

MY SISTER'S KEEPER BY JODI PICOULT

Jodi Lynn Picoult is an American writer. The most popular of her books include *My Sister's Keeper*, *Plain Truth*, *The Pact*, *Small Great Things*, and *Handle with Care*. In the novel *My Sister's Keeper*, the word “Keeper” means protector, defender or watcher. The book has a biblical reference—Cain and Abel were the first two sons of Adam and Eve. Cain murdered Abel. After the incident, God asked him where his brother was and Cain answered, “I know not; am I my brother’s keeper?”. Cain’s words have come to symbolize and subsequently question the responsibility or irresponsibility that one displays or has towards one’s fellows—or one’s brothers or sisters in extended sense of the term. Here, taking into consideration that Anna, the youngest child and the protagonist of the novel is her sister Kate’s saviour, certain questions arise, like how much is Anna responsible for the life and well-being of her sister Kate? But then again, the keeper in question could be Anna’s keeper and who is in charge of defending her? This question recurs in the book multiple times.

Also, one of the striking features of the book is the way Picoult uses multiple first-person narrators to tell the story. Each section is made up of parts designated by the names of character whose voice and perspective is being revealed. This allows the readers the ability to understand situations from different standpoints.

Character list:

Anna Fitzgerald - The youngest Fitzgerald child and the protagonist of the novel. Described by her father as their family’s constant, thirteen-year-old Anna is smart, funny, and observant. Anna’s actions drive the plot, as she struggles to reconcile her knowledge - that only she can provide Kate with the organs she needs to survive and her desire to live without this immense burden.

Sara Fitzgerald - The mother of the Fitzgerald family. Sara is strong, stubborn, and intelligent, and her life centers on her efforts to keep Kate alive. She has extremely strong maternal instincts, but her single-minded focus on saving Kate sometimes exists at the expense of her marriage and her relationships with her two other children.

Campbell Alexander - Anna’s lawyer. Initially arrogant and brusque, Campbell gradually emerges as a character with many layers. In many ways, he mirrors Anna. Both have found it difficult to be who their parents want them to be, and both have secrets they are unwilling to share. Campbell struggles between his urge to erect barriers around himself and his genuine desire to reach out to people. He ultimately

experiences the most personal growth of any of the characters, and by the end of the story he has formed strong bonds with the people around him.

Brian Fitzgerald - The father of the Fitzgerald children and a career firefighter. Brian often serves as a foil to Sara. In contrast to her, he can view the situation from his children's perspectives, making him both more perceptive and understanding than Sara at times. Yet Brian also escapes into his work to avoid dealing with the hardships surrounding his family. He can be kinder than Sara, but by the end of the story Sara proves to be the emotionally stronger of the two.

Jesse Fitzgerald - The oldest of the Fitzgerald children and the most delinquent. Despite his tough exterior, Jesse is in reality a vulnerable and sensitive character. He uses his destructive behavior to mask a fundamental feeling of inadequacy. Jesse cannot save Kate, and he has never been able to forgive himself for that. In addition, he has often felt ignored by his parents, who focus their attention almost exclusively on Kate, and he acts out in part to gain their attention.

Kate Fitzgerald - The middle Fitzgerald child and the focal point of many of the novel's events. Kate's cancer is at the heart of the story, but she only narrates the prologue and epilogue. She has struggled with cancer nearly her entire life, and she appears to have come to terms with the fact that she might die.

Julia Romano - Guardian ad litem to Anna. Julia has a genuine desire to discover what is best for Anna and is one of the most open and caring characters in the story. She possesses an independent personality that made her an outsider in high school but now makes her ideally suited for rendering an objective opinion on Anna's case.

Zanne - Sara's older sister. Zanne, a high-powered career woman without children, provides a foil to Sara, who could have been a successful attorney but essentially gave up her law career to care for her children full-time. Zanne often gives Brian and Sara comfort and support.

Dr. Chance - Kate's oncologist. A warm but serious man, Dr. Chance represents the science and medicine keeping Kate alive. He speaks to Sara and Brian very honestly and directly about Kate's condition, yet no matter how bleak Kate's situation gets, Dr. Chance always offers hope that a treatment may work, even when the chances are slim.

Judge DeSalvo - The judge appointed to Anna's case. Fair and kind, Judge DeSalvo genuinely cares for Anna's well-being. As the father of a child killed by a drunk driver, he understands how desperately Sara and Brian want to keep Kate alive.

Taylor Ambrose - Kate's fellow cancer patient. Kate and Taylor's short relationship emphasizes that, at heart, Kate is a normal teenage girl. Yet Taylor's sudden death underscores the fact that Kate's condition remains extremely fragile and that she could die with little warning.

Izzy Romano - Julia's twin sister and roommate. Izzy's dislike of Campbell reflects how much he hurt Julia, and her presence in the story serves as another example of the extreme closeness that can exist between sisters.

Judge (The Dog) - Campbell's service dog. Campbell does not reveal why he needs Judge for most of the book. Ultimately he reveals that Judge is an epilepsy service dog, meaning he alerts Campbell if a seizure is imminent so Campbell can move to a safe environment.

Summary of the novel:

The narrative of *My Sister's Keeper* alternates between first-person accounts by the novel's different characters. The bulk of the story takes place in the present, in a one-and-a-half week stretch of time. Sara Fitzgerald, a former attorney and current stay-at-home mom, narrates the remainder of the story from different points in the past but moving gradually toward the present. One final chapter, the epilogue, occurs in the future. In 1990, doctors diagnose Sara's two-year-old daughter, Kate, with a rare and aggressive form of leukemia. The news that their child might die shocks Sara and her firefighter husband, Brian, but Sara immediately resolves to begin Kate's treatment. Kate starts chemotherapy, and her oncologist, Dr. Chance, suggests she might eventually need a bone marrow transplant, preferably from a related donor. The Fitzgeralds test their four-year-old son, Jesse, but he is not a match. Dr. Chance mentions that another unborn sibling could be a match, and Sara suggests to Brian that they have another child.

Sara's passages, told at different points over the next fourteen years, focus largely on Kate's struggles. She describes how scientists help them conceive another daughter, Anna, who is a perfect genetic match for Kate. Over the course of the next few years, Anna undergoes several procedures, including frequent blood withdrawals and a painful bone marrow extraction, to help keep Kate alive. Sara describes in great detail the pain and suffering Kate endures. Chemotherapy and radiation make her violently ill, and an emergency trip to the hospital heralds each new relapse. Sara and Brian's marriage suffers as a result, to the point where they begin to feel like strangers. In different ways, both Jesse and Anna act out at Sara because of her single-minded focus on Kate.

The present action of the story begins on a Monday. Thirteen-year-old Anna goes to see a lawyer named Campbell Alexander and asks him to represent her. Anna tells Campbell that she wants to sue her parents for **medical emancipation**. Kate, her sister, is in the end stages of kidney failure, and Anna wants to file the lawsuit so that she will not have to donate a kidney to Kate. Campbell, who has a service dog but gives a sarcastic explanation whenever someone asks why, agrees to represent Anna for free. When she is served with the papers for the lawsuit, Sara becomes furious with Anna as she cannot understand Anna's decision. Brian, however, understands Anna's point of view to a degree and recognizes that she would not have brought a lawsuit unless she were genuinely unhappy. Judge Desalvo, the judge for Anna's case, decides to appoint a woman named Julia Romano as Anna's guardian *ad litem*, a person whose job is to objectively decide what is in Anna's best interests. When Julia goes to see Campbell, it becomes clear they have had a past and have not seen each other in many years. Throughout all of these events, Jesse has been setting different abandoned buildings on fire. Jesse acts like a delinquent in other ways as well, such as drinking alcohol excessively, but much of this behavior stems from anger over his inability to save Kate and his feelings of being ignored by his parents. Kate becomes seriously ill and must be hospitalized. Dr. Chance says she will die within a week. However, Anna refuses to change her mind about the lawsuit. At the hearing, Sara decides she will represent herself and Brian. Consequently, Brian takes Anna to stay with him at the fire station to give Anna some distance from her mother. He believes if they remain in the same house together, Anna may unwillingly cave to her mother's wish that she donate her kidney. Meanwhile, through flashbacks Campbell and Julia alternately recall previous scenes from their life.

At the trial, both Sara and Campbell question witnesses, including one of the doctors familiar with Kate's medical history, and both are effective at different times. Reluctantly, Anna takes the stand and admits that she filed the lawsuit because Kate told her to. At the very moment she makes this announcement, Campbell has an epileptic seizure and collapses. When his seizure ends, he admits he has been having seizures ever since a car accident in high school. He broke up with Julia because he didn't want his seizures, which limit him greatly, to limit Julia as well. He also explains that the seizures are the reason he has a service dog, which can tell when another seizure is coming on. Julia and Campbell reconcile. Back on the stand, Anna explains that Kate asked Anna not to donate her kidney because she was tired of being sick and waiting to die. Anna also admits that while she loves her sister, part

of her wanted Kate to die, too, so that she could have more freedom with her life. Judge DeSalvo decides to grant Anna medical emancipation and gives Campbell medical power of attorney over her. On the way to the hospital, Campbell and Anna get into a serious car accident. At the hospital, the doctors tell the family that Anna has irreversible brain damage. Campbell tells the doctors to give Anna's kidney to Kate. Kate narrates the epilogue, set in 2010. She discusses the grief her family went through after Anna's death, and the fact that she blames herself. She knows, however, that she will always carry Anna with her.

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My Sister's Keeper was adapted into a film in 2009. There are however certain differences between novel and film as the film features an alternate ending and more emphasis on certain subplots while entirely eliminating others:

- The novel's setting is in Rhode Island, while the film's setting is in California.
- Julia Romano, a central character in the novel and Anna's guardian ad litem during the trial, does not appear in the film.
- Aunt Suzanne is also a central character in the novel and while she has come to the family's aid due to her wealth, her relationship with Sara is strained due to her being overzealous in saving Kate's life. In the film, she is replaced with Aunt Kelly who follows a similar role to Suzanne.
- Campbell and Anna's relationship is more detailed in the novel than in the film.
- Jesse is a juvenile delinquent in the novel. However, his relationship with his parents improves when Brian finds out why he has been acting out and turning to a life of crime. In the film, Jesse is more neglected by his parents. He is stopped from going into a life of crime by Aunt Kelly, who talks to him.
- In the film, Sara is blonde and more obsessed with saving Kate, neglecting Brian, Anna and Jesse's needs.
- Judge DeSalvo is male in the novel, but female in the film.
- While in the novel the reason of the trial is especially Anna's need to be free and independent, the movie is more focused on Sara's refusal to accept that Kate is dying.

- In the novel, Anna dies in a car accident with her usable organs being donated to Kate and, who remains in remission for 8 years. In the film, Kate dies from her leukemia and Anna lives.
- In the novel's epilogue, Kate explains how her family has been trying to cope with Anna's death and their lives since the trial. In the film, Anna mentions their family goes to Montana every year to honor Kate and that Sara is proud of her for standing up for her own rights.
- In the novel, it was Judge's barking that got Campbell to ask Anna about her reasons in suing for **medical emancipation** and it leads to her confession. In the film, it was Jesse who exposed Kate's role in the lawsuit. His exposure angered not only Anna because she was trying to protect their sister, but also Sara for interrupting them.
- In the novel and before the verdict, Anna tells Sara about Kate's plans to die. While shocked at first, she comes to terms with it and wished Kate had told her sooner. She even mentions that she understood why Anna tried to protect her sister. In the film, Sara is in denial and accuses Jesse of lying to her. When Brian comes to his defense by pointing out her own wrongdoing in not listening to their family as they knew Kate wanted death, Sara feels guilty for ignoring her family and finally accepts responsibility for her actions.
- In the novel, Campbell had a seizure during the trial, and Brian stepped in to help him. In the film, Campbell left midway of the argument between Sara, Jesse and Brian and had a seizure from not being able to take his medication on time.

Major theme:

It can be said that the main theme of *My Sister's Keeper* revolves around the question of medical ethics, particularly as it relates to parental love. Though the author, Jodi Picoult, focuses largely on family dynamics, the family dynamics that come into play in the story revolve around the ethical considerations related to genetic engineering, stem cell research, and the creation of "savior siblings." Anna's attorney built a case around the question of medical ethics. He questioned the morality of parents whose decision to have a child rested solely on the ability of that child to serve as a tissue donor. When Anna's parents planned to force Anna to give her sister a kidney, Anna sought help from an attorney to protect herself. He sued for medical emancipation for his client, arguing that she was being subjected,

without her consent, to medical procedures that put her at risk and reduced her quality of life. Genetic pre-diagnostics are being used increasingly in medical practice to pre-select fetuses that are free of genetic diseases. Advances in medical science that have allowed people to manipulate the breeding process in this way have paved the way for the creation of designer babies—babies designed to have certain physical traits, or in this case, babies designed to have organs and tissues that make them suitable donors. For instance, in the United Kingdom, the Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority has ruled that it is lawful to use modern reproductive techniques to create a savior sibling. In Victoria, Australia, it is reviewed on a case-by-case basis. These babies are referred to as “savior babies,” and there have been real savior babies (here Picoult’s fictional Anna is such a character). Real savior babies have been used as donors of umbilical cord blood stem cells at birth, of bone marrow, and of organs. *My Sister’s Keeper* raises questions as to how far genetic engineering can go and should go, and how in the face of advancing medical possibilities, we can weigh the rights of dying children with the rights of their savior siblings. It raises the main ethical argument against it, that is, the possible exploitation of the child, the potential adverse psychological effects on a child born not for itself but to save another person and the possible future emotional reaction of the savior sibling upon discovering that they were born solely to save the life of the recipient, rather than being 'wanted' for reasons other than transplantation.