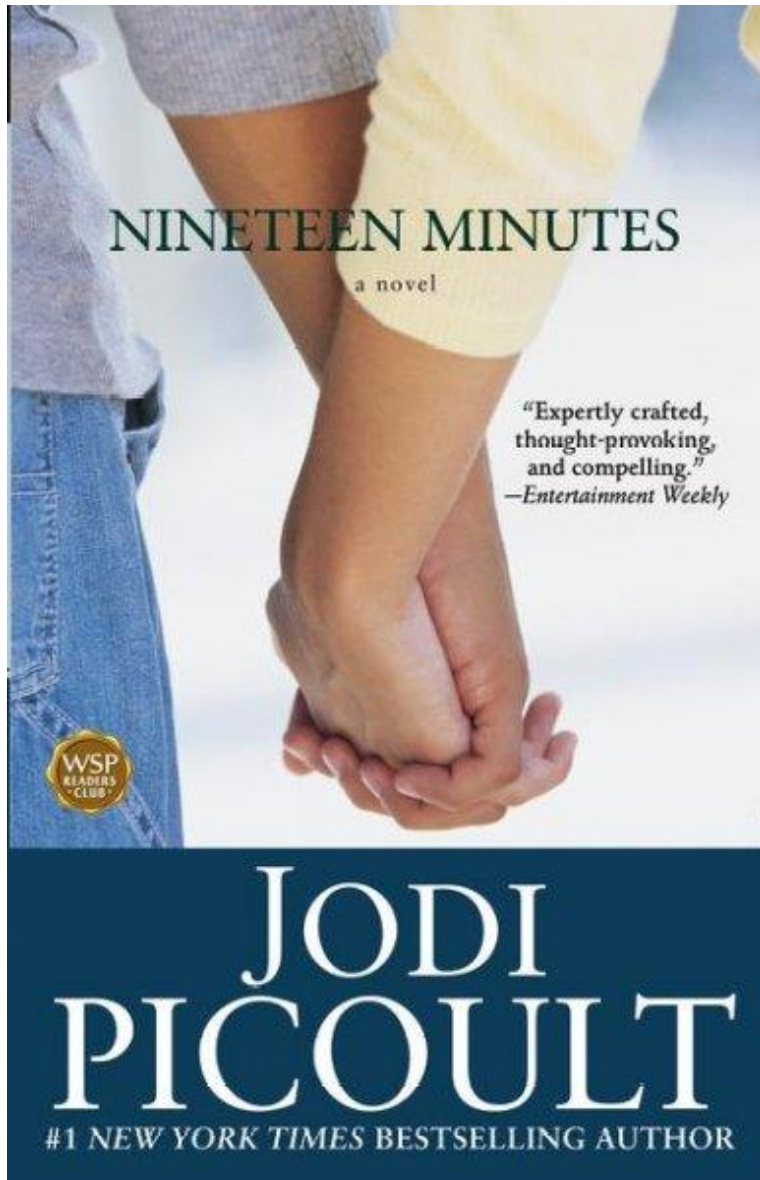


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

### About the Book



In Sterling, New Hampshire, 17-year-old high school student Peter Houghton has endured years of verbal and physical abuse at the hands of classmates. His best friend, Josie Cormier, succumbed to peer pressure and now hangs out with the popular crowd that often instigates the harassment. One final incident of bullying sends Peter over the edge and leads him to commit an act of violence that forever changes the lives of Sterling's residents.

*Nineteen Minutes* also features the return of two of Jodi Picoult's characters—defense attorney Jordan McAfee from *The Pact* and Salem Falls, and Patrick DuCharme, the intrepid detective introduced in *Perfect Match*.

Rich with psychological and social insight, *Nineteen Minutes* is a riveting, poignant, and thought-provoking novel that has at its center a haunting question. Do we ever really know someone?

**About the Author** Source: <http://www.jodipicoult.com/JodiPicoult.html>

Jodi Picoult, is the bestselling author of fourteen novels: *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1992), *Harvesting the Heart* (1994), *Picture Perfect* (1995); *Mercy* (1996), *The Pact* (1998); *Keeping Faith* (1999), *Plain Truth* (2000), *Salem Falls* (2001), *Perfect Match* (2002), *Second Glance* (2003), *My Sister's Keeper* (2004), *Vanishing Acts* (2005), *The Tenth Circle* (2006) and her newest novel, *Nineteen Minutes*, which debuted at number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Picoult studied creative writing with Mary Morris at Princeton, and had two short stories published in *Seventeen* magazine while still a student. Realism - and a profound desire to be able to pay the rent - led Picoult to a series of different jobs following her graduation: as a technical writer for a Wall Street brokerage firm, as a copywriter at an ad agency, as an editor at a textbook publisher, and as an 8th grade English teacher - before entering Harvard to pursue a master's in education. She married Tim Van Leer, whom she had known at Princeton, and it was while she was pregnant with her first child that she wrote her first novel, *Songs of the Humpback Whale*.

In 2003 she was awarded the New England Bookseller Award for Fiction. She has also been the recipient an Alex Award from the Young Adult Library Services Association, sponsored by the Margaret Alexander Edwards Trust and Booklist, one of ten books written for adults that have special appeal for young adults; the Book Browse Diamond Award for novel of the year; a lifetime achievement award for mainstream fiction from the Romance Writers of America; *Cosmopolitan* magazine's 'Fearless Fiction' Award 2007; Waterstone's Author of the Year in the UK, and a Vermont Green Mountain Book Award. Most recently, she wrote five issues of the *Wonder Woman* comic book series for DC Comics. Her books are translated into thirty languages in over forty countries. Two - *The Pact* and *Plain Truth* - were made into television movies; *My Sister's Keeper* is currently in development at New Line Cinema, with Nick Cassavetes directing.

She and Tim and their three children live in Hanover, New Hampshire with two Springer spaniels, a rabbit, two donkeys, and the occasional Holstein.

## Reviews

### *Booklist*

Popular and prolific Picoult (*My Sister's Keeper*, and *The Tenth Circle*, 2006) now tackles the troubling topic of a school shooting. Picoult considers the tragedy--in 19 quick minutes, 10 are dead and 19 are wounded--from several different perspectives, including that of the shooter, a troubled boy named Peter, who was mercilessly picked on at school. The small town of Sterling is rocked by the carnage.

Alex Cormier is the superior court judge planning to hear the case, but her daughter, Josie, Peter's only friend during childhood but now a member of the in crowd, was in the midst of the melee. Peter spared Josie, but killed her boyfriend. Two characters from previous Picoult novels are also involved. Charismatic detective Patrick DuCharme rushes into the school and apprehends Peter, and Jordan McAfee agrees to defend the young killer. Every bit as gripping and moving as Picoult's previous novels, *Nineteen Minutes* will no doubt garner considerable attention for its controversial subject and twist ending.

*Publishers Weekly* \*Starred Review\*

Bestseller Picoult (*My Sister's Keeper*) takes on another contemporary hot-button issue in her brilliantly told new thriller, about a high school shooting. Peter Houghton, an alienated teen who has been bullied for years by the popular crowd, brings weapons to his high school in Sterling, N.H., one day and opens fire, killing 10 people. Flashbacks reveal how bullying caused Peter to retreat into a world of violent computer games. Alex Cormier, the judge assigned to Peter's case, tries to maintain her objectivity as she struggles to understand her daughter, Josie, one of the surviving witnesses of the shooting. The author's insights into her characters' deep-seated emotions brings this ripped-from-the-headlines read chillingly alive.

*Library Journal* \*Starred Review\*

Many things can happen in the span of 19 minutes - fun things, mundane things, and downright horrific things. Best-selling author Picoult (*My Sister's Keeper*) shows just how quickly lives can be changed in this story of a school massacre much like Columbine that is told through the voice not only of the victims but also of the troubled teen who did the shooting. Readers will be pleased to see the return of two favorite characters. Patrick DuCharme, the detective from *Perfect Match*, is assigned to the case, while Jordan McAfee, the lawyer from *The Pact*, finds himself representing the shooter. Picoult has that rare ability to write about an unnerving subject in a way readers will find absorbing. What appears on the surface of a Picoult novel is never as it seems, which is why her books are so popular with book groups. Her 14th novel, perhaps her best, is highly recommended for all public libraries.

*Kirkus*

Picoult's 14th novel (after *The Tenth Circle*, 2006, etc.) of a school shooting begins with high-voltage excitement, then slows by the middle, never regaining its initial pace or appeal.

Peter Houghton, 17, has been the victim of bullying since his first day of kindergarten, made all the more difficult by two factors: In small-town Sterling, N.H., Peter is in high school with the kids who've tormented him all his life; and his all-American older brother eggs the bullies on. Peter retreats into a world of video

games and computer programming, but he's never able to attain the safety of invisibility. And then one day he walks into Sterling High with a knapsack full of guns, kills ten students and wounds many others. Peter is caught and thrown in jail, but with over a thousand witnesses and video tape of the day, it will be hard work for the defense to clear him. His attorney, Jordan McAfee, hits on the only approach that might save the unlikable kid—a variation of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder caused by bullying. Thrown into the story is Judge Alex Cormier, and her daughter Josie, who used to be best friends with Peter until the popular crowd forced the limits of her loyalty. Also found dead was her boyfriend Matt, but Josie claims she can't remember anything from that day. Picoult mixes McAfee's attempt to build a defense with the mending relationship of Alex and Josie, but what proves a more intriguing premise is the response of Peter's parents to the tragedy. How do you keep loving your son when he becomes a mass murderer? Unfortunately, this question, and others, remain, as the novel relies on repetition (the countless flashbacks of Peter's victimization) rather than fresh insight. Peter fits the profile, but is never fully fleshed out beyond stereotype. Usually so adept at shaping the big stories with nuance, Picoult here takes a tragically familiar event, pads it with plot, but leaves out the subtleties of character.

Though all the surface elements are in place, Picoult falters in her exploration of what turns a quiet kid into a murderer.

**Discussion Questions** Source: <http://www.jodipicoult.com/nineteen-minutes.html#questions>

1. Alex and Lacy's friendship comes to an end when they discover Peter and Josie playing with guns in the Houghton house. Why does Alex decide that it's in Josie's best interest to keep her daughter away from Peter? What significance is there to the fact that Alex is the first one to prevent Josie from being friends with Peter?
2. Alex often has trouble separating her roles as a judge and a mother. How does this affect her relationship with Josie? Discuss whether or not Alex's job is more important to her than being a mother.
3. A theme throughout the novel is the idea of masks and personas, and pretending to be someone you're not. To which characters does this apply, and why?
4. At one point defense attorney Jordan McAfee refers to himself as a "spin doctor," and he believes that at the end of Peter's trial he "will be either reviled or canonized" (250). What is your view of Jordan? As you were reading the book, did you find it difficult or not to remain objective about the judicial

system's standing that every defendant (no matter how heinous his or her crime) has the right to a fair trial?

5. Peter was a victim of bullying for twelve years at the hands of certain classmates, many of whom repeatedly tormented him. But he also shot and killed students he had never met or who had never done anything wrong to him. What empathy, if any, did you have for Peter both before and after the shooting?
6. Josie and Peter were friends until the sixth grade. Is it understandable that Josie decided not to hang out with Peter in favor of the popular crowd? Why or why not? How accurate and believable did you find the author's depiction of high school peer pressure and the quest for popularity? Do you believe, as Picoult suggests, that even the popular kids are afraid that their own friends will turn on them?
7. Josie admits she often witnessed Matt's cruelty toward other students. Why then does it come as such a surprise to Josie when Matt abuses her verbally and physically? How much did you empathize with Josie?
8. Regarding Lacy, Patrick notes that "in a different way, this woman was a victim of her son's actions, too" (53). How much responsibility do Lewis and Lacy bear for Peter's actions? How about Lewis in particular, who taught his son how to handle guns and hunt?
9. At one point during Peter's bullying, Lacy is encouraged by an elementary school teacher to force Peter to stand up for himself. She threatens to cancel his playdates with Josie if he doesn't fight back. How did you feel, when you read that scene? Do you blame Lacy for Peter's future actions because of it? Do you agree or disagree with the idea that it a parent's job to teach a child the skills necessary to defend himself? Discuss the novel's structure. In what ways do the alternating narratives between past and present enhance the story? How do the scenes in the past give you further insight into the characters and their actions, particularly Peter and Josie?
10. When Patrick arrives at Sterling High after the shooting, "his entire body began to shake, knowing that for so many students and parents and citizens today, he had once again been too late" (24). Why does Patrick blame himself for not preventing an incident he had no way of knowing was going to happen?
11. Dr. King, an expert witness for the defense, states that Peter was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of chronic victimization. "But a big part of it, too," he adds, "is the society that created

both Peter and those bullies” (409). What reasons does Dr. King give to support his assertion that society is partly to blame for Peter’s actions as well as those of the bullies? Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

12. Why does Josie choose to shoot Matt instead of shooting Peter? Why does Peter remain silent about Josie’s role in the shooting? In the end, has justice been satisfactorily dealt to Peter and to Josie?
13. Discuss the very ending of the novel, which concludes on the one-year anniversary of the Sterling High shooting. Why do you suppose the author chose to leave readers with an image of Patrick and Alex, who is pregnant? In what way does the final image of the book predict the future?
14. Shootings have occurred at a number of high schools across the country over the last several years. Did *Nineteen Minutes* make you think about these incidents in a more immediate way than reading about them in the newspaper or seeing coverage on television? How so? In what ways did the novel impact your opinion of the parties generally involved in school shootings—perpetrators, victims, fellow students, teachers, parents, attorneys, and law enforcement officials?
15. What do you think the author is proposing as the root of the problem of school violence? What have you heard, in the media and in political forums, as solutions? Do you think they will work? Why or why not?

## Multimedia

### ***Nineteen Minutes- Borders Book Club (Video Clip)***

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nprZA34w5LQ>

Jodi Picoult discusses her book.

## Further Reading

### ***Why kids kill: inside the minds of school shooters*** by Peter Langman

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1332695>

(Call number: 371.782 La)

Ten years after the school massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado, school shootings are a new and alarming epidemic. While sociologists have attributed the trigger of violence to peer pressure, such as bullying and social isolation, prominent psychologist Peter Langman, argues here that psychological causes are responsible. Drawing on 20 years of clinical experience, Langman offers surprising reasons for why some teens become violent.



***Ceremonial violence: a psychological explanation of school shootings*** by

Jonathan Fast

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1317276>

(Call number: 371.782 Fa)

*Ceremonial Violence* analyzes the Columbine high school shooting and four other cases and explains for the first time why teenagers commit school rampage shootings. In addition to these cases, Fast provides a detailed, clear narrative of the Columbine shootings. With his grasp of the elements of abnormal psychology, developmental psychology, sociology, and neurology that contribute to the homicidal mindset, Fast offers us a means of understanding and coming to terms with these tragedies.

***Columbine*** by David Cullen

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1330453>

(Call number: 371.782 Cu)

Ten years in the making and a masterpiece of reportage, "Columbine" is an award-winning journalist's definitive account of one of the most shocking massacres in American history.

***Author's official website***

<http://www.jodipicoult.com/>

Information, news, and resources from the author.

**Read-Alikes** *Source: NoveList*

***The Night Strangers*** by Chris Bohjalian

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1389856>

(Call number: Fiction Bohjalian)

In a dusty corner of a basement in a rambling Victorian house in northern New Hampshire, a door has long been sealed shut with 39 six-inch-long carriage bolts. The home's new owners are Chip and Emily Linton and their twin ten-year-old daughters. Together they hope to rebuild their lives there after Chip, an airline pilot, had to ditch his 70-seat regional jet in Lake Champlain after double engine failure. Unlike the Miracle on the Hudson, however, most of the passengers aboard Flight 1611 died on impact or were drowned.

***Endgame*** by Nancy Garden

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1273672>

(Call number: Fiction Garden)

Fifteen-year-old Gray Wilton, bullied at school and ridiculed by an unfeeling father for preferring drums to hunting, goes on a shooting rampage at his high school.

***Cage of Stars*** by Jacquelyn Mitchard

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1264856>

(Call number: Fiction Mitchard)

12-year-old Veronica Swan's idyllic life in a close-knit Mormon community is shattered when her two younger sisters are brutally murdered. Although her parents find the strength to forgive the deranged killer, Scott Early, Veronica cannot do the same. Years later, she sets out alone to avenge her sisters' deaths, dropping her identity and severing ties in the process. As she closes in on Early, Veronica will discover the true meaning of sin and compassion, before she makes a decision that will change her and her family's lives forever.

**After** by Francine Prose

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1206728>

(Call number: Fiction Prose)

In the aftermath of a nearby school shooting, a grief and crisis counselor takes over Central High School and enacts increasingly harsh measures to control students, while those who do not comply disappear.

**Body Surfing: A novel** by Anita Shreve

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1282203>

(Call number: Fiction Shreve)

At the age of 29, Sydney has already been once divorced and once widowed. Trying to regain her footing, she has signed on to tutor the teenage daughter of a well-to-do couple as they spend a sultry summer in their oceanfront New Hampshire cottage. But when the Edwardses' two grown sons arrive at the beach house, Sydney finds herself caught up in a destructive web of old tensions and bitter divisions. As the brothers vie for her affections, the fragile existence Sydney has rebuilt is threatened.

**We Need to Talk about Kevin** by Lionel Shriver

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1209078>

(Call number: Fiction Shriver)

The timely topic of Shriver's (*Double Fault*) eighth novel is sure to guarantee lots of attention, but the compelling writing is what will keep readers engaged. This is the story, narrated in the form of letters to her estranged husband, of Eva Katchadourian, whose son has committed the most talked-about crime of the decade—a school shooting reminiscent of Columbine. From the very beginning, the reader knows that Kevin has been found guilty and is in a juvenile detention center, yet the plot is never stale.

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*



Ann Arbor District Library