

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



With ten novels published by the time she was thirty-seven, Jodi Picoult ranks among the more prolific and ambitious young American writers. She has been characterized by critics as a women's fiction author; she contests this label, however, citing her popularity with both male and female fans. Her novels cross many genres, including literary fiction, legal thrillers, psychological portraits, romances, and ghost stories. In reviews, her body of work, themes, and writing style have been compared to authors as diverse as Alice Hoffman, John Grisham, and Daphne du Maurier. As this varied group of comparisons suggests, Picoult creates a new reading experience for her audience with each book.

Jodi Lynn Picoult was born on 19 May 1966 and grew up in Nesconset, Long Island, with her parents, Myron Michel Picoult, a securities analyst on Wall Street, and Jane Ellen Friend Picoult, a nursery-school teacher. She has one younger

brother, Jonathan Paul Picoult. On her official website, Picoult says jokingly of her childhood, "I had such an uneventful childhood that much later, when I was taking writing classes at college, I called home and yelled at my mother, wishing for a little incest or abuse on the side." She continues, "Good writers, I thought at the time, had to have something to write about. It took me a while to realize that I already did have something to write about--that solid core of family, and of relationships, which seem to form a connective thread through my books." Picoult's happy childhood included writing stories, which her grandmother still keeps as examples of her "early" work, and a job as a library page. These youthful interactions with professional writing compelled Picoult to move toward a career as a novelist. She earned a B.A. in English in 1987 from Princeton University, where she studied creative writing with writers Robert Stone and Mary Morris. Under their guidance, Picoult had her first publishing success. She submitted a short story, "Keeping Count" (February 1987), to *Seventeen*, which published it and a subsequent story, "Road Stop" (August 1987).

Despite these early writing successes, Picoult went to work on Wall Street in New York City after her graduation. She then worked at a publishing company and later at an advertising agency. Finally, Picoult returned to the classroom to pursue a master's degree in education at Harvard University, earning an M.E.D. in 1990. Concomitant with her graduate education, Picoult taught creative writing at the Walnut Hill School for the Arts in Natick, Massachusetts from 1989 to 1991.

On 18 November 1989, Picoult married Timothy Warren van Leer, whom she met when both were members of the heavyweight men's crew team at Princeton. Picoult jokes, "I was a manager/coxswain, and I was the first person with two X chromosomes to set foot in a men's crew shell at the university!" Picoult's first novel was published following her marriage. Written while Picoult was six months pregnant with the first of her three children, *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1992) establishes Picoult's primary theme for each of her subsequent novels: the love between family and friends. Her novels probe the key idea of what it means to love someone.

- [link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/H1200011658/LitRC?u=gene43801&sid=LitRC&xid=34055cc4](http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/H1200011658/LitRC?u=gene43801&sid=LitRC&xid=34055cc4)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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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 their 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. Who would you recommend *Small Great Things* to? Why?

- <https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/small-great-things/guide>

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Booklist

Immensely popular novelist Picoult (*Leaving Time*, 2014) continues to tackle weighty subject matter in her twenty-fourth novel. Ruth Jefferson, a widow with a teenage son, is a labor and delivery nurse and the only African American in her department. When the infant son of two white supremacists, Turk and Brittany Bauer, who have specifically asked that Ruth not handle their child, dies suddenly, Ruth is blamed for the child's death by both the hospital and the child's parents. In quick succession, Ruth loses her license, is dragged from her home by the police in the middle of the night, and is charged with murder. Kennedy McQuarrie, a white female public defender, takes Ruth's case, but her refusal to bring up race in Ruth's defense doesn't sit right with Ruth, given that race is ingrained in the case's DNA, from the Bauers' hateful views to Ruth's supervisor's acquiescence to their demands to Ruth's experience once in the cogs of the justice system. Picoult's gripping tale is told from three points of view, that of Ruth, Kennedy, and Turk, and offers a thought-provoking examination of racism in America today, both overt and subtle. Her many readers will find much to discuss in the pages of this topical, moving book. --Kristine Huntley.

### Library Journal

Ruth Jefferson is great at her job. She's an experienced labor and delivery nurse who not only knows how to guide women through labor, but also understands post-delivery needs such as a shoulder to cry on and lipstick. But her career and life change forever when she hesitates before helping a baby in cardiac arrest. Why would a nurse pause to help a patient? Ruth is African American and the baby's white supremacist parents don't want her touching their child. The hospital tells Ruth to comply with the parents' wishes, but when she's the only available nurse, should she follow orders or try to save the newborn's life? Told from the points of view of Ruth, her white public defender, and the white supremacist father, the novel digs into the issue of race. Picoult (*Leaving Time*; *The Storyteller*) delivers what her fans expect with a controversial topic that includes plenty of courtroom drama and a surprise twist. The novel is well researched, although it raises the question: can a person of one race write authentically about being another race? VERDICT Recommended for Picoult fans and book clubs that don't shy away from serious discussions. [See Prepub Alert, 4/25/16; 15-city tour.]--Amy Stenftenagel, Washington Cty. Lib., Woodbury, MN

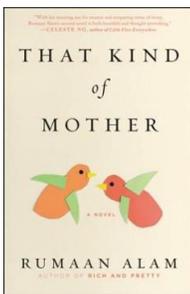
### Publisher's Weekly

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.) --Staff (Reviewed 08/29/2016) (Publishers Weekly, vol 263, issue 35, p)

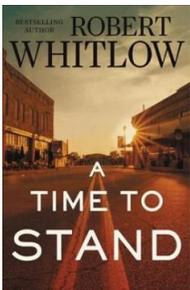
## READALIKES

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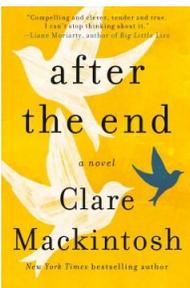
### ***That Kind of Mother* by Rumaan Alam**

Overwhelmed by new motherhood in spite of her love for her infant son, Rebecca, a white woman, asks a kind black woman, Priscilla, to become her family's nanny, only to have her perspectives changed about her own life of privilege, a situation that compels her to take on unanticipated challenges in the aftermath of a tragedy.



### ***Time to Stand* by Robert Whitlow**

Adisa Johnson, a young African American attorney, is living her dream of practicing law with a prestigious firm in downtown Atlanta. Then a split-second mistake changes the course of her career. Left with no other options, Adisa returns to her hometown where a few days earlier a white police officer shot an unarmed black teen who is now lying comatose in the hospital. Adisa is itching to jump into the fight as a special prosecutor, but feels pulled to do what she considers unthinkable--defend the officer. As the court case unfolds, everyone in the small community must confront their own prejudices.



### ***After the End* by Clare Mackintosh**

Disagreeing for the first time when their son falls ill and they receive conflicting doctor recommendations, a devoted couple finds a unique way for both of their preferences to become possible.