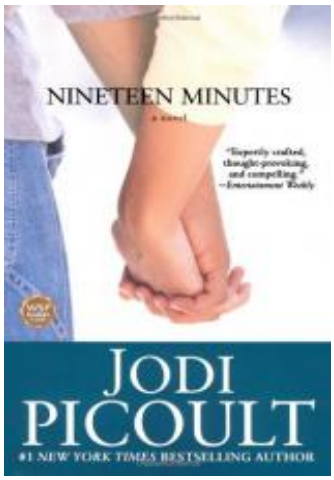
Nineteen Minutes

by Jodi Picoult



About the Book

In nineteen minutes, you can mow the front lawn, color your hair, watch a third of a hockey game. In nineteen minutes, you can bake scones or get a tooth filled by a dentist; you can fold laundry for a family of five....In nineteen minutes, you can stop the world, or you can just jump off it. In nineteen minutes, you can get revenge.

Sterling is a small, ordinary New Hampshire town where nothing ever happens -- until the day its complacency is shattered by a shocking act of violence. In the aftermath, the town's residents must not only seek justice in order to begin healing but also come to terms with the role they played in the tragedy. For them, the lines between truth and fiction, right and wrong, insider and outsider have been obscured forever. Josie Cormier, the teenage daughter of the judge sitting on the case, could be the state's best witness, but she can't remember what happened in front of her own eyes. And as the trial progresses, fault lines between the high school and the adult community begin to show, destroying the closest of friendships and families.

Nineteen Minutes is *New York Times* bestselling author Jodi Picoult's most raw, honest, and important novel yet. Told with the straightforward style for which she has become known, it asks simple questions that have no easy answers: Can your own child become a mystery to you? What does it mean to be different in our society? Is it ever okay for a victim to strike back? And who -- if anyone -- has the right to judge someone else?

Discussion Guide

In this emotionally charged novel, Jodi Picoult delves beneath the surface of a small town to explore what it means to be different in our society.

In Sterling, New Hampshire, seventeen-year-old high school student Peter Houghton has endured years of verbal and physical abuse at the hands of his 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.

Even those who were not inside the school that morning find their lives in an upheaval, including Alex Cormier. The superior court judge assigned to the Houghton case, Alex -- whose daughter, Josie, witnessed the events that unfolded -- must decide whether or not to step down. She's torn between presiding over the biggest case of her career and knowing that doing so will cause an even wider chasm in her relationship with her emotionally fragile daughter. Josie, meanwhile, claims she can't remember what happened in the last fatal minutes of Peter's rampage. Or can she? And Peter's parents, Lacy and Lewis Houghton, ceaselessly examine the past to see what they might have said or done to compel their son to such extremes. *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?

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 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 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 play dates 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?

10. 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?

11. 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?

12. 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?

13. 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?

14. 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?

15. 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 affect your opinion of the parties generally involved in school shootings -- perpetrators, victims, fellow students, teachers, parents, attorneys, and law enforcement officials?

16. 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?

Author Bio

Jodi Picoult is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of over 30 novels, including HOLLOW BONES, BY ANY OTHER NAME, MAD HONEY (co-authored with Jennifer Finney Boylan), WISH YOU WERE HERE, THE BOOK OF TWO WAYS, A SPARK OF LIGHT, SMALL GREAT THINGS, LEAVING TIME and MY SISTER'S KEEPER, and, with daughter Samantha van Leer, two young adult novels, BETWEEN THE LINES and OFF THE PAGE. She lives in New Hampshire with her husband.

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