

Jodi Picoult's latest book a moving story with a major twist

By David R. Altman

Yes, I have read a Jodi Picoult book. There, that's out there—and I won't deny it.

After encouragement from my wife, I took the plunge.

Before you sense any (misplaced) misogyny in these comments, I believe the majority of the best novels I've read in the past ten years have been written by female authors (Kristen Hannah, Jane Harper, Toni Morrison, Anne Patchett, Joan Didion, etc.).

I had the impression that Picoult's work was a little more about family drama and (don't take this the wrong way) a little lighter reading genre, much like romance novels that are always near the top of many of the best-sellers list.

Well, regrettably, I was dead wrong. I thought Picoult was more like Nicolas Sparks than Laura Hillenbrand (the great author of *Seabiscuit* and *Unbroken*). It's an unfair comparison. If Picoult's latest book, *Wish You Were Here* is any indication, I've been

missing out.

This book, with one of the most intriguing and difficult-to-see coming twists in modern fiction, was a compelling read right from the beginning.

It's a story about Covid—but also a story about coping, imagination, family and love.

The characters are richly described, and we can all identify with them as they live through the first months of the pandemic.

Picoult introduces us to the two central characters: Diana, a young professional who is ready to leave for a trip to the Galapagos with her boyfriend, an emergency room doctor named Finn.

Due to the spreading Covid, Finn has to remain at his New York hospital, working long hours during Covid to the point of exhaustion. So, with Finn's encouragement, Diana ends up going to the Galapagos by herself. It is here that the book's deep drama begins:

"It feels wrong, so wrong, to go without Finn; it feels even more wrong to think

about bringing a friend along as a substitute—not that I know anyone who could leave for two weeks with zero advance notice anyway. But there is also a practicality to his suggestion that sinks its claws into me."

Unfortunately, there's not much else to say about the story line that won't give away a critical spoiler—but rarely have I read a piece of non-fiction that contains a plot twist that is so perfectly crafted.

Picoult, a prolific writer of 28 novels, often writes about current issues, and you will find a rich blend of real-life conflicting values in her work. She told one interviewer that she wrote *Wish You Were Here* (WYWH) in only two months, as she fought the loneliness and depression of staying mostly inside during the height of the pandemic.

I read where some people characterize Picoult's work as "chick-lit"—which, whatever that means exactly, is way off point. Let's don't judge an author who has sold nearly 40 million books by

whether she's won a Pulitzer or a National Book Award (neither have Stephen King or Patricia Cornwell, who between them have sold nearly half a billion books).

And if you have any doubt about the seriousness of this author's approach, read *Nineteen Minutes*, her 2007 fictional, best-selling account of a school shooting, to get the range and depth of her prose. The compassion she shows for the tragedies on all sides of this issue are as impressive as they are haunting.

In *Wish You Were Here*, Picoult throws the reader into the everyday drama of a twisting story. Beside a riveting storyline with a jolting twist, the complexity of the book's secondary theme will bring back vivid memories we all shared at the beginning of the pandemic.

This book is well worth your time. While Ms. Picoult, like all great writers, can't be judged fairly by genre or category—her impressive success lies in writing for an audience that knows (and even expects)

that this author will always deliver.

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publication in early 2023. He is a member of the National Books Critics Circle and the American Academy of Poets. He and his wife Lisa live in Hoschton.

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