

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the Library of Congress National Book Festival co-chaired in 2009 by President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. Now in its ninth year this free event held Saturday, September 26th on the National Mall in Washington D.C. will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best selling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend the festival in person you can still participate online. These podcast interviews with well known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). It's now my honor to talk with the critically acclaimed author Jodi Picoult. Ms. Picoult has written an array of admired novels including the New Time's best seller *Change of Heart*, *Handle With Care* and *My Sister's Keeper* for which she received the Margaret Alexander Edwards Award. *My Sister's Keeper* was also recently released as a successful film starring Cameron Diaz and Alec Baldwin. Ms. Picoult has also penned several issues of *Wonder Woman* for DC Comics. Her upcoming novel *House Rules* is due for release in 2010. Ms. Picoult, thank you so much for joining us.

>> Oh, it's my pleasure.

>> Pleasure to talk with you. Let's start off by talking about the new novel, *House Rules*. Tell us about that if you would.

>> Well, *House Rules* is coming out in March, and it actually is the story of a teenage boy who has Asperger's syndrome. And like many kids with Asperger's he is very bright, very quirky, and has a real specialized localized passion for one topic. His happens to be crime scene analysis. And that means he tends to show up courtesy of the police scanner at a lot of crime scenes to tell the police what they're doing wrong. And everything is going well for him and his family until he winds up accused of a crime himself. And the reason I wrote the book was because I wanted to look at how our justice system works very, very well if you communicate a certain way. If you don't communicate a certain way then it all sort of goes to hell in a handbasket very quickly. And a lot of the hallmark behaviors of autism which many of us are familiar with now either with our own kids or children that we've seen in school look like guilt to someone in the justice system. Think about, for example, someone who recoils if you try to touch them. Someone who won't look you in the eye. Someone who speaks with a very flat affect or might even run if you try to ask too many questions. All of those are very typical behaviors for someone on the autism spectrum. But to a cop they're going to look like guilt.

>> Now, what inspired you to write about Asperger's syndrome? I think that's a term a lot of people haven't heard about.

>> Yeah, you know, I think that Asperger's is a really interesting kind of autism. It is considered to be on the autism spectrum. It's high functioning autism. And the really fascinating thing about a kid with Asperger's is that when you sit down and you talk to one of them they can be incredibly enlightening. I mean they know more about the subjects they love than anybody else so much so that when you want to leave the

conversation they miss all the social cues and they don't let you go. But they also you can tell something's just not quite right. The hallmark, the calling card for Asperger's is a lack of interpretation of social cues. Kids with Asperger's don't make friends very easily. They don't understand why if they walk up to someone and hold a conversation that's totally one sided it's not really socially appropriate. They don't realize what they look like to other kids nor do they really care. You can just tell something's a little bit off. But they are very bright. The other problem that they'll have is that routine is incredibly important to them. So if you screw up a routine or if you mess with the system in any way often a kid who is functioning perfectly well two seconds before might have an utter and complete breakdown. And that looks like a tantrum when a kid is four years old, but it looks a little different when the kid is 18 and is in a grocery store and is knocking jars off the shelf and needs to be physically restrained by a parent which can be very challenging if your son, for example, is bigger than you are. So it's a very interesting condition for me because this kid who is still incredibly intelligent and will present as incredibly intelligent it's often called the little professor syndrome when they're younger because they sound so grown up when they speak. You know, what looks normal one moment or even intelligent one moment can degenerate very quickly into something that you realize is not normal behavior at all.

>> Now, I know that you're known for very intensive I guess is a good research. You've lived with an Amish farmer for a week, you went to Yale for a day, you learned Wiccan love spells, you even followed a dogsled race in a snowmobile. Can you talk about that in the context of the current novel or anything that stands out in your mind as especially memorable?

>> Yeah, I actually did speak to probably upwards of 50 kids with Asperger's all of whom were totally different. I mean there was one kid who was completely fascinated by trains. There was another kid who could tell me everything that happened on a Disney show called the Suite Life of Zack and Cody. That was her special passion. And so you learn a lot talking to these kids. You also speak to their parents who have a very different experience than the kids do. Because one of the things that I kept seeing that came up when I talked to the parents was that although the kids understood that they were not well liked or that they didn't have any friends it didn't really affect them. They just didn't care very much but the parents cared a lot because they were socially adept enough to understand that their child was being marginalized. And any parent can relate to that. So I spoke to all of their parents as well. The other thing that sort of raised a really interesting red flag for me I touch lightly on the vaccine debate and autism in this book because it really hasn't been discussed yet in literature, and it's still a very hot topic. And I think with what's going on in the news these days with healthcare it's going to become an even hotter topic. And for me asking parents whether they believe that vaccinations are in any way linked to autism opened up an enormous can of words because they're split almost 50/50. Fifty percent of the parents believe there is an absolute and true and vital link and that someone really needs to look into this and address the immunization schedule. The other half say there's absolutely no connection whatsoever, and they're just as vehemently opposed to

believing that there is a connection. What was really intriguing to me, though, is that the big fear that people seem to have so parents who feel that vaccines are related to autism is that they'll stop immunizing their children, and I did not hear that from parents. What I heard was a call for the National Institute of Health or the CDC to recommend instead spreading out vaccines a little more so that they're not as concentrated in early childhood to the point where they might if there is a connection be a trigger that gets a kid who is genetically predisposed to becoming autistic kind of pitch them over the edge.

>> Now, you're pretty busy as a writer. Your book *Handle With Care* came out a little bit earlier this year, 2009. Talk a little bit about that book.

>> *Handle With Care* is a great book to talk about actually because it's sort of intimately tied to a lot of what's going on right now with healthcare. It's the story of the O'Keefe family which is Sean the dad, Charlotte the mom, Willow a five year old with osteogenesis imperfecta and her sister Amelia. And Willow's condition is a very, very rare one that basically means she will suffer hundreds of broken bones over a lifetime, although mentally she is 100 percent as normal as anyone else. She will have a severely compromised physical existence. She probably won't be more than about three feet tall. She will have spinal rodding surgery and rodding surgery in her femurs. She'll have respiratory complications, severe scoliosis, a really tough and painful physical life. But mentally she's a great, smart little girl. And like many other families that have a child with a disability the O'Keefes realize that insurance doesn't even begin to cover what they need to make sure their child has a good life. And Charlotte, the mom, thinks that she has found an answer. A wrongful birth lawsuit that's filed against her obstetrician for not telling her in advance about Willow's condition might lead to a really big monetary payout. But it also means standing up in court and saying if I'd known this in advance I would have terminated this pregnancy, words that her own daughter will hear her say and will understand her saying. And if that isn't just bad enough the obstetrician that she'll be suing happens to be her best friend.

>> Now, I think it's a good segue into the next question. You often deal with the theme of children in peril. Why do you like to focus on that?

>> You know, I've heard that before. The New York Times wrote a piece about me this spring and they said that and I laughed. I didn't realize that was a subcategory of genre literature. But maybe I'm the only one in it. I don't think I really write always about children in peril. I think I write about families in crisis. And that may be sort of a sliver of that. I think I like to put ordinary people into extraordinary situations. And I do believe that any time something happens to one of your kids whether it's illness or whether it's a kidnaping or whether it's some kind of legal conundrum or whether it's them suffering from depression, who knows, but anything that upsets the balance of power in a family like that affects all of the members of the family. And that's really what I like to write about. I like to write about ordinary people, people who you probably recognize or will feel like you know who's been put into an extraordinary situation by circumstance.

>> You yourself are a mother of three. How have your own experiences as a mother influenced your plots and your themes?

>> They actually influence me greatly. I probably wouldn't write about kids at all if I hadn't had them. I do think motherhood is probably the hardest job anyone can do. And maybe why that's why I'm so tough on my mother characters. But I think I tend to write about the things that superstitiously I'm most afraid of like a child getting sick or like a child facing a teen suicide pact. Something like that is probably in the back of my mind. If I write about it I think clearly I won't have to live it in real life. Now, that's ridiculous. There's no immunity involved. But you know there is a part of me that thinks maybe if I cover all my bases in fiction then I can protect my family a little. And vice versa although I don't write very much about things that happen in my life because I lead a wonderfully charmed life as opposed to my characters, there have been incidents that have led to fiction. Most directly was My Sister's Keeper where I wound up writing about a child who had a chronic health condition. And although my son did not have leukemia, never had cancer, he did have a chronic condition that required him to 13 surgeries. And so we were in and out of hospitals a lot, and that became a very comfortable place for me. And I found myself saying and doing things as a mom that I never would have expected until I was put in that situation. And a lot of that experience sort of bled its way onto the page of My Sister's Keeper.

>> Yeah, and just picking up on that, as I mentioned earlier that book was turned into a movie. How heavily involved were you in the filming and the making of that film?

>> Okay, so here's the truth, and here's what no one ever seems to know. Unless you're J.K. Rowling you really don't have any involvement in the film for the most part. You're lucky if they invite you to the set to be honest. And I really didn't have a lot of input into that production. I think it had a terrific cast that surprised me. They did a much better job than I would have thought they would have done. I really enjoyed seeing the film. It was a great and interesting experience as a novelist. It was also a really tough experience because the producers of the film and the director decided to change the ending. And in the book there's a big twist ending and it's there for a reason. It's because I really wanted to leave the reader with a specific sentiment. By changing the ending of the movie they changed the whole meaning of the story. And so that was really hard for me to swallow. I know a lot of my fans were disappointed. If they were disappointed you can only image how I felt. But overall it was a really intriguing experience because it wasn't one that I had before on the big screen. Would I do it again? Yes, I would, but I might be a little warier the next time around.

>> Is it a little like giving up a kid for adoption for someone else to raise?

>> I actually use that metaphor myself a lot. It is. You're not allowed to call up every day and say did you feed her breakfast. You make what you hope is an informed decision and you give the baby to a good family.

And in the long run I did, I gave it to a terrific production company, a wonderful studio, a very talented director who created a really good story. It was a really good movie. It just wasn't the same as the book.

>> I want to turn now to the comic books. You're only the second woman to write the Wonder Woman series which may be a little counterintuitive. But what drew you to that?

>> It actually fell into my lap. I had written a book called The Tenth Circle that had a comic book imbedded in it because one of the characters was a graphic novelist. And he was very reserved emotionally. And the only way he could really explain to the reader what was going on in his heart was to illustrate it so that you'd have to read about it and figure out what was going on in his mind. And I created this character called Wild Claw, had an artist draw this comic book that I created. And after the book was published I got a call from an editor at DC Comics asking if I'd be interested in Wonder Woman. And I thought that is really nice and it's kind of an honor but I don't have time to write Wonder Woman. And I went downstairs and I was telling my kids about it, and they all looked at me and said, mom, you totally have to write Wonder Woman. So I shuffled things around, and I wound up doing it and had a very good time. It was a real challenge for me because when you're a novelist you're all by yourself, you create everything from scratch. When you are a comic book writer you're stepping into a tradition that in Wonder Woman's case goes back to 1941 and has had a lot of storylines and a lot of history. And you can't make all the fan boys and fan girls unhappy so you have to be true to it. But you still want to be able to leave your stamp somehow on the character or they wouldn't have asked you to do it in the first place. So I had to really think hard about what kind of storyline I wanted to bring to her and get used to working collaboratively with both an editor and an artist and a penciler and everyone involved in the process. It was a really different writing experience for me. It was a lot of fun but very challenging to work with a character who I had not created.

>> And what do you feel that was unique or different that you brought to it?

>> Oh, I totally changed the way people think about Wonder Woman. She's unlike Superman. She's similar to him in that she's flawless, right, she comes from the gods. But she didn't have the back story like Clark Kent. She didn't really have anything that made you relate to her on a human level. So by putting her into this human environment where she's basically slumming it as a human and working in a Defense Department capacity and giving her this partner who has a total crush on Wonder Woman but thinks that the alter ego that he's working with is a real jerk, you first of all give her this dynamic, a womanly dynamic that I think was really funny and fun to play with. But the biggest thing was to give her what I think all people growing up whether you're female or male all of us have this, and that's sort of that issue of separating from our parents. How do we become our own people without dishonoring our parents who want us to be just like them? And that's going to be an even bigger problem for someone like Wonder Woman whose mother is an Amazon queen. So I basically gave her some mother issues. And that was really fun. It was

really fun to get to play those out and to play with the [inaudible] and bring the Amazons back.

>> What would you say to parents or teachers who think that maybe comics and graphic novels aren't necessarily a viable or legitimate form of, quote unquote, literature?

>> I actually think that right now graphic novels are some of the most cutting edge literature out there because they really address social issues probably better than most fiction does. I teach eighth grade English, and I was really a big proponent of the fact that if you want to get kids reading you don't hand them George Eliot. You let them read something that's going to engage them at their interest level. Because if kids fall in love with the act of reading then kids go on to read everything. And I've seen it play out over and over not just with the kids I taught but with my own kids and with the fans who have come to me because my books happen to be on summer reading lists and have won multiple young adult awards although they're technically adult fiction. It's a great bridge to read one of my books and springboard into adult literature from that book. And I really value the institutions, the high schools and the middle schools, that have put my books on reading lists because hopefully they're compelling and realistic for teenagers, and that's why they get so involved with them.

>> Jodi Picoult before I let you go is there anything else that's coming up for you project-wise?

>> Well, we've got the new book, House Rules will be out in March which I'm very excited about. And I'll be doing a great big tour all over the U.S. for that, so it will be nice to meet people again. And I will get off the phone right now and actually get back to writing the 2011 book which is on my screen as we speak.

>> My goodness. Any preview of that or a little hint?

>> Yeah. I'm really excited about that book actually because I'm kind of wondering how it hasn't been written yet. But it's the story about embryo donation and gay rights and what it means to be a family. And that's all I'm going to say, but I will tell you it's a really good one and a really important one.

>> Well, the current book is Handle With Care. The upcoming book in March is House Rules. Jodi Picoult, thank you so much for your time today.

>> My pleasure.

>> And we'll definitely be excited to hear more from you at the National Book Festival. That's on Saturday, September 26th on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. free and open to the public as always. For more details and a complete list of participating authors visit [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). From the Library of Congress this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.