Who's going to support you?"' Realism—and a profound desire to be able to pay the rent—led Picoult to a series of different jobs following her graduation: as a technical writer for a Wall Street brokerage firm, as a copywriter at an ad agency, as an editor at a textbook publisher, and as an 8th grade English teacher—before entering Harvard to pursue a master's in education. She 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 *My Sister's Keeper*—Jodi Picoult

*My Sister's Keeper* was not a book I ever planned to write. In fact, I was working on a different book—*Second Glance*—when the idea first surfaced. I was learning about pre-implantation genetic diagnosis—the procedure that allows a couple to have embryos screened for undesirable genes like those that produce haemophilia or sickle-cell anaemia—

and I kept coming across the story of a couple in Colorado that was the first American family to specifically use the procedure to genetically engineer a child—one who would be a perfect donor match for his ill older sister, who had a rare form of cancer. The plan was to use the baby's cord blood stem cells in a transplant, and to put the sister's illness into remission.

Well, it was too interesting NOT to find out more . . . even though I knew this wasn't going to be a part of the book I was writing. As it turned out, the baby was born, the stem cells were donated, and the sister went into remission. It's been several years now, and so far, so good. But my fiction-writer's brain started humming: what about when that little boy gets older, and finds out the circumstances of his birth? Will he wonder if he was only conceived because his sister was sick? What if his sister, sadly, goes out of remission . . . or even dies? Will he believe it's his fault? I began to consider the story from a personal standpoint—what we always ignore when we talk about stem cell science . . . namely, that the issues the presidential candidates and ethicists debate about involve people with feelings and histories—and the Fitzgerald sisters of *My Sister's Keeper* began to come to life.

At the same time that I stumbled across this real-life family struggle, I was going through one of my own. My middle son, Jake, was diagnosed at age five with a cholesteatoma—a very rare, benign tumour that grows inside the ear canal. It isn't cancerous, but it will kill you if it spreads to your brain. The traditional way to get rid of this is to perform a procedure that renders the patient totally deaf, but allows the doctor to scrape away the tumour as it continues to grow. My husband and I opted to find another approach instead, and we carted Jake to a specialist in Boston, whose treatment for cholesteatoma involved multiple surgeries . . . but might, if we were lucky, ultimately preserve some hearing. I remember wondering—like Sara does in *My Sister's Keeper*—whether putting Jake through extra surgeries made me a bad mother or a good one, since there was no guarantee he'd wind up with hearing anyway. Eventually, my husband and I decided to take that chance. In three years time, Jake had ten surgeries. We learned that he had cholesteatomas in both ears (which is sort of like winning the Bad-Luck Lottery twice). Today, at age ten, he is profoundly deaf in his left ear and wears a hearing aid. In his right ear, his hearing tests at the very bottom edge of the 'normal' range. He's a smart, happy hockey goalie who has a remarkable capacity for not sweating the small stuff.

I would never compare myself to the parent of a child suffering from a terminal illness, but I did learn during those years what it's like to have your entire life change when your child is suddenly scheduled for another surgery. I learned how you can treat a doctor like your last hope. I learned how a hospital can start to feel familiar, instead of strange. I learned how a major illness can simply become another thread in the fabric of your family. And I learned how my other two children began to make accommodations for Jake's condition, and the upheaval it wreaked on our lives. These were the feelings I tried to bring to life in Sara Fitzgerald, in Jesse, and in Anna.

There are so many shades of grey in real life, and those are the ones that I tend to gravitate toward when it comes to writing fiction. This book allowed me to dissect the whole debate about stem cell research to reveal, underneath, the people whose lives are at the centre of the storm. It allowed me to question what it means to be a good parent, what it means to be a good sister. It allowed me to ask what we owe to the people we love; and what they owe us. I hope you get a chance to read *My Sister's Keeper*, and that the Fitzgerald family becomes as real to you as it has to me.

## Reviews

### *Herald Sun*—Shaunagh O'Connor Family dramatist

Picoult's latest work is *My Sister's Keeper*, about the ethical dilemma faced when a couple genetically engineer a baby to create a bone marrow match for her terminally ill sister. That creation is Anna, who is beginning to question her place in the world and whether she wants to continue being operated on in order to save sister Kate's life.

Picoult says she is personally pro-stem cell research, but her novel grew out of the realisation that it has been about three years since the first American family gave birth to a genetically engineered sibling so his umbilical cord blood could save a sick, older child. 'The older child is in remission, the little boy is a hero in his family—mum and dad are delighted because both their kids are healthy,' Picoult says. 'It's a total success story, right? But my brain doesn't function that way. I think 'What happens if, God forbid, his sister goes out of remission. Will he feel morally responsible? And what if, when he turns 13, 14, like every teenager on the planet, he starts to ponder the questions of life: What am I doing here? What am I doing in this family? If his sister wasn't sick, would he even be here?'

Perhaps the mother in *My Sister's Keeper* is a selfish, misdirected person. Perhaps she is a wonderful mother. Picoult lets the reader decide.

### *Sunday Telegraph*—Lucy Clark A tragic tale of sisterly sacrifice

Best-selling US author Jodi Picoult truly loves an ethical minefield; and she doesn't tiptoe through them so much as to show the many different routes through and around a tricky situation. Never more so than with her latest novel, *My Sister's Keeper*, in which Picoult tackles genetic engineering by posing the knock-out question: 'If you use one of your children to save the life of another, are you being a good mother or a very bad one?'

Picoult, who wrote the best-selling *The Pact* (about teenage suicide), *Mercy* (about euthanasia) and *Keeping the Faith* (about child abuse in the Catholic Church), has set *My Sister's Keeper* with an explosive world full of medical and moral conundrums. It makes for an uber-dramatic backdrop for her narrative, and Picoult herself thinks of this book as a 'Sophie's Choice for the new millennium.' In it, Picoult tells the story, from every angle, of a family wracked with the tragedy of having a child dying from leukaemia. Kate is diagnosed with acute promyelocytic leukaemia at the age of three, and she is not expected to live long.

When the doctors tell her parents, Sara, a retired lawyer, and Brian, a fireman and paramedic, that an identical genetic match could provide Kate with precious bone marrow and umbilical cord blood, which might extend her life, they decide to try for a genetically engineered baby. Along comes sister Anna, a perfectly healthy match who, by the age of thirteen, has had a lifetime of donating leucocytes and bone marrow to help keep her sister alive.

Her very existence is defined by her ability to save her sister and Picoult has a brilliant grasp on the psychological ramifications this might have on a young teenager. When faced with having to donate a kidney when Kate's health takes another dive, Anna takes the extraordinary step of suing her parents for medical emancipation—she wants the

right to be able to say no to invasive medical procedures, even if it might mean the death of her sister. She hires a lawyer, and is appointed by her own legal adviser and carer by the court.

It's an enormous decision that tears the family apart, and all the splintered factions have their own significant points of view. So Picoult writes in alternating voices, piecing together an emotional and compelling story—Anna writes, as does delinquent brother Jesse, who has been largely ignored by his parents for most of his life due to other family dramas.

### **Advertiser—Samela Harris** **Perfect Match**

...Jodi Picoult's new novel, *My Sister's Keeper*, is a fierce and agonising ethics debate. At the same time, it is a swiftly moving piece of fiction.

This is not the first time Picoult has tackled the hard issues. She is a prolific writer, with 11 novels under her belt. *Mercy* is about euthanasia; in *The Pact* she writes of teen suicide; *Keeping the Faith* is on religion; *Salem Falls* explores the phenomenon of the witch hunt; and in *Second Glance* it is the idea of the paranormal.

*My Sister's Keeper* is a bravely topical novel. There has been one instance in the US of a child conceived for his matching DNA and, recently in Australia, an IVF conception to save the life of a sibling with an incurable genetic disease.

One cannot help pondering the implications of such use of science and the psychological ramifications that knowledge of such a form of conception may have upon a growing child. Picoult tackles the dilemma from every stance. Different type fonts represent the assorted characters affected by this agonising predicament.

... the narrative moves towards a courtroom scene where the moral issue is finally debated. How far can parents go to protect their young? Jodi Picoult presents multiple points of view, compassionately pondered. The book is hard to put down but also difficult to read because one is riven between the arguments, and still wondering, even at the dramatic conclusion.

### **Bookpage.com—Allison Block** **Keeper of the fate**

Most people spend their lives seeking to understand the purpose of their existence. Thirteen-year-old Anna Fitzgerald, the protagonist of Jodi Picoult's latest novel, has never for a moment questioned hers: she is the genetically perfect 'match' brought into the world to keep her leukaemia-stricken sister, Kate, alive. Physically and emotionally depleted from life in the shadow of her sibling's illness, the strong-willed Anna lashes back at the parents who conceived her out of desperation, not desire—she sues them for the medical rights to her own body.

Poetic treatment of prickly topics is the trademark of Picoult, whose past bestsellers address such topics as statutory rape and teen suicide. Alternately narrated by each of its major characters, *My Sister's Keeper* revolves around Anna and the life-altering consequences of her very adult decision. As the novel begins, the courageous teenager enlists the legal assistance of Campbell Alexander—a relentless cynic known for suing God—who soon serves the subpoena that splinters the Fitzgerald family. Mother, Sara, who gave up her law practice to render round-the-clock care to Kate, comes to her dying daughter's defence, while husband Brian sides with Anna.

With the trial date drawing near, and Kate on the verge of kidney failure, Anna teeters on an emotional tightrope. How can she reject the person who has defined her from day one? At the hospital, Anna climbs into Kate's bed and rests her head on her chest: 'I didn't come to see Kate because it would make me feel better,' she says. 'I came because without her, it's hard to remember who I am.'

Hope and heartbreak fill the pages of *My Sister's Keeper*, which Picoult describes as a sort of *Sophie's Choice* for the new millennium. 'If you use one of your children to save the life of another,' the author asks, 'are you being a good mother ... or a very bad one?' Blending science, philosophy, morality and ethics, this is a thought-provoking thriller that grips and won't let go.

### **New York Daily News—Sherryl Connelly** **Organ donor's tragic dilemma**

At 13, Anna Fitzgerald takes the unusual step of hiring a lawyer to win medical emancipation from her parents. She's fully aware that in doing so, she's condemning her 15-year-old sister—whom she deeply loves—to death. On the surface, what is at stake is Anna's kidney. But in *My Sister's Keeper*, Jodi Picoult emotively explores the familial tangle that's begot when a child is bred in a test tube specifically to save a sibling's life.

Sara, a non-practicing lawyer, and Brian, a fire fighter, consider their family complete until 2-year-old Kate is diagnosed with leukaemia. Anna is brought into the world to become Kate's donor, supplying stem cells and bone marrow as needed. Her childhood is thrown into chaos by Kate's medical emergencies. Then she is told one of her kidneys must be harvested or Kate will die.

Anna gets herself a lawyer, an oddly endearing mercenary, while Sara represents what she considers to be the family's interest—saving Kate's life—in the courtroom. Picoult plays the conflict through, giving intimate voice to everyone's perspective in shifting narratives. It's only at the story's close that she skirts the very issues she's raised. Yet even if Picoult can't summon the wisdom of Solomon, *My Sister's Keeper* has the emotional tenacity to fuel tears and talk as it becomes a book club must-read.

### **Washington Post—Katherine Arie** **Spare parts: A genetically made-to-order daughter creates a host of ethical dilemmas**

A few years ago the BBC reported that a British couple wanted to create the United Kingdom's first 'designer baby', one whose umbilical-cord stem cells could be used to treat an older brother with a life-threatening blood disorder. The news reopened controversy on both sides of the Atlantic and raised a series of sobering questions. Is the deliberate selection of an embryo as a tissue match for a terminally ill child ethical? How would a child feel, knowing he was conceived for the sole purpose of saving his sibling's life? What would happen if the ailing sibling required future medical treatments or transplants? Where would a donor's own rights begin and his responsibility end?

Leave it to Jodi Picoult to jump into the fray. Picoult is known for writing fictional page-turners that address controversial issues, and her latest novel is no exception. *My Sister's Keeper* tells the story of a feisty 13-year-old, Anna Fitzgerald, who was conceived to save her sister Kate's life. Over the years, Anna dutifully serves as her sister's donor, providing

Kate, who has leukaemia, with stem cells, blood and bone marrow. But when Kate's organs begin to fail and Anna's parents expect her to donate a kidney, she balks. Fed up with spending time in the hospital for medical procedures that are not in her best interest or for her benefit, and tired of living in her sister's shadow, Anna decides to sue her parents for 'medical emancipation', or the right to make decisions about her own body.

Denying Kate a kidney, Anna knows, will lead to her death. But why should she submit to major abdominal surgery and have to make do with only one kidney? On the other hand, what kind of monster would let her sister die? Picoult explores the emotional, legal and moral dimensions of Anna's dilemma from alternating perspectives—Anna's, her parents', her brother's, her lawyer's, her guardian's—giving considered balance to both sides of the lawsuit. The novel's shifting points of view also help to add depth to a cast of characters who would otherwise seem rather thinly drawn. Without this device, Anna's mother could become a one-sided study in shrill desperation, and Anna's lawyer, Campbell, could be mistaken for a base egomaniac.

In fact, Campbell emerges as the most appealing of the lot. A good old boy who never grew up, he is a scene stealer and a sarcastic wit. He's also a tough nut to crack. Campbell is a closet epileptic, and he steers conversation partners away from registering his condition by deflecting questions about his seizure-alert dog with tall tales: 'I have an iron lung ... and the dog keeps me from getting too close to magnets'; 'I have Ebola ... he's tallying the people I infect'; 'I have an irregular heartbeat and he's CPR certified'; 'He translates for my Spanish-speaking clients'; 'He chases ambulances for me.'

Campbell also figures in an entertaining subplot, a romance with Anna's court-appointed guardian, Julia, Campbell's high-school sweetheart. Julia, a persuasive do-gooder, is as serious as Campbell is frivolous. She's useful, too—from her position as a children's advocate, she can isolate the crux of the case in a way the others, too close to the action, cannot: 'Traditionally, parents make decisions for a child, because presumably they are looking out for his or her best interests. But if they are blinded, instead, by the best interests of another one of their children, the system breaks down. And somewhere, underneath all the rubble, are casualties like Anna.' Picoult's other characters are less convincing. Anna's gentle father, Brian, a fire-fighting hero and armchair astronomer, is almost too good to be true, and Picoult stretches noticeably to make both his job and his hobby symbolically relevant to the story. Anna's brother, Jesse, is a poster child for self-destructive behaviour. Kate, finally, is as weak and wispy on the page as she's supposed to be in life.

Picoult is at her best, and most moving, when writing from the perspective of Anna's mother, Sara. Exhausted by Kate's recurrent illness, Sara is often on edge and overwhelmed. But she is also focused: her tenacity, her vigilance and her support during Kate's aggressive cancer treatments all give Kate a reason to live. Mothering takes on new meaning, and the mundane becomes surreal: Kate's goldfish, according to the oceanologist Sara consults in a desperate effort to save the pet's life, requires bottled water, and the mere thought of buying Jesse a new pair of soccer cleats after Kate relapses seems 'downright obscene.'

Picoult uses the present tense throughout the novel, which lends an appropriate breathlessness to the narrative—after all, Kate doesn't have long to live—and encourages the reader to charge eagerly through the story. Unfortunately, the characters themselves are overwhelmed by the galloping pace. Indeed, it is not Anna, her parents, or even Campbell, but a bittersweet turn of events—one last plot twist, a surprise ending—that solves the dilemma at hand.

Nevertheless, *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? Babies selected for certain characteristics, like Anna, are predestined to be tied indefinitely to the circumstances of their birth, and to their parents and their siblings in need. Aren't they?

## Some suggested points for discussion

-  Reread the prologue to *My Sister's Keeper*. Who is the speaker? Is it the same person you thought it was the first time you read it?
-  What is the metaphorical relevance of Brian's profession as a fire chief? And what might be a possible reason for his fascination with astronomy?
-  On p. 98, Kate is being admitted to the hospital in a very serious condition. She mouths to Jesse, 'Tell Anna ...' but is unable to finish. What do you think she was trying to say?
-  On p. 122, Julia says, 'Even if the law says that no one is responsible for anyone else, helping someone who needs it is the right thing to do.' Who understood better how to 'help' Kate, Sara or Anna?
-  Did Anna do the right thing, honouring Kate's wishes?
-  On p. 142, Brian says that when rescuing someone from a fire, 'The safety of the rescuer is of a higher priority than the safety of the victim. Always.' How does this apply to his role in his own family?
-  On p. 144, Brian says, 'Like anything that's been confined, fire has a natural instinct to escape.' How does this truth apply to Kate? And to Brian himself?
-  Do you agree with Brian's decision not to turn Jesse in to the authorities for setting the fires?
-  Do you feel that it's ethical to conceive a child that meets specific genetic requirements? If not, do you believe that there should be specific exceptions, such as the purpose of saving another person's life, or is this just a 'slippery slope'?

## Other books by Jodi Picoult

*Keeping Faith*

*Mercy*

*Perfect Match*

*Picture Perfect*

*Plain Truth*

*Salem Falls*

*Second Glance*

*Songs of the Humpback Whale*

*The Pact*

*Vanishing Acts*

## Further reading

*The Prosperous Thief* by Andrea Goldsmith

*The House at Evelyn's Pond* by Wendy Orr

*The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini

*Fire Fire* by Eva Sallis

*The Broken Book* by Susan Johnson