

# Jodi Picoult

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LEAVING TIME*

## small great things

A NOVEL



JENNIFER HAUCK FOR THE VALLEY NEWS

Picoult studied creative writing with Mary Morris at Princeton, and had two short stories published in *Seventeen* magazine while still a student. 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](#).

## Honors and awards

In 2003 she was awarded the New England Bookseller Award for Fiction. She has also been the recipient an Alex Award from the Young Adult Library Services Association, sponsored by the Margaret Alexander Edwards Trust and Booklist, one of ten books written for adults that have special appeal for young adults; the Book Browse Diamond Award for novel of the year; a lifetime

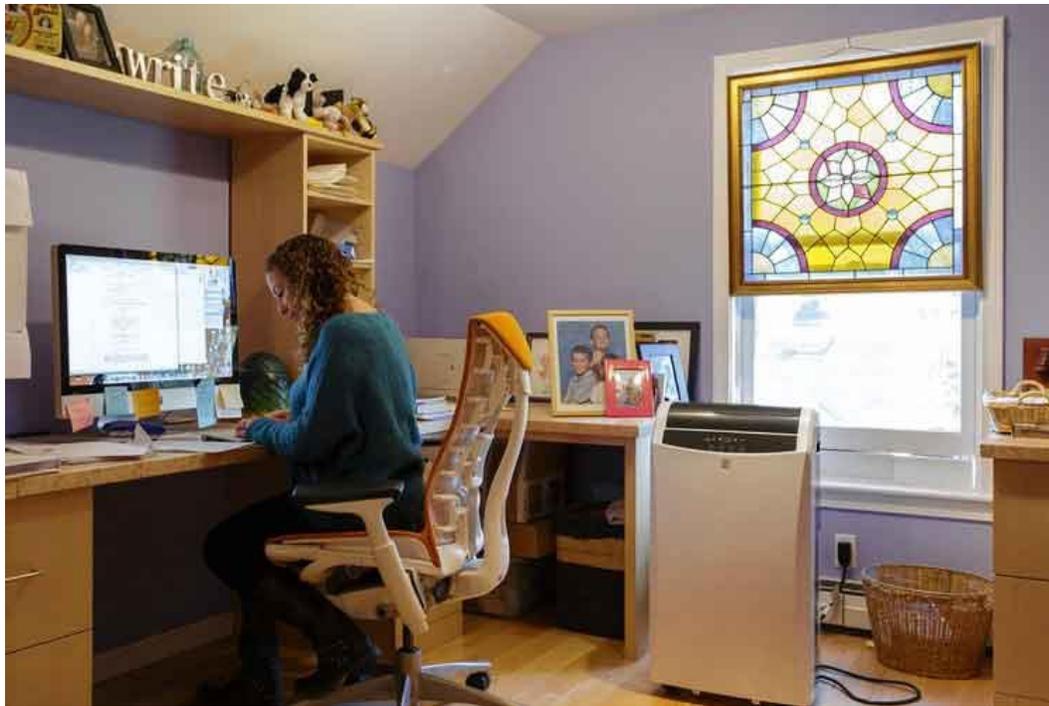
achievement award for mainstream fiction from the Romance Writers of America; Cosmopolitan magazine's 'Fearless Fiction' Award 2007; Waterstone's Author of the Year in the UK, a Vermont Green Mountain Book Award, a NH Granite State Book Award, a Virginia Reader's Choice Award, the Abraham Lincoln Illinois High School Book Award, and a Maryland Black-Eyed Susan Award. She's the 2013-14 recipient of the New Hampshire Literary Award for Outstanding Literary Merit.



BOB O'CONNOR FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

She wrote five issues of the [Wonder Woman](#) comic book series for DC Comics. Her books are translated into thirty four languages in thirty five countries. Four - [The Pact](#), [Plain Truth](#), [The Tenth Circle](#), and [Salem Falls](#) - have been made into television movies. [My Sister's Keeper](#) was a big-screen released from New Line Cinema, with Nick Cassavetes directing and Cameron Diaz starring, which is now available in DVD. She received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Dartmouth College in 2010 and another from the University of New Haven in 2012.

Jodi serves on the advisory board of VIDA: Women in Literary Arts, a research-driven organization whose goal is to increase critical attention to contemporary women's writing and to foster transparency around gender and racial equality issues in contemporary literary culture. She is part of the Writer's Council for the National Writing Project, which recognizes the universality of writing as a communicative tool and helps teachers enhance student writing, and is a spokesperson for Positive Tracks/Children's Hospital at Dartmouth, which supports youth-led charity fundraising through athletics. She is on the advisory committee of the New Hampshire Coalition Against the Death Penalty. She is also the founder and executive producer of the Trumbull Hall Troupe, a New Hampshire-based teen theater group that performs original musicals to raise money for local charities; to date their contributions have exceeded \$120K. She and her husband Tim and their three children live in Hanover, New Hampshire with two Springer spaniels, two rescue puppies, two donkeys, two geese, ten chickens, a smattering of ducks, and the occasional Holstein.



## Jodi Picoult: By the Book

New York Times SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW — October 9, 2014

What books are currently on your night stand?

“We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves,” by Karen Joy Fowler; “One Plus One,” by Jojo Moyes; “The Rosie Project,” by Graeme Simsion. Also stacked are the books I have recently read and loved: Luanne Rice’s “The Lemon Orchard”; Chris Bohjalian’s “Close Your Eyes, Hold Hands”; John Searles’s “Help for the Haunted”; Jo-Ann Mapson’s “Owen’s Daughter.” In related news, I can no longer find my alarm clock when the buzzer goes off.

Who is your favorite novelist of all time? And your favorite novelist writing today?

I remember discovering Hemingway when I was in college. I had been assigned some of the Nick Adams stories for the Princeton syllabus, and I must admit: I didn’t understand the wow factor at first. It wasn’t until I read the short story “Hills Like White Elephants” that I was appropriately blown away. Here’s a piece about abortion that never actually mentions the phrase, and in fact the omission (and its reason for never being uttered) is the most critical element in the story. It’s one thing to craft a reputation as a novelist for the words one uses — it’s a whole new playing level to be revered for what you don’t say, but manage to convey anyway. My favorite contemporary novelist is Alice Hoffman. Her work lies in the dreamy world where love collides with magical realism, reminding me of Gabriel García Márquez. With every book, she has startling, beautiful turns of phrase that take my breath away.

What's your favorite movie based on a book?

As someone who's written a book that was badly translated to film, I am very sensitive to this topic, and always on the lookout for movies that are faithful adaptations of stories I've loved. I still don't really understand why Hollywood continues to fix things that are not broken. My gold standard for book-to-film translation is "Out of Africa." In that memoir, Isak Dinesen — whose Gothic fairy tales are lush and elaborately written — dramatically alters her style to describe her life. The more personal the story she tells, the more she strips down the language — and the barest bones are used to tell of her relationship with Denys Finch Hatton. We now know, from other memoirs and original source material, that the writer's relationship with Finch Hatton was one of the seminal moments of her life; it's almost as if her deliberate parity of description was meant to keep the private private; to suggest that ordinary words simply could not convey the depth and parameters of this relationship, thus the writer was not even going to make the attempt to do so. The filmmakers took all the ellipses in Dinesen's memoir and filled them in visually, revealing Dinesen's complex relationship with Finch Hatton through images the way she could not in prose.

And which book do you think should be made into a movie?

I've recently finished Deborah Harkness's "Book of Life." The whole series is like Harry Potter for adults — it's very visually rich, and I would love to see a filmmaker do it justice. Imagine a witch who sees spells all around her in various threads of color. Cool, right?

What's the best love story you've ever read?

"Romeo and Juliet." For years, I waited to meet a guy whose pickup lines, with my responses, would automatically turn into a sonnet. Sadly, I think that kind of guy went out of fashion with doublets and hose. What's wonderful about Romeo and Juliet, of course, is that as long as there are adolescents who believe that they are the first to invent true love, and as long as there are parents to stand in their way, the story is relevant. And when you think of how this plot has been adapted and resurrected — from "West Side Story" on Broadway to "Warm Bodies," the recent film about a star-crossed romance between a zombie and a live girl — you realize how mutable and timeless the nugget of Shakespeare's story is.

What kind of reader were you as a child? Your favorite book? Most beloved character?

One of my first memories is of getting a library card. My mom was a huge reader, and every week she'd come home with a stack of books, and all I wanted was to be like her. I started reading at age 3, and I was so excited when, for my birthday, I got a reading lamp that sat next to my bed, so that I could read before I went to sleep at night. I was a voracious reader, and I remember several children's books that were special: "Where the Wild Things Are," "Umbrella," "Little Blue and Little Yellow." As I got older, I started inhaling the All-of-a-Kind Family chapter books, and the "Little House on the Prairie" series. I remember wanting to be as kind and calm and beautiful as Mary, but realizing deep down that I was probably a lot more like Laura: headstrong, messy, and too smart for my own good.

If you had to name one book that made you who you are today, what would it be?

When I was 13, I read “Gone With the Wind.” I memorized entire passages and could act out scenes between Rhett and Scarlett, playing both roles — which also explains why I didn’t have a boyfriend until I was 15. It was the first book that made me realize an author could create an entire world out of words, and it was the first time I thought, “Maybe I could do that.” I’ve revisited the book numerous times, and I’m always intrigued by how manipulative and shrewd and needy Scarlett is — but how she’s also impossibly strong.

And of the books you’ve written, which is your favorite, and why?

My favorite is “Second Glance.” It’s about the things that come back to haunt us: ghosts, and history. It illuminates a period in the 1920s-30s that very few people know about: when various states were in the business of racial hygiene, getting rid of people who were considered an economic and social drain on the community.

The other reason I love “Second Glance” is because the research was the most remarkable I’ve ever done — I went ghost hunting with the Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS). They explained to me that dying is like getting on a bus: You’re supposed to go to the end of the line and get off. But sometimes the bus stops at a rest stop and you get off to use the restroom — and when you come back, the bus is gone. That’s a ghost. They then took me to a home in Massachusetts whose owners had contacted them after hearing moans and groans in the attic. I was given the key to the padlocked attic door, and the ghost hunters set up a video camera on a tripod to record paranormal energy. I was the last one out of the attic; I closed and locked the door. The couple had two kids, ages 6 months and 22 months, asleep in their separate rooms. Downstairs, the homeowners described coming home to find all the faucets running, all the cereal spilled into a pile on the kitchen floor. One night at 2 a.m. they heard calliope music and found a child’s toy piano playing — without batteries — on the steps of the attic. I went to check on the kids, and on the floor outlining the edge of each crib, I found six pennies per room that had not been present 10 minutes earlier, all dated between 1968 and 1973. I unlocked the attic door, went to the video camera tripod and found another 15 pennies underneath (all dated between 1968 and 1973) that had not been there when I left. Was I scared? No. Did it make sense? No, and I’d seen it with my own eyes. Also, pennies with those dates were scarce. Eventually the ghost hunters went back and determined that there was something paranormal in the house, and did research — two people died there. One in 1968, and one in 1973. I’ve done a ton of research for my writing, but that remains the coolest.

If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?

I would be honored if the president read “Nineteen Minutes,” the book I wrote about a school shooting. (O.K. In truth, I wouldn’t just be honored. I’d probably faint.) It addresses what happens when bullying is ignored by schools, and what it means to be a kid who feels marginalized, and why the media is fostering future school shootings by focusing their 24/7 coverage not on the victims, but on the shooter. (This is obviously done for ratings, but may in fact be what makes another kid on the fringe think: “Hmm. No one notices me, but maybe this is how to get my 15 minutes of fame.”) Most importantly, the book illustrates the staggering emotional cost of a school shooting — something that is routinely left out of pro-Second Amendment arguments against gun control. Come to think of it, maybe the president isn’t the one who needs to read this book. Maybe I could require the head of the N.R.A. to read it instead?

You're hosting a literary dinner party. Which three writers are invited?

Alice Hoffman, because I idolize her writing and because she's just the loveliest, kindest lady. Toni Morrison, because she's Toni Morrison. The only regret I have from my education at Princeton was that after hearing her read from "Beloved" while it was a work in progress (seriously, you could have heard a pin drop in the room as she commanded it with her voice and her prose), she went on to teach there — after I graduated. And Mary Morris, who was my mentor and is an impossibly gifted writer of fiction and memoir, and who really did teach me everything I know. I would bake a very delicious chocolate dessert to thank each of them for the gifts they've given me: Alice Hoffman made me a hungry reader again, after I was burned out from being an English major; Toni Morrison showed me a pinnacle to which I aspire as a writer; and Mary Morris gave me the tools of my craft.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel you were supposed to like, and didn't? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?

The one genre I absolutely cannot stand is Russian literature. You need genealogy charts to just figure out the characters, every novel is a thousand pages and pretty much everyone dies. One year my son went on a Russian lit kick and tried to get me to read some Tolstoy, but I just couldn't. Life's too short. Which, come to think of it, is coincidentally the theme of most Russian literature, too!

What's the one book you wish someone else would write?

One that explores why our country is so contentiously divided along the fault line of religion — a construct meant to unite, but that more often creates schisms. All the hot-button political issues in this country — abortion, reproductive rights, gay rights, the death penalty — all have ideological roots in religious beliefs that are often archaic or that have been cherry-picked to support specific points of view. I hope that same book can explain why our country, which was founded on religious freedom, so often finds itself tangled up in the screen that should separate church and state. Also, I would like Jon Stewart to write it, because he has a way of swiftly illuminating the truth when you think you're just there to be entertained.

Whom would you want to write your life story?

Nathaniel Philbrick. First off, compared with the Revolutionary War or the wreck of the Essex, my life would be a cakewalk to research. In addition, Nat's the consummate historian, a detailed investigator, and his writing is captivating — something that is not a given for nonfiction. But most of all, he's just a really nice, humble guy.

What books are you embarrassed not to have read yet?

Please do not tell my former professors, but I never finished Thackeray's "Vanity Fair," and yet still managed to pass my comps and graduate with honors.

What do you plan to read next?

"The Book of Unknown Americans," by Cristina Henríquez.

*(taken from jodipicoult.com)*



CreditHanna Barczyk

**SMALL GREAT THINGS**

By Jodi Picoult

470 pp. Ballantine Books. \$28.99.

In a very earnest author's note at the end of her latest novel, "Small Great Things," Jodi Picoult says that she has long wanted to write about American racism. Picoult is savvy enough to make her position as "white and class-privileged" known from the start. She details the rigorous research she did, the people she talked to, including women of color and skinheads. Of the former, she said: "I hoped to invite these women into a process, and in return they gave me a gift: They shared their experiences of what it really feels like to be black." There is also a lot of introspection about her presumed audience (white people) and her own racism. She ends the note acknowledging that talking about racism is difficult but that "we who are white need to have this discussion among ourselves. Because then, even more of us will overhear and — I hope — the conversation will spread."

Picoult certainly seems to have the best of intentions. The question is whether good intentions translate into a good novel. "Small Great Things" is, in most ways, a classic Jodi Picoult novel — tackling contemporary social issues,

creating interesting, relatable characters and presenting a gripping courtroom drama.

Ruth Jefferson, a black woman with a teenage son, has been a labor and delivery nurse for more than 20 years when the white supremacists Turk and Brittany Bauer come to her maternity ward for the delivery of Brittany's first child, a boy named Davis. Turk demands that Ruth have no interaction with the baby — but when the ward is short-handed, Ruth finds herself alone with Davis just as he stops breathing. In that moment, Ruth has to decide whether she should heed her humanity and her oath as a nurse or follow the orders she has received to stay away from the Bauer baby. In the end, Ruth does both, but cannot prevent serious consequences. The parents, as you might expect, need someone to blame. In short order, Ruth's nursing license is suspended. She is charged with felony crimes, and her fate lies in the hands of the public defender Kennedy McQuarrie, a white woman.

Picoult knows how to tell an interesting story, and the novel moves briskly. This is a writer who understands her characters inside and out. She knows her story equally well. In terms of research, Picoult has put in the work — even too much work at times, as if she is saying, “Look at everything I know about everything I'm writing here.” Still, this preparation and eagerness to please don't really detract. I'd rather read a writer who knows too much about the story she is telling than a writer who knows not enough.

“Small Great Things” particularly shines when Picoult writes from Turk Bauer's point of view. She makes this man with loathsome ideologies flawed but human. He is a white supremacist, but he is also a husband and father. We see his anger and impotence, and as the story unfolds, we see how he learned to hate, how he met and fell in love with Brittany, how avenging his son becomes his singular motivation. At times, Turk's story feels like a history of the modern white supremacy movement, but given the current political climate it is quite prescient and worthwhile.

Then there is Kennedy, Ruth's public defender, married to a surgeon who (of course) seems to be the perfect man. They have one child, a daughter who is (of course) adorable and precocious. Kennedy is harried, but (of course) a loving and well-loved wife and mother. By the end of the novel, she becomes a proxy for well-meaning white folk who don't realize the extent of their racism until they are forced to confront it. Kennedy's evolution quickly becomes too contrived and convenient. There is even a moment in her closing arguments during which Kennedy says: “When I started working on this case, ladies and gentlemen, I didn't see myself as a racist. Now I realize I am.” Girl, I guess.

When it comes to race itself, the novel stumbles. Its least believable character is Ruth. Her blackness is clinical, overarticulated. I certainly appreciate the research Picoult did and the conversations she had, but research does not necessarily translate to authenticity. Ruth and her sister, Adisa, were raised in Harlem by a single mother who works as a maid for a wealthy white family.

Ruth is light-skinned and Adisa darker. (Nee Rachel, Adisa had an awakening in her 20s and changed her name to get in touch with her African roots.) Now Adisa is the militant one while Ruth is more open to integration. The more we see of Ruth and her family, the more their characterization feels like black-people bingo — as if Picoult is working through a checklist of issues in an attempt to say everything about race in one book. Colorism, professional discrimination, segregation, the challenges of black ambition, microaggressions, the welfare system, negotiating predominantly white spaces, the boundaries of authentic blackness and, of course, race and the justice system: Bingo! There are references to Trayvon Martin’s killing and the tennis player James Blake’s mistaken arrest (though Blake, inexplicably, becomes “Malik Thaddon”). There is a stand-in for Al Sharpton, one Wallace Mercy: “His wild white hair stands on end, like he’s been electrocuted. His fist is raised in solidarity with whatever apparent injustice he’s currently championing.” Bingo!

It all starts to feel excessive and desperately didactic. This rises, I suspect, out of Picoult’s keen awareness that she is writing mostly for a white audience, which needs a more nuanced understanding of the black experience. And therein lies the true challenge of writing across difference, or of writing a political novel — if the politics overcomes the prose, then it becomes something other than a novel.

During Ruth’s trial, it’s clear that the courtroom is where Picoult feels most comfortable. We are treated to pages and pages of legal discovery and testimony. At times, it starts to feel like reading court transcripts — but to be fair, they are very interesting court transcripts. Turk and Brittany Bauer show up, and Brittany, racked with grief, makes the occasional outburst from the gallery. Ruth’s son starts to struggle with his mother’s precarious position and the revelations of the trial. There are more legal maneuvers. And then there is the ending, with a twist that is so unexpected and so over-the-top that it undermines what is, on the whole, a compelling and well-intended novel. Truly, the twist still has me shaking my head because I understand the why of it while recognizing that Picoult has crossed a bridge too far. From there, the ending is breathlessly rushed, with revelations, resolutions and epiphanies.

It is, in the end, the author’s note that leaves me feeling generous toward “Small Great Things” despite its shortcomings. Picoult wanted to write about race in contemporary America, and she does. The novel is messy, but so is our racial climate. I give Picoult a lot of credit for trying, and for supporting her attempt with rigorous research, good intentions and an awareness of her fallibility. Picoult’s flawed novel will most likely be well received by her intended audience. I trust that the next time she writes about race — and I do hope there is a next time — she’ll write about it in ways that will also be compelling for the rest of us.

***(taken from nytimes.com October 2016)***

# Small Great Things

*Jodi Picoult. Ballantine, \$28.99 (480p) ISBN 978-0-345-54495-7*

Bestselling author Picoult's latest page-turner is inspired by a Flint, Mich., event in which a white supremacist father refused to allow an experienced African-American labor and delivery nurse to touch his newborn. In Picoult's story, a medical crisis results in an infant's death and a murder charge against a black nurse named Ruth Jefferson. The story unfolds from three viewpoints: Ruth's, the infant's father—a skinhead named Turk—and Ruth's public defender, Kennedy McQuarrie, a white professional woman questioning her own views about racism. The author's comprehensive research brings veracity to Ruth's story as a professional black woman trying to fit into white society, to Turk's inducement into the white-power movement, and to Kennedy's soul-searching about what it's like to be black in America. Unfortunately, the author undermines this richly drawn and compelling story with a manipulative final plot twist as well as a Pollyannaish ending. Some may be put off by the moralistic undertone of Picoult's tale, while others will appreciate the inspiration it provides for a much-needed conversation about race and prejudice in America. (Oct.)

*(taken from [publishersweekly.com](http://publishersweekly.com))*

## Discussion Questions

1. Which of the three main characters (Ruth, Turk, or Kennedy) do you most relate to and why? Think about what you have in common with the other two characters as well—how can you relate to them?
2. The title of the book comes from the Martin Luther King, Jr. quote that Ruth's mother mentions on p. 173: "If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way." What does this quote mean to you? What are some examples of small great things done by the characters in the novel?
3. Discuss Ruth's relationship with her sister, Adisa. How does the relationship change over the course of the novel?
4. Kennedy seeks out a neighborhood in which she is the only white person to help her gain some perspective. Can you think of an example of a time when something about your identity made you an outsider? How were you affected by that experience?
5. All of the characters change over the course of the novel, but Turk's transformation is perhaps the most extreme. What do you think contributed to that change?
6. Discuss the theme of parenthood in the novel. What does being a parent mean to Ruth, to Kennedy, and to Turk? What does it mean to you?
7. Why do you think Ruth lies to Kennedy about touching Davis when he first starts seizing? What would you have done in her position?
8. Why do you think Kennedy decides to take Ruth's case? What makes it so important to her?
9. Discuss the difference between "equity" and "equality" as Kennedy explains it on p. 427. Do you think Ruth gets equity from the trial?
10. Was your perspective on racism or privilege changed by reading this book? Is there anything you now see differently?
11. Did the ending of *Small Great Things* surprise you? If so, why? Did you envision a different ending?
12. Did the Author's Note change your reading experience at all?
13. Have you changed anything in your daily life after reading *Small Great Things*?
14. Whom would you recommend *Small Great Things* to? Why?  
(Questions issued by the publisher.)

**(taken from *litlovers.com*)**