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INTERVIEWS

Jodi Picoult

by Jill Owens, March 25, 2008 3:15 PM

As authors go, Jodi Picoult is pretty close to a household name. If you haven't yet read one of her books, chances are that someone in your immediate family has. *Change of Heart*, her newest novel, was her second book to debut at #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list. And the critical praise she's received makes a strong case for her popularity: the *Washington Post* claims, "Picoult has become a master — almost a clairvoyant — at targeting hot issues and writing highly readable page-turners about them...It is impossible not to be held spellbound by the way she forces us to think, hard, about right and wrong."



A mother, grieving over the murder of one child years ago, faces an agonizing choice: whether to accept a heart donation from Shay, her child's killer, to save her remaining child's life. Meanwhile, Shay may or may not be performing miracles on death row. *Change of Heart* brims with questions: How do we define religion? What exactly constitutes justice? And what, if anything, can bring us redemption? Bookreporter.com agrees, "Hands-down Jodi Picoult's most thought-provoking novel to date. You may not believe in the death penalty, or you may scoff at religion, but you cannot deny the astonishing power this story holds."

Jill Owens: What was the genesis of *Change of Heart*?

Jodi Picoult: Usually when I write, I write about things that I'm worried about. Sometimes they're things I'm worried about as a wife, or a mom, or a woman; in this case, it was something I am worried about as an American.

I am watching our country being split apart along what I think is a fault line of religion. I think that where you stand on all of the really big issues that face this country today — things like capital punishment and abortion and gay rights — really depends on your own religious views. Especially with the election coming up and seeing the interweaving of politics and religion, it's got me thinking: How did this come to be? How did organized religion, which I think was truly meant to unite people, become so incredibly divisive?

I wanted to address why we believe the things we believe. Is it because they're right? Is it because it's too scary to admit that we don't know the answers? And why, necessarily, does saying "I believe I'm right" mean "Therefore, you must be wrong"?

So I chose to write a book that looks at organized religion and how it came to be, but also examines it through the lens of one of these particularly difficult moral issues, which is why it's about both religion and the death penalty.

Jill: In the acknowledgements at the beginning of the book, you write: "It's very hard to write about religion responsibly," which I thought was an interesting choice of words. What exactly do you mean by "responsibly"?

Picoult: You don't want to fall into the same trap. It does you no good to write a book about religious tolerance if you're then preaching to your choir. I've written about religion before; I could probably write about it another dozen times and still not have all the answers, which is one of the reasons I keep coming back to it.

But I don't think it's my job to tell people what to think. I never believe that, no matter what the issue is that I'm writing about, but it's even more important in the case of a book like this because I'm trying to illustrate the fact that religion can be a very personal and individual journey, that it might not be about being part of a group, but finding what works for you.

To write about religion without telling people what the right answer is is difficult, and without telling them what you feel is difficult, too. What I feel is just one opinion, and it's no more valid than yours, or any other reader's. For me, the challenge and the responsibility of writing a book like this is to create a book about religion that doesn't narrow, but opens people's minds.

Jill: How did you come across the Gospel of Thomas?

Picoult: I think I had probably read a magazine article on it. I found it really intriguing, because here's something that's dating back to the beginnings of Christianity but had so much more in common with Near East religions and with mystical Judaism. I wanted to learn more about it, so I read Elaine Pagels's book. Elaine Pagels, as far as I'm concerned, is one of the most brilliant women I've ever had the opportunity to speak to.

Jill: She's wonderful; I love her books.

Picoult: Oh. My. God! The best part about this book was that I got to have a private tutorial with Elaine Pagels. Of course, I had to literally chase the poor woman down to do it, but... *[Laughter]* She's the kind of person that you talk to and you literally leave with your head buzzing, and I love that. I love the idea of learning for the sake of learning. She of course is one of the foremost experts on the Gnostic Gospels, and she was so generous with her knowledge. It was absolutely fascinating to me — not just reading her book, but putting contextually back into history the development of religion and how it changed into what it is today.

What was really intriguing to me was this idea that so much could have changed with just an editorial decision. We've come to a point today where there is a lot of entitlement in religion. We're seeing the rise of the evangelical movement, where the Word of God is the Bible. That's

all very well and good, but the Bible was created almost singlehandedly by one guy who decided what went into it. And I will be the first to tell you, if the Bishop of Lyon, Irenaeus, had not done that, there would be no Christianity. It was dying out in a mess of infighting. People were dying by saying they were Christian, but nobody really knew what it meant to be Christian.

One of the reasons Christianity has survived was because Irenaeus was smart enough to say, "Guess what. You read these four gospels, you believe these four things." He created the forerunner, basically, of the Nicene Creed, and he codified what it meant to be Christian. But my take, based on learning from Elaine, was that he also sort of threw the baby out with the bathwater. A religion that was truly meant to be inclusive, especially for a lot of downtrodden people, became instead a drawn line in the sand, with the idea that if you do not believe this, you are out.

The idea of individual spirituality; the idea that man and God are not presumably separate, but flip sides of the same coin; the idea that nobody can tell you what to believe, that you have to discover that for yourself, and that it's different for everyone — that's all stuff that got lost in the Catholic church. I think it would probably make the world a much nicer place in terms of religion if we all start to think that way. I wanted to explore that moment where that editorial decision was made: what was included, and what was excluded, and why, and what are the gains because of it, and what are the losses.

Jill: In the book, June describes praying with Michael this way: "It felt like putting on flannel pajamas on a snowy night; like turning on your blinker for the exit that you know will take you home." Do you think the religion we're raised with resonates in us that way, even when we've explicitly or rationally rejected it?

Picoult: Apparently not! Wasn't there just an article that came out last week about how 80% of people change their religions? I was fascinated by that. I skimmed over it because it was a headline in the paper, and I thought, "Wow, that's a big number." But it doesn't surprise me. I remember when I studied the Amish, when I was writing *Plain Truth*, that I was amazed that 85% of their kids have a believer's baptism at age sixteen or so. They choose to be Amish. It's an interesting and insidious little plan, because they don't know anything but the Amish life, and if you fall in love with an Amish girl, you've got to be Amish to marry her. There are lots of little hooks in there to keep you Amish.

On the other hand, it's not very different than the way most of us get our religion, which is that you're born into it. This is a kind of radical or extreme thought, but how is that different from a cult? Just because your parents wanted to be Catholic does not mean that that might work for you, necessarily. That's why I think a lot of people become dissatisfied with their faith and grow out of it, or it doesn't work for them and they choose to follow something else.

My personal take on it is that there are some people who believe in God; there are some people who do not believe in God; there are some people who believe in good works; there are some people who believe in kindness. All of those are wonderful things. Secular humanism is a

great thing to follow, too. I think it's about what works for you, and why it works for you. That is a very personal journey, and to say instead that one person, whether it be a priest or a rabbi or whatever, should be telling you what to think and what to believe and how to connect with whatever power it is that you're believing in, seems to me too easy.

So I don't find it surprising that people would be dissatisfied with their faith. When you get down to the bare bones, especially of Christianity, Jesus historically was a Jew who was trying to find a better way of doing things because Judaism wasn't working for him! *[Laughter]* So what did he do? He went and explored something else. Again, there's this historical basis to ask questions and to question authority in a way that leads you to a deeper exploration and understanding. That, to me, Jesus the man, totally would have endorsed.

I think he would have been very surprised to see someone like Tertullian, who was a very famous early Christian scholar, talking about how faith is something that you keep in a bank. You deposit it, and then you take it out and look at it, and then you put it back in the safe deposit box, and you don't touch it or change it. I think Jesus would have been shocked by that.

Jill: Although there's a lot of tragedy in this book, it feels more optimistic to me than some of your earlier books. Michael says at one point, "There's more than one kind of right"; a lot of the characters ultimately end up finding their own kinds of redemption.

Picoult: I'm the first to tell you I write some pretty depressing things. *[Laughter]* There are some stories that are more depressing than others. There is hope in this one. The last page, to me, is an extremely hopeful last page. Anyone's final take on the book is going to be a valid interpretation, because they've taken the whole journey fictionally, but it does leave you with hope, I think, no matter how you're thinking of it.

So I would agree with you. I think there is something positive in this book. Out of great tragedy, often, that's where hope rises, like a phoenix. You can't redeem yourself until you hit rock bottom; it's that same principle. If there is a silver lining to tragedy, that would probably be it.

Jill: Speaking of the plot twists at the end and on the last page —

Picoult: Don't give it away! *[Laughter]*

Jill: No, no; I wouldn't do that. But in this book and your earlier books, I've been impressed by your foreshadowing abilities. How do you construct plot and character so that surprises make sense, but that the reader doesn't see them coming?

Picoult: I think you get better with it over time. For me, the plot does not come first. It's usually that central question of, *What would I do in this situation? What if its parameters changed, why am I worried about this, how can I resolve it?* I think about an issue until it gets big enough for me to walk around in, mentally, and characters begin to pop up like little mushrooms. They take the story away from me.

The characters arrive without me feeling as though I've put a lot of thought and effort into them; they just come. They all have voices already, and they all have their own issues. I just step back and listen. Then I stop, figure out what I need to know about these characters and how I become an authority on them, and do a lot of research. During the course of that, I'm forming the plot.

I usually know the end of a book before I write the beginning, but I don't know how I'm going to get from the beginning to the end. The characters take me there. I just sit back and go along for the ride and listen to them. The idea of creating the whole drama comes very organically for me, and it usually grows out of something that I am personally struggling with. The actual creation of character and plot just happens; it happens throughout the process.

When I go back and I do my revisions, I'm much more careful about foreshadowing, about trying to make sure that I've laid a paper trail for you, so that when you read that last page, you can go back and see what you've missed. Honestly, to me, that's the mark of a good writer. It's very easy for anyone to pull a sucker-punch at the end, but it's much harder to integrate that so that it becomes a part of the story.

Jill: Lucius, Michael, and Maggie are interesting characters to tell this story; this book is told from more peripheral points-of-view. June has her voice, but it's not a primary one.

Picoult: Think of who tells you the story of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Jesus never speaks. So what you basically have is everyone else's impressions of this one man and the havoc he's wreaking on the world. By the same token, you have Maggie, Michael, Lucius — and then you have June. Much like the gospel of John, June is a little bit different than the other three, because June is not necessarily based off the same interpretations of what Shay's doing than the other three are.

John is a much harder sell as a gospel. I've read the gospels many, many times, in addition to the Gnostic gospels, and John is a weird gospel. It's vitally different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke — which of course, it should be said, were not written by Matthew, Mark, or Luke. When Iraenaeus picked those four gospels, he picked Matthew, Mark, and Luke because they were all based on something called the Quelle gospel, which is an original document that is a sort of narrative commentary of the history of Jesus' actual, physical life.

The fourth gospel, John, he picked because he knew this guy who had known the guy who wrote John. It was really that shady. *[Laughter]* And he decided that was a good enough reason to include it as what he called the fourth pillar of the throne of Christianity.

When I was creating the book, I knew that Shay was not going to have a voice, because you don't ever see Jesus have a voice either, in the Bible. Ultimately, you have Maggie, Michael, Lucius, and then June giving their interpretations of what was going on, and then events that were going on.

Jill: I can't believe I didn't pick it up on that, but even just saying their names out loud...

Picoult: Isn't it cool to learn about it now, though? [*Laughter*]

Jill: A lot of the questions you evoke concern agency and choice — Anna in *My Sister's Keeper*, Shay and Lucius in *Change of Heart*.

Picoult: In a book like this, of course, the question is, Who saves us? Can we save ourselves, or do we need somebody else to do it? Christianity, and particularly Catholicism the way it stands right now, is a very passive redemption. If you confess to Christ, you're saved. Bingo — it's successful. You don't have to do anything. You just have to believe in the right stuff and say the right things. You can have your deathbed confession, and you could be Hitler, but you'll still be redeemed. I should say that's a very simplistic and boiled down way of explaining redemption. Any priest will tell you, "No, no, no, you're supposed to model Christ's life." So I don't mean to be facetious in any way.

But by the same token, there's a difference between that simplicity of being a vessel and being an active part. A really good example of that would be mystical Judaism and the idea of *tikkun olam*, which comes up in the book, too. The idea is that the world is a broken place, that all the light that was God couldn't be contained, and so it was scattered all over the earth, in tatters and shards. It's the job of man to make this world a better place by releasing these bits of light, and in doing that, man makes God more whole.

I actually think that's really beautiful. I like that image, and I like that idea of partnership. That is a very active role. It's your job to make this world a better place for the Messiah. The Messiah's not coming to save you. You've got to make the place somewhere the Messiah wants to come!

That to me is the question of free will versus destiny, which does come up again in this book. If you're looking at the core of all my books, I flip back and forth all the time. I can't tell you which one I believe is right — if we have any control or if we don't. But I reserve the right to change my mind — and then change it again.

Jill: What was the most interesting research you did for this book?

Picoult: Going to death row. Obviously I had to see a working death row; I went to New Hampshire's, but it's true that in the state prison there, all the extra mattresses are in the death cells because no one's been executed there since 1939. I finagled my way into a prison in Florence, Arizona, where they still have a working capital punishment system. I was flying there when they cancelled my visit mid-flight, because they'd decided I was the wrong kind of media. (I don't really know what that means.) I banged on the door, begged to get in, and was taken to the death cells. They're very boring; they're in lockdown for twenty-three hours a day, just like you see in the book, so if it's running low, it's very quiet and not much is going on.

I really wanted to go to the death house, which is where the executions occur. I sweet-talked my way there with an officer who was talking to me as we went. I was standing outside the gas

chamber, and I was flipping the switch on the microphone, and a woman comes up to me, and she asks, "What are you doing here?"

I told her who I was, and it turns out she was the warden, and she was not too happy with what I'd been told by the officer, because she didn't think it was the right information. So I said, "Maybe you have a few minutes to talk to me?" She said, "What do you want to know?" I said, "I want to know if you've presided over any executions." She said yes.

I said, "Have you ever attended an execution that you did not preside over?" She told me about a woman named Debra Milke, who is currently serving a death sentence in Arizona. She was convicted murder, of telling her four-year-old son that they were going to see Santa. He got dressed in his Halloween costume and they drove to the desert, and the man she had hired to kill him for the hit money met him and murdered him. She is on death row, and she asked this warden to come to her execution, because no one in her family was speaking to her. The warden said she would, not because she felt the woman was innocent, but because she's a Catholic, and someone had to pray for her soul.

I looked at her and said, "You're Catholic; do you believe in the death penalty?" She said, "I used to." She turned to her deputy and told him to go get this binder on her desk. Turns out this thing was like a ten-inch thick binder, and it is the statute of how you go about executing someone in the state of Arizona. It's a legal document that most inmates who are on death row sue for and are usually denied. It includes everything from how to stage a dry run of the execution; how to make sure that the victim's family and the killer's family do not meet at the prison when they're coming down to where the execution occurs; how you go about finding a vein when you can't get one for lethal injection because many of these guys are drug users; where the physician is (the AMA does not sanction having a physician there, and theoretically their name isn't even on the death certificate, but they have much more hands-on involvement than you would think); to what the actual mechanics of the execution are, which was probably the most interesting.

Right now the Supreme Court is debating whether or not lethal injection is cruel and inhumane. That's because in Arizona, for example, this is how it works: The warden walks in, and she reads the warrant of execution out loud, and when she finishes, she says, "Do you have any last words?" That is the cue for the physician, who is behind some other screen, to begin administering sodium pentathol. The last words of a prisoner can be something like, "Screw you," "I'm really sorry," "I love you, Mom." It's usually not 30 minutes long. It's a pretty short little speech.

When he finishes, the warden says, "May God have mercy on your soul," and she walks out. When the door closes, that is the cue for the three officers acting as executioners to push down on the hypodermic that they have. All three lines go into one, and they don't know who actually has the potassium chloride. That's the moment that the inmate's heart is stopped. Now, given the amount of time that passes between the administration of the sodium pentathol and

the potassium chloride, there is probably not enough time to anesthetize that inmate, which tells you why the Supreme Court has taken this up.

The stuff that she told me was really moving and interesting. Not a single officer or administrator that I met there said they believed in the death penalty. They said they'd all do it, because it's their job, but they do not believe it is fair. They have seen too many people who were old and feeble when they were executed because it takes too long to execute somebody; by the same token, they have so many recidivist crimes come through because so many crimes are not eligible for capital punishment. How can you say that one murder is more awful than another? Given that, is that a really fair system of justice? What was most interesting to me was that this woman wound up unexpectedly retiring about a month after my visit. I'd like to think that maybe I had something to do with it. But it was really fascinating to talk to her.

I was supposed to meet with a death row inmate on that trip and I had to fly back because they had cancelled my visit, like I said. I did eventually meet with him; he's a very nice man named Robert Towery. We still correspond. He's a wonderful artist who, like Lucius, makes his own pigments, and he taught me how to do that. He keeps me updated on the plots of Grey's Anatomy and Lost when I'm on book tours. He asks after my children, and he is by all means very polite. He also was convicted of armed robbery, during which he told the person that he was robbing that he was going to anesthetize him and, because he had no anesthesia, he shot his veins full of battery acid and killed him.

It brings up an interesting point. It's very easy to say that we shouldn't execute the innocent. Barry Scheck's Innocence Project is an excellent project because of that. But it's much harder to ask, "Should we execute somebody who's guilty?" That's a much harder question to answer, and one that I don't think we have really addressed in a long time in this country. I'm trying to figure out why not. Is it because we're too afraid to look at it, or is it because we know we're right? And if we do know that, how do we know it?

Jill: Has there been any precedent of the situation in your book, of a death row inmate wanting to donate their organs?

Picoult: Yes, there has. There was a guy somewhere in the Midwest; he was on death row, and he wanted to donate his kidney. It created quite a furor because, just like you see in the book, people think it's a sympathy ploy, that he's doing this because he wants to get good press and raise awareness about his case. I don't believe they actually let him do it. He wanted to donate it to his sister.

Jill: It seems a shame not to let inmates do that, if that's what they want.

Picoult: Yes, except keep in mind you have to be executed a certain way, so you have to then petition for a "less humane" means of execution. In New Hampshire, you can be hanged, and if it's done the right way, with supervision, then you can donate your organs. To be honest, the best place, if you really want to donate your organs once you're executed, is Utah, where you could be shot by a firing squad. But let's think about that. How far do you think that capital

punishment is going to go when people are saying, "I'd really like to be an organ donor, so could you please shoot me in the head?" All of a sudden, the government's going to find itself in some pretty hot water.

Jill: Are the stories that June recounts about cellular memory with heart transplants true?

Picoult: Yes. Those came from research that I did. The funny thing is that those are all documented cases where people who received organs picked up on habits or mannerisms or knowledge that the donor organ's host body knew. But any physician will tell you it's not true. The people who've experienced it will tell you otherwise. It's a little bit like believing in ghosts, I think. If you've experienced it, you have a different take on it.

Jill: What's one of the more interesting experiences you've had with one of your readers?

Picoult: I actually got a letter yesterday that had me in tears. A woman wrote me to say that her mother is in a mental hospital; she's not lucid anymore and is a danger to herself. A nurse there got two copies of *Change of Heart*, one for the mother and one for her daughter who came to visit her. This woman told me, "I have no connection with my mother anymore, but we both used to love your books." It turns out her mother spent the whole weekend reading it with her, and saying "Can you believe this is happening? Can you believe that? What do you think this means?" She wrote, "Thank you so much for giving me a piece of my mother back again."

I was literally in tears. That was so moving, and so beautiful. You write fiction, and you don't think you're going to change somebody's life, but every now and then you do. I've heard from so many teenagers who've read *The Pact*, and who've said, "I'm depressed, but I don't want to wind up like Emily. I'm telling somebody today." Or parents who have read *Nineteen Minutes*, and then sat down with their kids and said, "What's it like for you at school?" Things that they don't want to talk about but realize that maybe they should be talking about.

Or the mother from Virginia Tech who said, the week after the shooting, there was such an outpouring of sympathy, all this well-wishing, and the only thing that got her through having her son killed there was reading *Nineteen Minutes*. Those are amazing, amazing moments.

And then there are the funny ones, like the husband who writes me on his honeymoon who says his wife's ignoring him because she has my book on the beach.

Jill: What are you reading these days?

Picoult: I recently finished Tom Perrotta's *The Abstinence Teacher*, which I loved. I love that man; I just love him. He is so funny. He is America's Nick Hornby. He is just fantastic. I also loved his book because there were resonances between what I was writing and what he was writing, so I was really interested to hear what his take on religion would be.

The book that I have now, which I've literally only read five pages of it, is Chris Bohjalian's new one, *Skeletons at the Feast*. It's not out yet, but it'll come out in May, and it looks like a really good one. He's working again from a historical document and creating a fiction around it like he

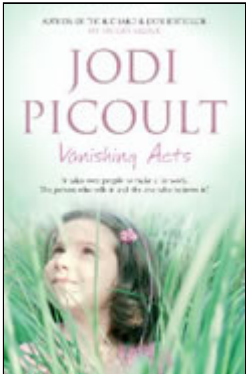
I spoke with Jodi Picoult on the phone on March 4, 2008.

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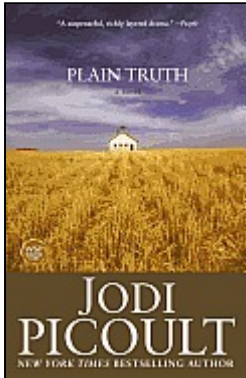
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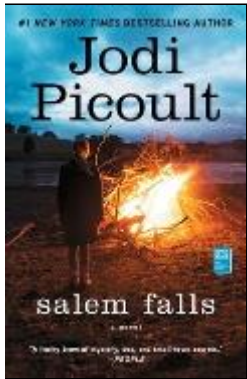
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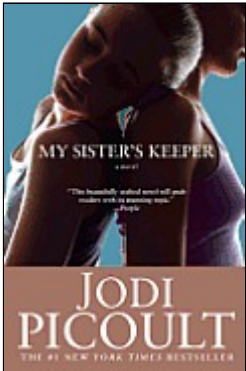
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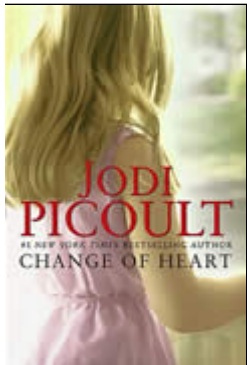
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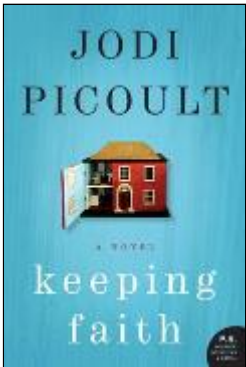
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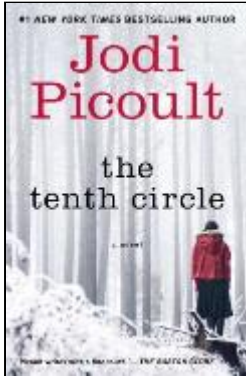
Change of Heart
Jodi Picoult



Change of Heart
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Keeping Faith
Jodi Picoult

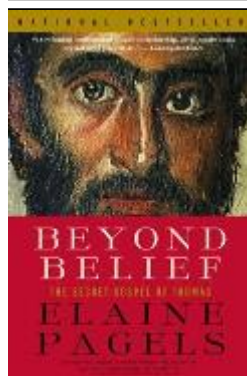
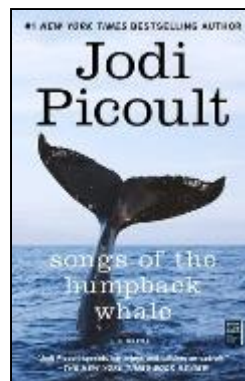
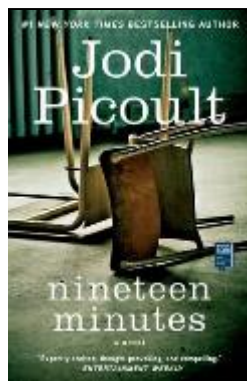


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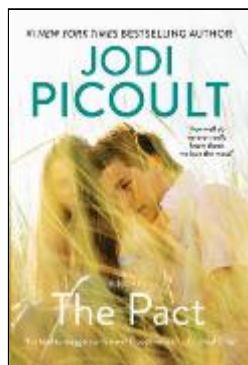
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Picoult, Jodi



Beyond Belief The Secret Gospel of Thomas

Elaine Pagels



Pact

Jodi Picoult



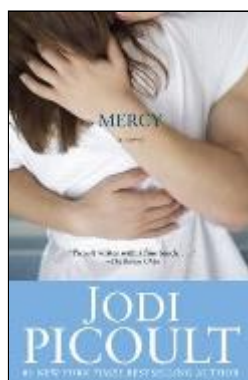
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Tina Richmond August 10, 2010 at 04:02 PM

Dear Ms. Picoult, I happen to know the the AMAZING man of whom you speak. Robert Towery and I were to to be married back in the 90's. I happen to know of his innocence! To this day he and I write each other. I've loved this man for over 20 yrs. now, and am still in love with the most respectful,lovable,dedicated,politis,unabusive man I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. So when you wrote about him I got the feeling you care about Robert. I just wanted you to know you're right in how you feel towards him and I'm so glad you 2 still write each other. He told me about you and your book Change of Heart. I plan on purchaseing a copy soon.

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