

# **BOOK CLUB To Go!**

## **My Sister's Keeper**

### **By Jodi Picoult**

#### **Introduction**

*My Sister's Keeper* is about 13- year-old Anna Fitzgerald, who enlists the help of an attorney, Campbell Alexander, to sue her parents for rights to her own body. Anna was conceived as a donor for her sister Kate, who is 16 and has leukemia. Anna donated genetic material throughout her life, and the latest donation is for her to give a kidney to Kate. If she wins the lawsuit, she would not have to donate.

Her parents, Brian and Sara Fitzgerald, have different reactions to the suit. Brian has mixed feelings while Sara feels that Anna should donate the kidney. Sara is a lawyer turned housewife and decides to represent the parents' side in the suit.

*My Sister's Keeper* examines what it means to be a good parent, a good sister, a good person. Is it morally correct to do whatever it takes to save a child's life, even if that means infringing upon the rights of another? Is it worth trying to discover who you really are, if that quest makes you like yourself less? Should you follow your own heart, or let others lead you? Once again, in *My Sister's Keeper*, Jodi Picoult tackles a controversial real-life subject with grace, wisdom, and sensitivity.

([readinggroupguides.com](http://readinggroupguides.com) & [bookrags.com](http://bookrags.com))

## About the Author

Jodi Lynn Picoult was born on May 19, 1966, in Nesconset on Long Island in New York. Picoult's family moved to New Hampshire when she was 13. Although she left New Hampshire for college and her early jobs, she settled there again as a married woman. She currently lives in Hanover, New Hampshire with her husband, Tim Van Leer, and their three children, Sammy, Kyle and Jake. Picoult studied writing at Princeton University, where she earned her bachelor's degree. She also earned a master's degree in education from Harvard University. Picoult wrote her first story, "The Lobster which Misunderstood," when she was five. While at Princeton, she published two stories in *Seventeen* magazine. She wrote her first novel, *Songs of the Humpback Whale*, while she was pregnant with her first child, and published it in 1992. Picoult's novels usually deal with ethical issues and are told from a variety of viewpoints, with each chapter written in a different character's voice. Picoult uses this technique to show multiple sides of a situation and underscore areas of moral ambiguity.

([booksellers.com](http://booksellers.com))

## Author Interview by Bethane Kolly Patrick and Carol Fitzgerald

April 9, 2004

**Patrick and Fitzgerald:** What made you choose to write a book with a plot that concerns genetic planning, namely with one child being conceived as a possible donor for another?

**Picoult:** I stumbled over this idea by accident while I was researching my last novel, *Second Chance*. That book involved the VT eugenics project --- namely, how Vermont was one of twenty-six states in the US in the 1920s and 1930s that had a law on the books to sterilize people they felt were degenerate. When Hitler praised these laws during WWII, funding dried up --- as did the American Eugenics Society. The organization that moved into its corporate headquarters, believe it or not, is the Human Genome Project. In many ways, this incredibly advanced science has the potential to be "our" eugenics project, if it's used incorrectly.

I found an article about a family that was the first one in the US to conceive a child as a bone marrow match for an older, ill sibling. The newborn's cord blood stem cells were given to his sister; she went into remission; it's been three years. Happy ending, right? Well, I started to wonder what might happen if that sister goes OUT of remission --- if the brother would feel morally responsible. I wondered how he'd feel if his parents mentioned that he was conceived because his sister was sick. Of course, I was flashing forward, and offering the worst-case scenario ... but it seemed like such a heavy load to

thinking about what that child might be like as a teenager --- an age when you normally try to figure out who you really are --- and so Anna Fitzgerald, and her family, were born.

**Patrick and Fitzgerald:** How did you research this topic? Where did you begin? In the course of your research did you ever feel this story was too emotionally painful to write?

**Picoult:** I started in my own life, which is very rare for me. My middle son, Jake, was diagnosed at age 5 with a cholesteatoma --- a very rare, benign tumor that grows from the inside of the ear. It's not cancerous, but it will burrow into your brain and kill you if you don't get it out ... and it's an awfully aggressive tumor. The typical treatment involves removing the ear canal wall, making it easy to remove subsequent growths --- but also rendering the child deaf in that ear. My husband and I decided to go with a more experimental treatment instead --- one that would require extra surgeries for Jake, but might preserve some of his hearing. In three years time, he was diagnosed with tumors in BOTH ears ... and he had ten surgeries. Now, at age ten, he is a happy, healthy guy who is deaf in his left ear and has hearing somewhere in the bottom-normal range in his right ear. It's something we look back on now ... but for a while there, we were used to dropping everything at an instant to take Jake in for surgery; hospitals became a comfortable place; our other children learned that their lives came second to Jake's illness.

All this played heavily in the writing of *My Sister's Keeper* as did the basic feeling I had as a mom: that I would have done anything to keep Jake from having one more surgery. Sara, in *My sister's Keeper*, would say the same about Kate.

From there, research became twofold: speaking to oncologists and oncology patients (as well as their parents), and to attorneys about medical emancipation. You'd be surprised --- talking to pediatric cancer patients is remarkable, because they are all so amazingly upbeat. It's as if they know that they've got to make the most of the time they have here --- every time I interviewed one, I'd come away amazed and inspired.

I didn't get emotionally overwhelmed writing this book initially, because I'd known all along there weren't going to be any happy endings. But then I got to the end of the book and was so upset about finishing it that I actually called an oncology nurse, asking her if there might be a different ending --- a medical miracle. I won't give it away for you, but rest assured: I cried the whole time I was working on it.

**Patrick and Fitzgerald:** Did the direction your characters took surprise you, or do you typically have a plot etched out when you start?

**Picoult:** The interesting thing about *My Sister's Keeper* was that I realized almost immediately I needed more than one narrator. Everyone has a point of view in this book, and I thought you deserved to hear why they all feel the way they do. It felt like patching together a quilt of different voices: one alone wasn't going to keep you warm, but when you hear the whole symphony of their emotions, you are able to fully understand the conundrum this family is facing. Although I hear that this book is a real page-turner, it always felt to me like a character study ... of seven characters! There were moments in the book that surprised me --- for example, what happens to Brian on the witness stand --- but for the most part, I knew the beginning and the endpoint of the book and let the characters tell me how to get from point A to point B.

**Patrick and Fitzgerald:** *My Sister's Keeper* is the perfect title for this book. How soon in the writing process did you come up with it?

**Picoult:** I should lie, and tell you I'm naturally brilliant and had the title from Day One. In truth, I'd finished the book and was completely clueless. Then, one morning I was walking three miles with my friend at 5:30 AM and talking about the book ... and suddenly the title was there on the tip of my tongue. Who says exercise doesn't spark creativity?!?!

(*Bookreporter.com*)

## Reviews

"*My Sister's Keeper* is a beautiful, heartbreaking, controversial, and honest book."

—*Booklist*

"A spellbinding suspense novel." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Picoult's characters are so compelling that the reader hopes this won't be the last time we meet."—*USA Today*

(*readinggroupguides.com*)

## Movie Adaptation

Sara (Cameron Diaz) and Brian Fitzgerald (Jason Patric) have just been informed that their young daughter Kate (Sofia Vassilieva) has leukemia, and that she only has a few years to live. The doctor suggests to the parents that they try an unorthodox medical procedure of producing another child in a test-tube that would be a perfect match as a donor for Kate. Sara will try anything to save Kate, and they have a new baby Anna (Abigail Breslin) to be used as a donor for Kate. The first thing they use is blood from the umbilical cord for Kate. As years go on, the doctors must take bone marrow from Anna to give to Kate. At age 11, the next thing Anna must give to her sister is a kidney. Anna has had enough of all of these medical procedures, and she decides to sue her parents for medical emancipation and the right to decide how her body will be used. The whole family is being torn apart by Anna's decision because everyone knows what will happen to Kate if she doesn't get a new kidney.

*(imdb.com)*

## Movie Reviews

“Exceptional! This movie is unlike any other that you will see this summer.”

*-Hollywood.com*

“Enormously touching and genuinely poignant.”-*nbc/reel talk*

“Cameron Diaz shines in the performance of her career.”-*reelzchannel*

*(mysisterskeepermovie.com)*

## Further Reading

*A Time to Embrace* by Karen Kingsbury

*Change of Heart* by Jodi Picoult

*She is Me* by Cathleen Schine

*Beach Roses* by Jean Stone

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#### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. Is there such a thing as an objective decision in the world of this story? Is anyone capable of being totally rational, or do emotions always come into play?
2. What do you think of this story's representation of the justice system? What was your opinion of the final outcome of the trial?
3. What is your opinion of Sara? Did you find yourself criticizing Sara, empathizing with her, or both?
4. Why do you think Campbell feels that he needs to hide his illness? Is it significant that Anna is the first to break down his barriers and hear the truth? Why, for example, does he flippantly dismiss all questions regarding Judge with sarcastic remarks?
5. It is interesting that Campbell suffers seizures that only his dog can foresee. How might this unique relationship mirror some of the relationships between humans in this novel?
6. On page 149, Brian is talking to Julia about astronomy and says, "Dark matter has a gravitational effect on other objects. You can't see it, you can't feel it, but you can watch something being pulled in its direction." How is this symbolic of Kate's illness?
7. Near the end of the novel, Anna describes "lfspeak" -- the language that all children know, but abandon as they grow older -- remarking that "Kids think with their brains cracked wide open; becoming an adult, I've decided, is only a slow sewing shut." Do you believe this to be true? What might children teach the adults in this novel? Which adults need lessons most?
8. Discuss the different kinds of ethical problems that Anna, as the "designer baby," presents in this story? Did your view change as the story progressed? Why or why not? Has this novel changed any of your opinions about other conflicts in bioethics like stem cell research or genetically manipulated offspring?

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