



## BEA 2014: Jodi Picoult: Mothers, Daughters, and Grief Among Elephants

By Karen Jones | May 31, 2014



The wildly popular and bestselling author Jodi Picoult has written more than 20 novels including *The Storyteller*, *Nineteen Minutes*, and *My Sister's Keeper*. She is not shy about exploring subjects of deep emotional complexity, and her new novel, *Leaving Time*, due from Ballantine in October, examines grief and the enduring power of the mother/daughter relationship.

The inspiration for *Leaving Time* was multifaceted, Picoult tells *Show Daily@BookCon*, and includes her avid interest in the emotional lives of elephants—and their preservation. “In an elephant herd, a mother and daughter will stay together until one dies.”

Hands-on research in Botswana allowed her to observe grief rituals displayed by an elephant herd mourning the loss of a member. “They will gently pick up the bones and get completely quiet and reserved,” says Picoult. She adds that, unlike humans, “elephants seem unhindered by the mojo of religion or an afterlife, as in, ‘are they going to see someone again?’”

The ardent need to see someone again is central to *Leaving Time*, which follows a 13-year-old girl’s search for her mother, a scientist who disappeared a decade earlier while researching grief among elephants. Enlisting the help of a failed psychic and the detective who first investigated her mother’s mysterious disappearance, the young protagonist is on a quest that could lead to a harsh realization—she might never find her mother. “I wanted to write about why humans find it so hard to be left behind by a loved one,” says Picoult, who first wrote about the mother/daughter relationship over 20 years ago in her first book, *Songs of the Humpback Whale*, “when I was closer in age to the daughter.” A mother of three and recent empty-nester, Picoult felt the time was right to revisit the relationship.

Unlike some top-tier authors with a large, devoted following, Picoult has fully embraced social media and the accessibility it provides readers. “You need readers’ thoughts and opinions to make your work a living thing,” she says. She employs no personal assistant and answers her own emails: “I think it is important for authors to say ‘thank you for reading my book.’”

A former schoolteacher, she is a staunch advocate for encouraging kids to read using whatever subject matter engages them. “When you start putting restrictions on what kids read, you start damping down their enthusiasm for the act of reading. You need to find whatever it is that cracks open that child’s mind and makes them hungry for more.”

Picoult is also a fan of the BEA and BookCon, which she calls “a fantastic experience for a writer. It has a great vibe.” She says her advice for “all people who say the novel is dead” is to attend the BEA and BookCon “and feel the buzz and hum of people who love books

<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bea/article/62671-bea-2014-jodi-picoult-mothers-daughters-and-grief-among-elephants.html>

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