



PLAIN TRUTH
by Jodi Picoult

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About Jodi Picoult

Jodi Picoult grew up in Nesconset, New York. She received an A.B. in creative writing from Princeton and a master's degree in education from Harvard. She is the author of seven other books, all of which have come out in rapid-fire succession: *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1992), which Picoult wrote when she was six months pregnant with her first child; *Harvesting the Heart* (1994), which she describes as a reflection of her feelings as a new mother—and her most emotionally autobiographical novel; *Picture Perfect* (1995); *Mercy* (1996), a novel about married love and if it's really 50/50 (Picoult says she and husband Tim are still debating this); *The Pact* (1998); *Keeping Faith* (1999) and *Salem Falls* which was published by Allen & Unwin in June 2001.

Plain Truth was published in 2000 and Jodi's next novel, *Perfect Match*, is due to be published in March 2002. She lives in New Hampshire with her husband and three children.

‘I grew up out on Long Island, with my parents and younger brother—all of whom I’m still incredibly close to. I went to a public high school where I breezed through with straight As, never bothering to crack a book. I had the shock of my life upon entering Princeton, where I not only learned to work, but to write.

‘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. Good writers, I thought at the time, had to have something to write about. It took me a while to realise 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.

‘I picked Princeton because at the time it had one of the only undergrad writing workshops in the east, and my mother was surreptitiously throwing away all my college applications west of the Mississippi River. There, I started off writing poetry, and then switched over to fiction to work with Mary Morris, a terrific writer who really challenged me to dig deeper, and taught me how to fine-tune my writing. It was at her prodding that I submitted a short story to *Seventeen* magazine, which was bought . . . for more money than I had in my checking account at the time. Thrilled, I called my mom to tell her I was going to be a writer. My mom said, ‘How nice. Who’s going to support you?’

‘I guessed this was what was on my mind when I left Princeton and went to work on Wall Street, then advertising, then textbook publishing, then went to Harvard to get an M.Ed and teach eighth-grade English. I worked very hard NOT to be a writer. It was only after I was pink-

slipped, married and pregnant with my first son that I gave in and took the summer to write a 1000 page manuscript that was published the following year, *Songs of the Humpback Whale*?

It took a while, but Picoult says she has reconciled writing and motherhood. ‘I’m a better mother because I have my writing and I’m a better writer because of the experiences of motherhood that have shaped me.

‘Nowadays, I can’t imagine doing anything but writing. My biggest supporter—and my first reader—is my mother.’

On Writing *Plain Truth*—Jodi Picoult

‘*Plain Truth* is about an eighteen-year-old Amish girl who hides a pregnancy, delivers a baby in secret, and then is brought up on charges of murder when the infant is found dead beneath a pile of horse blankets. The girl, however, denies killing it, and giving birth to it. Needless to say, there are not many Amish felony suspects, and Katie finds herself being defended by an attorney from Philadelphia who is a distant relative and who finds herself awkwardly placed in the position of living in a foreign culture while defending a client who doesn’t want to be defended.

‘I wrote the book because I was fascinated by the culture of the Amish, who believe that standing out from the crowd is an incredibly uncomfortable thing (the opposite of us attention-hogging Americans!). To this end, if they are accused of a sin, they’ll confess in church—even if they didn’t do it! As soon as I heard that, I knew I could write a book in which the American system of justice comes into conflict with the Amish one since any attorney is going to be stymied by a client who confesses, although she isn’t guilty!

‘The book also gave me the opportunity to paint the Amish people truthfully—I lived with two families for a week while doing research. In my country, they are seen as saints, or tourist attractions, and I wanted to capture them as people with the same feelings and thoughts as anyone else—while still giving readers a chance to ‘visit’ a world that is typically hidden to those outside the Amish faith.’

A Conversation with Jodi Picoult

You're only 34 years old, and have written eight novels in nine years while bearing—and raising—three children. You must have an amazing regimen?

Regimen? No way. Does anyone with three kids under the age of ten have a regimen? I'm lucky to gather the scraps of my time and write when I can! Nothing I'm working on is as important as my children which means that if one of them comes up to my office to show me a cut on his knee or to have me referee a war with her brother, that takes precedence. It has gotten easier since my husband became a stay-at-home dad this summer. I finally can go on tour without stressing over who will watch the kids; I can work straight through school pick-up at 2:45pm. In making this life choice, my husband Tim has given me an incredible gift.

But for years I managed to squeeze in my writing where I could, and as a result of that, I've developed a discipline, if not a regimen. I am blessed with an ability to write very quickly, and I don't believe in writer's block, because I don't have time to believe it. I sit down and write, whether the stuff I type out is good or not, and edit it later.

Usually I thrash through a plot first, then characters, and finally a tentative ending (which, I discover, is usually not the way it ends at all . . .). I do my research, and then when I feel like I 'know' enough to write, I work chapter by chapter. Whenever people look at my books, and then at my kids, and shake their heads and ask how I do it, I always want to ask back, 'How couldn't I?' I wouldn't trade a moment with my children and in return, my children know that I need to write like some people need asthma medication—as a preventative, because when I don't write for a few days, I get predictably cranky.

Which of your books is your favourite?

Shame on you. That's like asking a mother which kid she loves best, you know. But okay, I'll admit that I am closer to some books than others. I'm supposed to say that my favourite book is the one you can buy, right now, at your book store and in a way that's true, because I'm always excited about whatever's new, due to the hoopla around the publication. And now that I've given you the party line, I'll confess that I do have some favourites. *Harvesting the Heart* reminds me of having my first child, and is probably my most autobiographical novel (but no, I did not leave home, for those of you who are wondering . . .). *The Pact* brought more fans my way than all my

previous books put together and still makes me cry. *Mercy* is a personal favourite, because it cracks open the question of love and that's something I believe everyone can relate to. *Plain Truth* and *Perfect Match* were both incredibly clean books—easy and fast to write, and I was proud of them even as books-in-progress . . . something that NEVER happens!

How long does it take to write a book?

Nine months, usually, and you can stop laughing now. I don't know why it takes me the same amount of time to deliver both a book and a baby, but there you have it. Sometimes the amount of research vs. rough drafting varies, but it generally takes three-quarters of a year for my head to gel ideas into a cohesive story. That said, with my husband at home, I just finished the first draft of *Perfect Match* in a breathless two and a half months. (Don't get all excited. It's still not going to be published until 2002.) Often, I'll be thinking of the next book while I'm putting the finishing touches on a manuscript and simultaneously on tour for the novel that's just been published (yes, that means I'm three books ahead of myself). I work sequentially, writing the chapters just the way you see them. My mom and agent and a good friend read the chapters as they come off the computer printer, and give comments. These I incorporate into the next draft . . . and do a hefty edit. And then another . . . and another . . .

Where do the ideas come from?

A what-if question: What if a boy left standing after a botched suicide pact was accused of murder? What if a little girl developed an imaginary friend who turned out to be God? What if a man arrived as a mystery in a small town, and a group of conniving girls decided to run him right back out of it? I start mulling over a question and before I know it, a whole drama is unfolding in my head. Often, an idea sticks before I know what I'm going to do with it. For *Mercy*, I researched Scottish clans without having a clue why this was going to be important to the book. It was only after I learned about them that I realised I was writing a novel about the loyalty we bear to people we love.

Sometimes ideas change in the middle. *The Pact* was not a page-turner when I conceived it. I was going to write a character-driven book about the female survivor of an unfinished suicide pact, and went to the local police chief to do some preliminary research. 'Huh,' he said, 'It's the girl who survives? Because if it was the boy, who was physically larger, he'd automatically be suspected of murder until cleared by the evidence.' Well, I nearly fell out of my seat. 'Really?' I asked, and the character of Chris began to take shape, as well as the plot of *The Pact*. *Plain Truth* came

about because my mother said I ought to explore the reclusive Amish. ‘If anyone can learn about them,’ she said, ‘it’s you.’

Do you know the ending when you start to write?

Let’s put it this way . . . I think I do, but I’m usually wrong. There’s always a point in the book where it starts writing itself, and I’m just along for the ride. I know how crazy this sounds, I mean, I’m the writer, right? Can’t I control the characters? But the truth is, the characters become so real to me that it seems I’m just transcribing a film that’s being screened in my head, almost as if I have nothing to do with the creative process. Certain scenes surprise even me after I’ve written them—I just stare at the computer screen, amazed, and wonder how that happened.

For example, the scene in *The Pact* where Melanie runs Chris down with her car. Or in *Keeping Faith* when Millie Epstein comes back to life. When I was writing *Plain Truth*, I called my mom up one day. ‘You’re not going to believe what’s happening to Ellie!’ I told her. I think she told me I was scaring her and hung up . . . Okay, so it’s a little unnerving, but I love the moments when my characters walk away on their own two feet.

Why did you want to write about the Amish?

Because no one else has. At least not accurately. I wanted to write a book no one could describe in terms of someone else’s book (i.e. Oh, this is *Memoirs of a Geisha*-meets Grisham). The closest thing to this novel is *Witness*, a film made over fifteen years ago. I wanted to take a culture I knew nothing about, find out the reality behind it and then present it in a way that made readers understand the Amish as real people, rather than icons.

How do you do your research?

Meticulously. I hate catching authors in inaccuracies when I’m reading, so I’m a stickler for research. At this point I have several folks ‘on call’ for me during the writing of a book—a few lawyers, a few psychiatrists, some doctors, a pathologist, a DNA scientist. When I begin to research a topic, I read anything I can about it. Then I immerse myself in the topic by meeting with an ‘expert’. Some things are harder to find out about than others—getting the head of Launch Operations at NASA to squeeze me into his busy schedule, for example; or making a series of connections that landed me in the home of an Amish farmer for a week. In the name of research,

I've watched Sylvester Stallone on a movie set for *Picture Perfect*, I've gone to jail for the day for *The Pact*, I've observed cardiac surgery for *Harvesting the Heart*, I've milked cows on an Amish dairy farm for *Plain Truth*.

How on earth did you get to research the Amish for *Plain Truth*?

Amazingly, through the Internet. After posting a query on a Lancaster County message board, I got a response from a lovely Mennonite woman, with whom I struck up a research relationship. After many, many email queries, she suggested I come visit the area and volunteered to find me some Amish friends to stay with. I was there for a week, milking at 4.30 a.m and participating in the morning Bible study, as well as helping out with the cooking of meals. I quickly learned that the Amish aren't the one-dimensional characters they're made out to be. Like us, there are good people and bad people, tolerant people and intolerant people, lenient people and more exacting people. Just because we grow up taught to live our lives differently doesn't necessarily mean our way is better.

Reviews

***The Canberra Times*—Helen Chrissydes** **A slice of Amish life**

It's said that you can't judge a book by its cover, but that's not so when it comes to American fiction writer Jodi Picoult. Her books have covers as appealing, intriguing and alluring as their content. Consider the titles: *The Pact*, *Keeping Faith* and *Plain Truth*. They're mysterious, enticing headings for the controversial subject matter contained within. Picoult convincingly tackles the topics of teenage suicide, divine visions and Amish lifestyle, each story taking four to five hundred pages to tell, each book a guarantee of a gripping and captivating read.

How does she do this? With meticulous research, lifelike characters and a riveting plot. Her latest novel *Plain Truth*, the tale of an Amish farm girl accused of murdering her baby, is as compelling a read as its predecessors.

While the response by her American readers has been phenomenal, Picoult does not expect feedback from the people she depicted. 'No-one Amish will ever read this book, it isn't allowed by their bishop,' she explains, adding that their reading matter consists of *Little House on the Prairie* and *Reader's Digest*. 'However, Mennonites have read it, as well as Amish men and women who

have left the faith. They say I got the research right and brought back a slice of life the way they remember it. To me, that's the highest compliment I could receive.'

Picoult will spend nine months on a book—three months researching and six months writing or vice versa, depending on the novel. But her children—Kyle, 9, Jake, 7, and Samantha, 5—come first and so she fits in work around them . . . Yet it is dedication to her task rather than luck that has brought Picoult to this enviable position where her books now each sell in excess of 60 000 copies.

'Being a writer isn't a glamorous job. It's lonely, time consuming and extremely hard work.' But she would not trade this solitary existence for any other. 'If you are a true writer, you can't not write. True writers have stories battling around inside their minds at all times, and it's physically painful, until you find a scrap of paper and scribble it out.

Then all you need is a cover.

Who Weekly—Andie Paviour

Plain Truth is an ambitious potpourri of drama, romance and courtroom suspense set amongst the Amish of Pennsylvania. It's just as well, then, that New Hampshire author Picoult has a lively way with words and has done her homework with a vengeance.

The last of her many acknowledgments is to the Amish community and Picoult used that access well. Her suspenseful account of Katie Fisher, a young, unmarried Amish woman who may or may not have murdered her newborn son, is alive with the authenticity of first hand observation. The dignified Fisher family and nervy big-city lawyer Ellie Hathaway, who comes, reluctantly, to live among them and defend Katie on a charge of murder, are engagingly real, and the courtroom theatrics crackle.

Picoult is at her sharpest when the tension is tingling: at 504 pages, *Truth* is a weighty book that flows like a dream. Its deft prose grows cloying in the mushy realm of Ellie's love life ('Their hands were twined like ivy, growing up between their hearts'), but the hairpin bends are a challenge to the very last page.

People (US)—Jill Smolowe

From the very start, Picoult draws readers into her suspenseful, richly layered drama . . . Despite the occasional cliché and a coda that feels artificially tacked on, Picoult’s seventh novel never loses its grip. The research is convincing, the plotting taut, the scenes wonderfully vivid. Most impressive, the author gets beneath the uniformities of dress, custom and conduct to paint a unique community—closed to most Americans—in all its social and psychological complexity. As Katie’s mother observes, and Picoult proves, ‘We look alike. We pray alike. We live alike. But none of these things mean we all think alike.’

Entertainment Weekly (US)

It’s a risky proposition, choosing *faith* as your literary territory in these irony-friendly days: you open yourself to reactions ranging from eye rolling to outright disdain. But Picoult makes it work. Her seventh novel, a *Witness-meets-Agnes of God* courtroom thriller, is nominally about the murder of a baby but really about belief.

Deep in Pennsylvania, an 18-year-old Amish mother is charged in relation to the death of her newborn. How does a lawyer defend someone whose religion teaches that agreeing to accusation is the fastest way to make it go away—and that, in any case, God will make it work out? Put another way, how do you deal with intense faith when you don’t have any faith of your own? Against all expectations Picoult avoids cliché and keeps the story both absorbing and affecting.

Some suggested points for discussion

- ◆ What character has the most to learn during the course of this novel?
- ◆ In your opinion do the actions of the men in this book aid, or detract from, the growth of the female characters?
- ◆ From your reading of *Plain Truth* why would an Amish person accept a punishment without having committed a crime?
- ◆ In your opinion, what occurs after the last page is turned—to the Fishers, to Katie, to Ellie?

- ◆ Why do we care so much about Katie Fisher? How does her specific situation come to touch upon universal issues like community estrangement and forbidden love?
- ◆ ‘We all have things that come back to haunt us’, Adam Sinclair tells Katie at one point. ‘Some of us just see them more clearly than others.’ Discuss the ways in which ghosts of the past come to haunt the present action in *Plain Truth*. Of all the book’s characters, who comes to ‘see’ things most clearly?

Further reading

The Pact by Jodi Picoult

Keeping Faith by Jodi Picoult

Salem Falls by Jodie Picoult

Perfect Match by Jodie Picoult (to be published in March 2002)