

Soroff On JODI PICOULT

The novelist opens up about writing as a mom, movie adaptations and Cameron Diaz.



BESTSELLING AUTHOR JODI PICOULT, 42, has written 17 novels, including *The Tenth Circle* and *My Sister's Keeper*, which was made into a movie starring Cameron Diaz. Her newest book, *House Rules*, about a boy with Asperger's syndrome, hits stores in March. A Princeton graduate, Picoult worked as an ad-agency copywriter and an eighth-grade English teacher, among other jobs, before enrolling at Harvard to pursue a master's in education. While pregnant with her first child, she wrote her first novel. The recipient of numerous awards and accolades, she has been translated into 34 languages and is one of New England's most successful authors. She and her husband, Tim Van Leer, live in Hanover, N.H., with their three children and a virtual petting zoo.

Jonathan Soroff: *So what's with the "i" in your name?*

Jodi Picoult: Growing up, I hated my name, but I hear from a lot of readers who are Jodi's with an "i," and they pick up my books because of it.

Do you dot the "i" with a smiley face?
[Laughs.] No, a special big heart.

How did it feel to have My Sister's Keeper made into a movie?

Almost all of my books at some point were optioned for film, and you just kinda go, "Yeah, right." I will say that I was probably happier with the prospect going into it than I was at the end.

What would you have thought if you'd known Cameron Diaz would play the mother?

I would never have cast her. They had been tossing around names like Jodie Foster and Diane Lane and Julia Roberts—people with much more gravitas. I didn't think Cameron Diaz had it in her, but I will say that she did a really good job. I had no problem buying her as a mom. I had more trouble buying her as a lawyer, because she was just too nice.

Jason Patric: *hottest thing ever?*

Oh, my God! If I didn't have the world's hottest husband, I totally would've been all over Jason Patric. He was a really nice guy.

So you were on the set?

I was on the set... until I got booted off. The problem was that the ending was changed for the movie, and it wasn't a decision I was happy about. It went completely orthogonal to what I had requested and what the director told me would happen. I still don't understand why they made the decision they made.

Who do you think deserves an Oscar from it?

Either of the girls. Both Abby [Abigail Breslin] and Sofia [Vassilieva] were amazing. I watched them shoot one scene where Abby bursts into tears. They must have done six or seven takes, and each time they'd yell "Cut!" she'd wipe them away and be laughing and a totally normal little girl. She has mad skill as an actress.

Do you have any weird writing rituals?

I'm ritualistic in the sense that my children need to be in school in order for me to get anything done.

Favorite title of one of your books?

It's the one that's coming out in 2011, which is called *Sing You Home*. It's about embryo donation and gay rights, and one of the characters is a musician. Each of the chapters has a title that's a song that's on a CD that will be packaged with the book, and the songs were cowritten by me and a friend who sings them.

How has your writing changed?

If I want to describe something, I can probably do it in six words or less, instead of a whole paragraph.

What about life experiences?

I had so many more brain cells before I had kids. [Laughs.] If anyone ever teaches Jodi Picoult 101 at a college, you'll see a progression based upon where I was in my life. I started out writing about the relationship between a mother and a daughter, then I moved onto marriage and having children, and then all the scary things that can happen to a kid.

Worst job you ever had to pay the rent?

I worked at a two-person advertising agency, and I was one of them. My boss would go to

work out in the middle of the day and leave his underwear on the floor and stuff like that.

Genre you're most comfortable writing?

I hate being assigned to a genre. It pisses me off. I hate being called a women's-fiction writer, because it's a real insult to the 49 percent of my fans who write me and are male.

Ever get writer's block?

No. And I'll tell you why. When I had a newborn, I learned very quickly how to write in the 10 minutes when your child is napping, or at nursery school, or not hitting his brother with a block. You just sat down and did it, because you didn't have great spaces of time.

List three adjectives that describe your books.
Controversial. Thought-provoking. Emotional.

Is there a word or phrase you use too much?

Whenever I think of a child's hand, I think of a starfish, and I always have to stop myself because I know I've used it before.

Can writing be taught or is it innate?

I think you're born a storyteller, but you can be taught to be a good writer.

One quality that unites all great writers?

Inquisitiveness. You have to want to know what happens next.

Top three books you'd take to prison?

Gone With the Wind, because it's really long and because it's the book that made me want to become a writer. An Alice Hoffman book, because she's my all-time favorite. I always say I'd read her grocery list. And then some piece of Russian literature, because I've never read any of it, and my oldest son, who's at Yale, is completely appalled by that.

Any plans to write a vampire series?

God! It's so funny you asked that! What I do in my spare time is write children's musicals with my son Jake and my friend Ellen. We raise money for charity, and next year's is about vampires!

Fill in the blank: Jodi Picoult would much rather _____ than write.

I guess disappear to Turks and Caicos. But I'd probably end up writing there, too. ***