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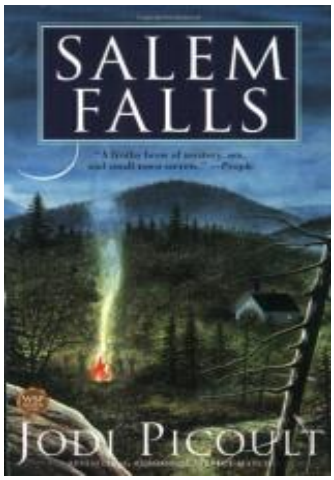
Salem Falls

by Jodi Picoult



About the Book

Love can redeem a man...but secrets and lies can condemn him. A handsome stranger comes to the sleepy New England town of Salem Falls in hopes of burying his past: once a teacher at a girls' prep school, Jack St. Bride was destroyed when a student's crush sparked a powder keg of accusation. Now, washing dishes for Addie Peabody at the Do-Or-Diner, he slips quietly into his new routine, and Addie finds this unassuming man fitting easily inside her heart. But amid the rustic calm of Salem Falls, a quartet of teenage girls harbor dark secrets -- and they maliciously target Jack with a shattering allegation. Now, at the center of a modern-day witch hunt, Jack is forced once again to proclaim his innocence: to a town searching for answers, to a justice system where truth becomes a slippery concept written in shades of gray, and to the woman who has come to love him.

Discussion Guide

1. Throughout the novel, the author uses quotes from Arthur Miller's The Crucible and from the story of Jack and Jill. How do these quotes increase your understanding of the story as a whole? In what ways do these seemingly disparate sources work in terms of the subject matter?

2. After pretending to be sick from school, Gillian explains to her friends, "I am not faking; I'm method-acting." Method acting is often described as a tool for telling the truth of a character under imaginary circumstances. How might this definition help us better understand Gillian's actions and her motivations in this novel? What is the truth in her life that needs to be shared?

3. The tension between truth and fiction is a major theme here. Similarly, the concept of believing in lies so strongly that they become truth also powers this narrative. To what extent do you think Gillian and the other girls actually believe their own lies? Does this change for any of them by the end?

4. Throughout history, witches have been the victims of persecution. Recently, witchcraft and pagan religions have gotten a lot of attention both in the media and in popular culture. What drives our fascination with witches and witchcraft? Why do you think some people seem to find it so threatening?

5. In the same vein, what is so attractive about witchcraft to the girls of **Salem Falls**, either in the stereotypical sense or in the realistic sense? Or to any girls, for that matter?

6. Do you know any people who practice Wicca? If so, how authentic is the author's presentation of the religion? To what extent is this book about spirituality/religion, and its abuse?

7. In **Salem Falls**, much is made of the individual characters' point of view. People seem to see what they need to see in order to keep their world in order. In what way are characters in this novel affected, either positively or negatively, by the lenses through which they see the world?

8. What is the significance of Jack's role as a history teacher? How about his vast knowledge of trivia?

9. By the end of the story, the majority of the residents of Salem Falls prove themselves to be rather suspicious, closed-minded people, yet somehow Addie is not this way. This is interesting in light of the personal tragedies she has endured through her life -- many of which would make most people distrustful or bitter. What is it about her personality or her experiences that allows her to take Jack in off the street?

10. Delilah tells Jack early in the novel, "I think that all of us have our ghosts." Although she may be literally addressing Addie's situation, how does this concept apply to the other characters in **Salem Falls**? Which ones, if any, successfully exorcise their ghosts?

11. Who do you consider to be the strongest character in this story? Discuss the different ways strength manifests itself in this novel and the various degrees to which the characters maintain their strength -- or fail to.

12. How much does setting affect this novel? How similar is the world of **Salem Falls** to the world of **The Crucible** and **The Scarlet Letter**, books from which the author clearly draws?

13. At one point, as he is watching his students walk to the locker room, Jack thinks to himself, "Beauty is truth, and truth, beauty." Do you agree with this? What do you think the novel suggests?

14. Do you believe that Jack, in light of all his experiences, should be totally free from blame? Are there instances when his judgment seems to be off, or is he truly the unluckiest man in the world?

15. Jack's mother forgives the prostitute that her late husband was seeing, so much so that she invites her to live with her, yet she immediately turns on her own son when he is accused of rape. How can one account for this shift in her character? Is it a shift? Were you surprised that she did not ask for his side of the story, or do you think there is some sort of solidarity among women that transcends familial ties?

16. Picoult tells the story of Jack's life backward, to the moment of his birth. How do these flashbacks affect the present-day story, and why do you think she chose to do this?

17. Should a verbal accusation of rape be enough to set the judicial wheels turning? Explain, using the examples of both Catherine Marsh and Addie Peabody.

18. Compare the father/daughter relationships of Addie and Roy, Gillian and Amos, Charlie and Meg, Matt Houlihan and Molly, and Catherine and Reverend Marsh. How does the bond formed between parent and child influence each of their actions?

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.

Critical Praise

"Picoult has carved her own niche with her novels -- one part romance, one part courtroom thriller, two parts social commentary....She keep[s] the reader constantly guessing."

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