i. Author’s Biography and Works

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.

Jodi is a very interesting person. She wrote her first book, "The Lobster Which Misunderstood" when she was 5 years old and when she was a college student, Seventeen magazine published some of her short stories. Jodi also has had several of her novels turned into movies. Having a happy childhood has inspired Jodi to have kids of her own and to be a good mother and wife. Her son Jake was diagnosed with benign ear tumors that could have been fatal when he was 6 years old. After about ten surgeries, however, the tumors were removed and he was left with partial deafness until recently. Jodi uses this life changing event when she writes novels that deal with parents who confront
medical issues. She is very passionate about her writing. It usually takes her about nine months to write one book. This is so she can do as much research as she can and make it just right. Jodi has also taught middle-school English in Concord, Massachusetts. Something she loved about teaching was making the students think hard about what they believed and why they believed it. Jodi had a very loving and caring home as a child. She was quoted as saying, “I grew up on Long Island with my parents and my little brother, the product of a ridiculously happy childhood.” Her main activities, other than writing, include doing things with her husband, Tim Van Leer, and their three children, Sammy, Kyle and Jake. Also, every morning at 5:30 she goes on hikes with her friend. Jodi and her son, Jake, write a children’s musical every year that is performed to raise money for a charity that benefits orphans with H.I.V. and AIDS in Zimbabwe. A quote that I found written in one of Jodi’s books and that I really feel summarizes her personality and her life is when she writes, “There's always going to be bad stuff out there. But here's the amazing thing -- light trumps darkness, every time. You stick a candle into the dark, but you can't stick the dark into the light.”

In her career as a novelist, Jodi Picoult has published at an extraordinary pace, releasing seventeen books in about as many years. Though panned by some critics for the commercial nature of her writing, she has earned a large and devoted following of readers. Nearly 14 million copies of her books are in print in the U.S. alone, and her work has been translated into thirty-four languages in thirty-five countries. Her novels cover a range of topics, from school shootings to teen suicide to death row inmates, yet many share a single theme: ordinary people in extraordinary and often morally complicated situations. All manner of horrific things happen in the lives of Picoult’s characters, and the choices her characters make in response typically form the crux of her plots. Her books often explore the psychological consequences of wrenching incidents and decisions, and they deal largely in
moral gray areas, where the ethics of medicine, law, and society come into conflict with one another. Rarely, if ever, do her novels offer easy resolutions.

Born in 1966, Picoult attended Princeton University for her undergraduate studies. Seventeen magazine published two of her short stories while she was still a student. After graduation, Picoult took on a series of different jobs to earn her living. She worked as a technical writer for a brokerage firm, wrote copy for an advertising agency, served as an editor at a textbook publisher, and taught English to 8th graders. Eventually she enrolled in Harvard, where she received her Masters in Education. She married Tim Van Leer, and while pregnant with her first child she published her first novel, Songs of the Humpback Whale, which was released in 1992. But not until the release of her 1998 novel, The Pact, about the apparent murder of a seventeen-year-old girl by a boy she had known all her life, did Picoult begin to achieve wide-scale commercial success.

In 2004, Picoult published My Sister’s Keeper. Like most of her works, the novel takes on a range of morally complex issues, from the ethics of genetic engineering, to the right of terminally-ill patients to elect to die, to a minor’s right to control her own body. Genetic engineering alone has been the subject of controversy since its very first uses to help infertile couples conceive via in vitro fertilization. As the potential uses of the method have grown, so have the moral questions that such genetic manipulation raises. Notably, the ethics of using science to create a so-called “designer baby,” meaning one whose physical traits are selected by the parents, has become the object of frequent and heated debates. These quandaries, and those regarding the rights of terminally ill patients and minors to determine what happens to their bodies, all intertwine in My Sister’s Keeper, which tells the story of one family devastated by their child’s battle with acute promyelocytic leukemia, an extremely aggressive form of cancer. As in many of her novels, Picoult distills these conflicts to their
most controversial aspects, places ordinary people in the midst of them, and challenges readers to confront their own preconceptions about the subject.

The world of *My Sister’s Keeper* brims with realistic medical and legal jargon. In fact, Picoult is renowned for diligently researching the topics she writes about, and she has said that her research can at times take even longer than the actual writing of the book. Her regular routine entails conducting numerous interviews with experts related to the issue at hand and spending time with real individuals and families who have been affected. The writing of her novel *House Rules*, for instance, about a teenage boy with the autism-spectrum disorder called Asperger’s Syndrome, involved several conversations with autistic children and their parents. For *My Sister’s Keeper*, Picoult spent time with pediatric oncologists who treat children with cancer. Picoult also brings her personal experiences to her books. *House Rules* came about in part because her cousin has autism, so she knew first-hand how autism can affect a family. With *My Sister’s Keeper*, Picoult drew on her experiences with her middle son, who at the age of five needed ten surgeries over three years to treat a tumor in his ear. Picoult says the desperation she felt sitting in the hospital beside her anesthetized son and knowing she could do nothing to help him informed her depiction of Sara, the mother in the Fitzgerald family of *My Sister’s Keeper*. That emotion, combined with the knowledge Picoult gathered in her research, imbues the book with a sense of realism.
ii. Summary of the Novel

*My Sister’s Keeper* alternates between first-person accounts by the novel’s different characters. The bulk of the story takes place in the present, in a one-and-a-half week stretch of time. Sara Fitzgerald, a former attorney and current stay-at-home mom, narrates the remainder of the story from different points in the past but moving gradually toward the present. One final chapter, the epilogue, occurs in the future. In 1990, doctors diagnose Sara’s two-year-old daughter, Kate, with a rare and aggressive form of leukemia. The news that their child might die shocks Sara and her firefighter husband, Brian, but Sara immediately resolves to begin Kate on treatment. Kate starts chemotherapy, and her oncologist, Dr. Chance, suggests she might eventually need a bone marrow transplant, preferably from a related donor. The Fitzgeralds test their four-year-old son, Jesse, but he is not a match. Dr. Chance mentions that another unborn sibling could be a match, and Sara suggests to Brian that they have another child.

Sara’s passages, told at different points over the next fourteen years, focus largely on Kate’s struggles. She describes how scientists help them conceive another daughter, Anna, who is a perfect genetic match for Kate. Over the course of the next few years, Anna undergoes several procedures, including frequent blood withdrawals and a painful bone marrow extraction, to help keep Kate alive. Sara describes in great detail the pain and suffering Kate endures. Chemotherapy and radiation make her violently ill, and an emergency trip to the hospital heralds each new relapse. Sara and Brian’s marriage suffers as a result, to the point where they begin to feel like strangers. In different ways, both Jesse and Anna act out at Sara because of her single-minded focus on Kate.

The present action of the story begins on a Monday. Thirteen-year-old Anna goes to see a lawyer named Campbell Alexander and asks him to represent her. Anna tells Campbell that
she wants to sue her parents for medical emancipation. Kate, her sister, is in the end stages of kidney failure, and Anna wants to file the lawsuit so she will not have to donate a kidney to Kate. Campbell, who has a service dog but gives a sarcastic explanation whenever someone asks why, agrees to represent Anna for free. When she is served with the papers for the lawsuit, Sara becomes furious with Anna as she cannot understand Anna’s decision. Brian, however, understands Anna’s point of view to a degree and recognizes that she would not have brought a lawsuit unless she were genuinely unhappy. Judge Desalvo, the judge for Anna’s case, decides to appoint a woman named Julia Romano as Anna’s guardian ad litem, a person whose job is to objectively decide what is in Anna’s best interests. When Julia goes to see Campbell, it becomes clear they have a romantic past and have not seen each other in many years. Throughout all of these events, Jesse has been setting different abandoned buildings on fire. Jesse acts like a delinquent in other ways as well, such as drinking alcohol excessively, but much of this behavior stems from anger over his inability to save Kate and his feelings of being ignored by his parents.

Kate becomes seriously ill and must be hospitalized. Dr. Chance says she will die within a week. Anna refuses to change her mind about the lawsuit, however. At the hearing, Sara decides she will represent herself and Brian. Consequently, Brian takes Anna to stay with him at the fire station to give Anna some distance from her mother. He believes if they remain in the same house together, Anna may unwillingly cave to her mother’s wish that she donate her kidney. Meanwhile, through flashbacks Campbell and Julia alternately recall scenes from their high-school relationship. They both attend a prep school populated by children from wealthy families. Julia feels and acts like the outsider, and Campbell falls in love with her despite the reservations of his friends and parents. Their relationship ends abruptly, however, when Campbell breaks it off without explanation. In the present, Campbell and Julia initially bicker with each other, but they end up sleeping together the night before the trial begins.
At the trial, both Sara and Campbell question witnesses, including one of the doctors familiar with Kate’s medical history, and both are effective at different times. Reluctantly, Anna takes the stand and admits that she filed the lawsuit because Kate told her to. At the very moment she makes this announcement, Campbell has an epileptic seizure and collapses. When his seizure ends, he admits he has been having seizures ever since a car accident in high school. He broke up with Julia because he didn’t want his seizures, which limit him greatly, to limit Julia as well. He also explains that the seizures are the reason he has a service dog, which can tell when another seizure is coming on. Julia and Campbell reconcile. Back on the stand, Anna explains that Kate asked Anna not to donate her kidney because she was tired of being sick and waiting to die. Anna also admits that while she loves her sister, part of her wanted Kate to die, too, so that she could have more freedom with her life. Judge DeSalvo decides to grant Anna medical emancipation and gives Campbell medical power of attorney over her.

On the way to the hospital, Campbell and Anna get into a serious car accident. At the hospital, the doctors tell the family that Anna has irreversible brain damage. Campbell tells the doctors to give Anna’s kidney to Kate. Kate narrates the epilogue, set in 2010. She discusses the grief her family went through after Anna’s death, and the fact that she blames herself. She knows, however, that she will always carry Anna with her.