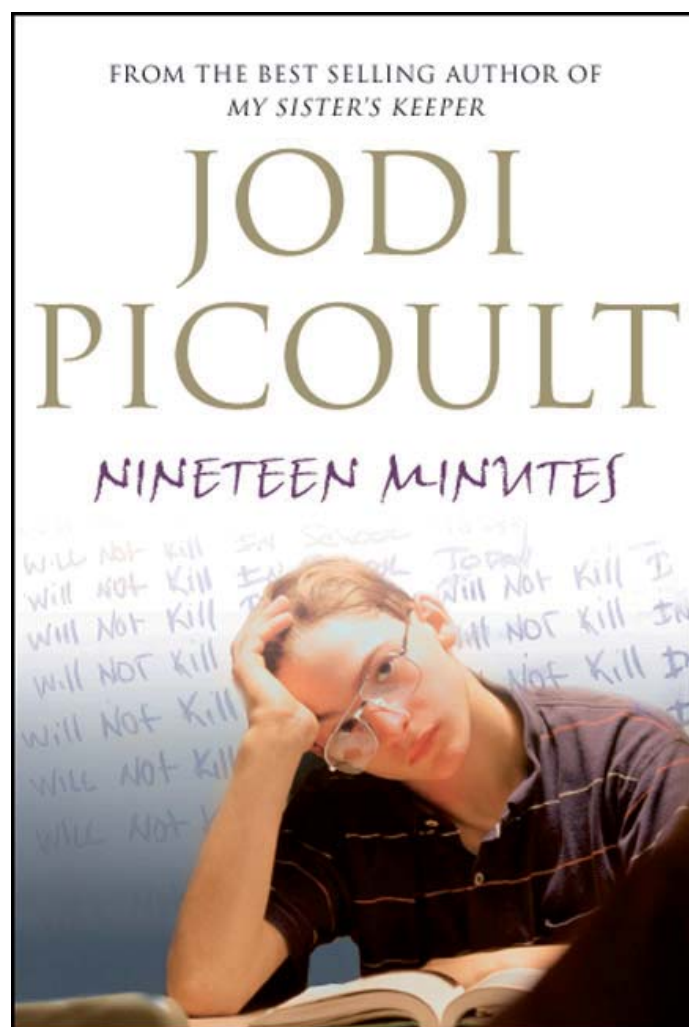


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

In this emotionally charged novel, Jodi Picoult delves beneath the surface of a small town to explore what it means to be different in our society.

In Sterling, New Hampshire, 17-year-old high school student Peter Houghton has endured years of verbal and physical abuse at the hands of classmates. His best friend, Josie Cormier, succumbed to peer pressure and now hangs out with the popular crowd that often instigates the harassment. One final incident of bullying sends Peter over the edge and leads him to commit an act of violence that forever changes the lives of Sterling's residents.

Even those who were not inside the school that morning find their lives in an upheaval, including Alex Cormier. The superior court judge assigned to the Houghton case, Alex—whose daughter, Josie, witnessed the events that unfolded—must decide whether or not to step down. She's torn between presiding over the biggest case of her career and knowing that doing so will cause an even wider chasm in her relationship with her emotionally fragile daughter. Josie, meanwhile, claims she can't remember what happened in the last fatal minutes of Peter's rampage. Or can she? And Peter's parents, Lacy and Lewis Houghton, ceaselessly examine the past to see what they might have said or done to compel their son to such extremes. *Nineteen Minutes* also features the return of two of Jodi Picoult's characters—defence attorney Jordan McAfee from *The Pact* and *Salem Falls*, and Patrick DuCharme, the intrepid detective introduced in *Perfect Match*.

Rich with psychological and social insight, *Nineteen Minutes* is a riveting, poignant, and thought-provoking novel that has at its centre a haunting question. Do we ever really know someone?

About Jodi Picoult

Jodi Picoult 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 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.

Q&A

What drew you to the subject of school shootings for the premise of a novel?

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 archetypal 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?

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?

This book was VERY hard to research. I actually began through my long-time 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 counsellor 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.

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

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.

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

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 centre. (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.

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' job relate to the story as a whole?

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.

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?

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?

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

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

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?

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.

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

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 in *Nineteen Minutes* – it's one big grey area to wallow in with your book group!

Many of your books centre on topics that are front and centre 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?

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 non-fiction. 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 centre, 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!

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?

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.

Reviews

Local

‘*Nineteen Minutes* manages to be both a gripping read and incisive social commentary.’ – *Sunday Herald*

‘Picoult’s writing is superb and the characters are vividly drawn.’ – *Daily Telegraph*

‘Picoult ... aims her fiction at contemporary issues and all but forces the reader to see a story from different sides.’
– *West Australian*

‘Publicity for this novel said it would “have you by the throat from the very first page.” This is not so. It grabs the reader by the heart. Then breaks it.’ – *Good Reading*

‘This is a riveting, thought-provoking tale with a jaw-dropping finale.’ – *Abbey’s Bookshop*

‘She explores the very depths of their inner beings, leaving us to decide who carries the ultimate responsibility. I couldn’t put it down.’ – *Highlife Magazine*

‘She is a prose and storyteller and none the worse for it. Dickensian in her concerns.’ – *Juliette Hughes, The Age*

International

‘[*Nineteen Minutes* is] absorbing and expertly made. On one level, it’s a thriller, complete with dismaying carnage, urgent discoveries and 11th-hour revelations, but it also asks serious moral questions about the relationship between the weak and the strong, questions that provide what school people call ‘teachable moments.’ If compassion can be taught, Picoult may be just the one to teach it.’ – *Washington Post*

‘Picoult’s fiction is intelligent, often moving and always ripe for book club discussion... Who knows? Oprah has been unpredictable with her picks of late, but maybe “*Nineteen Minutes*” will turn her on to fiction again.’ – *New York Daily News*

‘Bestseller Picoult 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.’ – *USA*

'Superb, many-stranded, and grimly topical...Picoult binds together precarious alliances with sensitivity, giving depth to characters without losing pace. Inhabited by contradictory, flawed individuals, this intelligent novel draws suspense, moral complexity, and a stunning final twist.' - *Financial Times* (USA)

Suggested Points for Discussion

☞ 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 daughter away from Peter? What significance is there to the fact that Alex is the first one to prevent Josie from being friends with Peter?

☞ 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.

☞ 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?

☞ At one point defence 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". What is your view of Jordan? As you were reading the book, did you find it difficult or not 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?

☞ 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?

☞ Josie and Peter were friends until the sixth grade. Is it understandable that Josie decided not to hang out with Peter in favour 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?

☞ 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?

☞ Regarding Lacy, Patrick notes that "in a different way, this woman was a victim of her son's actions, too". 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?

☞ 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's a parent's job to teach a child the skills necessary to defend himself?

☞ 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?

☞ 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". Why does Patrick blame himself for not preventing an incident he had no way of knowing was going to happen?

☞ Dr. King, an expert witness for the defence, 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". 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?

☞ 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?

☞ 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?

☞ 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 impact your opinion of the parties generally involved in school shootings—perpetrators, victims, fellow students, teachers, parents, attorneys, and law enforcement officials?

☞ 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?

Other books by Jodi Picoult

Songs of the Humpback Whale (1992)

Salem Falls (2001)

Harvesting the Heart (1994)

Perfect Match (2002)

Picture Perfect (1995)

Second Glance (2003)

Mercy (1996)

My Sister's Keeper (2004)

The Pact (1998)

Vanishing Acts (2005)

Keeping Faith (1999)

Nineteen Minutes (2006)

Plain Truth (2000)

The Tenth Circle (2007)