

Understanding Sibling Dynamics Amidst Ailment and Ethical Choices in Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*

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Abstract

This paper explores Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*. It examines the ethics of using savior siblings as genetic material donors. It is about Anna Fitzgerald, a young girl who was conceived through in vitro fertilization to be a genetic match for her elder sister, Kate, who is battling leukemia. Anna has abundance of love for her sister. In the event of extending assistance, she maintains a type of autonomy in dealing with her. When Anna attains maturity, she begins to question the sacrifices she has made for her sister and grapples with the ethical implications of her role as a "designer baby" created to save others. The novel is open-ended, as the problem among the family is left inconclusive, leaving no definite solution to the ongoing conflict. The siblings have been shown extraordinary generosity in assisting each other in medical ethics to keep them healthy for a prolonged period. Jodi Picoult delves into the psychological development of the children. In the novel *My Sister's Keeper*, she presents a character who questions her own way of conducting herself with siblings, and in the end when left with no option to deal with the issues at hand, the other provides a solution. This could be considered as a novel that provides a series of advice to young children. It is arduous to accept the illness of Anna and the ethical choices made by Anna's mother, Sara Fitzgerald. Through Anna's journey, Picoult informs readers to consider the true meaning of generous and the boundaries of familial love. As the story unfolds, it is clear that there is no easy answer when it comes to making choices that affect not only ourselves but those who care for us deeply. Ultimately, *My Sister's Keeper* serves as a poignant reminder of a parent who can have ulterior motives with children. In the care of Anna, the mother, Sara has given birth to her daughter for the purpose of donating an organ to her sister Kate. It is left to the parents to take decision about the number of children they can have. Also, they have been showing mother Sara wants her daughter, Anna to remain healthy to donate organs to her sibling sister, Kate. But Sara has been complaining about her health again and again, which the mother is not ready to accept. The mother, on the other hand, wants both of them to mutually accept in the process of donating organs and maintain their health there by.

Key words: Sibling dynamics, love, autonomy, illness, ethical choices, family obligations, sacrifice, genetic material donors, familial love.

Jodi Picoult is a best selling American author known for her provocative novels that consistently investigate a complex moral dilemmas and human relationships. With a background in writing and a degree from Princeton University, she has crafted stories that delve into sensitive topics such as family dynamics, justice, and ethical issues. Her ability to weave multiple perspectives into her narratives has resonated readers worldwide. Some of the most notable works include *My Sister's Keeper*, *The Storyteller*, *Nineteen Minutes*, *The Pact*, *Handle with Care*, *Leaving time*, *A Spark of light* and *House Rules*. Every one is offering a unique blend of emotion and insight. Her writing frequently inspires readers to reflect on their own beliefs and the choices they would make in difficult situations.

The novel *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult delves into the complexities of familial relationship, particularly highlighting the bond between siblings. At the heart of the story lies the ethical dilemma of using one sibling as a donor for another, raising questions about autonomy, love, and the time spent to save the loved one. The relationship between Anna and her sister Kate is at the center of the novel, as Anna struggles with her role as a donor and the impact it leaves on her. The dynamics between the siblings are further complicated by the ethical choice of parents on what is best for Kate, leading to conflict and tension within the family. As the story unfolds, readers are forced to confront their own beliefs about love, sacrifice, and the limits of autonomy in the face of life-threatening illness.

In United States, more than one hundred and seventeen thousand citizens enrolled on the United Network for Organ Sharing [UNOS] list of persons waiting for life saving organ and tissue transplants (UNOS 2013,12). Some thousands individuals do not receive the organs needed to survive. Among the enlisted in the UNOS, eighteen people die each day for want of organs and tissues as per United Nations on record.

The category of two savior siblings are created with the assistance of reproductive technology. To create a category two savior siblings in vitro fertilisation (IVF) is required to fertilise a human egg. Once the eggs are fertilised the attending specialist waits until the cells in the fertilised embryo divide into six or ten cells (Handyside, 2010, 68).

The ethical dilemmas presented in *My Sister's Keeper* raise thought provoking questions about the value of individual autonomy for the greater good of a family unit. Picoult skillfully explores intricate themes, prompting readers to reflect on the ethical consequences of Anna's choice to assert control over her own body, despite her parents' objections. The

tension between personal agency and familial obligation adds a layer of depth to the narrative, prompting readers to reflect on their own beliefs about the nature of love and sacrifice. The main themes are identity, struggle for survival, love and sibling dynamics. Ultimately, *My Sister's Keeper* presents a compelling examination of the emotional and psychological connections that shape perspectives of individuals.

I begged my father to take me to the Kmart parking a lot, or the school basketball court, or any where, really, where I could play around a little. He promised me that on Friday, after Kate had a routine bone marrow aspiration, we could all go out to the school. I could bring my skateboard, Anna could bring her bike, and if Kate felt to it, she could Rollerblade. (Picoult 241).

In *My Sister's Keeper*, the narrator longs for a moment of freedom and play. They beg their father to take them anywhere to have fun. However, the father postpones it until after Kate's medical procedure, showing how the family's life revolves around her illness. This is an instance of sacrifice made by the sibling. The passage reflects the emotional burden and adjustments they face in order to live a normal life.

PGD allows physicians to weed out embryos with genetic profiles that exhibit traits of severe disability or illness such as cystic fibrosis, Huntington's disease, or other PGD-detectable genetic conditions deemed undesirable. HLA matching allows physicians to choose embryos that are genetically and immunologically compatible with an intended recipient; this increases the chances that the recipient's body will accept the new material post-transplant (Mayo Clinic 2011).

This passage emphasizes that preimplantation may help them to identify and avoid severe conditions like Huntington's disease. Human Leukocyte Antigen is another technique where doctors select the embryos that are genetically compatible. This mixture of genetic screening helps to improve the terms and conditions of the disease.

Using PGD and HLA matching increases the probability of finding suitable donors for ailing children, whose families are unable to locate compatible registered or unregistered donors (Sparrow 2010, 668). The paper sheds light on surveys conducted in European countries regarding the relationship among sibling donors. The parents of affected children, apart from covering the expenses, consult doctors to identify a possible donor. The parents persuade the donors to offer organs to the affected child. The latter's character is largely shaped by the circumstances in which she is raised during early childhood.

Toddler Max Matthews has given nine-year-old Megan the ultimate gift – a cure for the life-threatening disease she has suffered since birth. He became the first 'saviour sibling' to be created in the UK after doctors cultivated embryos that could provide stem cells to treat Megan's condition (Ellis 2010).

One of the first families who participated in the procedure was the Mathew's family of King's Lynn, Norfolk. Katie, the thirty-three-year-old mother of the children, said:

It has been a tremendous rollercoaster of highs and lows but Megan is now making fantastic progress, better than we could have hoped for. For the first time we are looking forward to Christmas without worrying whether Megan will be well or not. While saviour siblings have been born before with the help of U.S. laboratories, this is the first time medics have carried out the entire process in the UK (Ellis 2010).

The creation of category two saviour siblings in a fashion similar to the British FFEA is extended to France in December 22, 1976. All French citizens are considered potential donors unless "they have expressed their refusal during their lifetime." This refusal must be registered with the French National Registry of Organ Donation Refusals. The Cavaillet law was repealed and improved by the 1994 bioethical law as stated by Advitam. Anna engaged in an in-depth discussion on Earth, Adam, and Eve, integrating religious references into her perspective. Her descriptions of celestial bodies demonstrated significant depth and insight. Anna's father Brian Fitzgerald likes the myth of Pawnee Indians. There is an overall comparison between morning star and evening star. "Morning star and evening star hooked up and gave birth to the first female. The first boy came from the sun and the moon" (Picoult 244).

My Sister's Keeper is an eye opener to those who get affected by different modern diseases. It gives hope for a possible remedy for the victim and the close ones who also passively suffer with the sufferer. It serves as a focal point to readers. The narrative is inspired by Picoult's own sickness, which she acknowledges from the very beginning of the novel. Picoult's child undergoes ten surgeries within a short span of three years. This painful experience of witnessing the suffering of her child might have influenced her to write *My Sister's Keeper*.

By drawing on instances which are real-life cases, the researcher highlights how Picoult's novel explores moral dilemmas and human emotions prevalent in the midst of this. Anna engaged in an in-depth discussion on Earth, Adam, and Eve, integrating religious references into her perspective. Her descriptions of celestial bodies demonstrated significant depth and insight. Thus, concentrating on universal objects, away from her pitiable state, provides a type of psychological comfort to Anna. She has artificially lifted herself into another world where everything is perfect; where in she enjoys overtly. This is a type of psychological gratification which is constructive in nature and offers a fruitful solution for the time being. This work employs a narrative technique characterized by its natural flow, allowing a deeper understanding of the reader. It also examines Picoult's deep engagement with her characters. More broadly, two key themes from psychoanalytic and ethological perspectives that shaped early research on siblings were (a) the importance of early experiences and (b) the adaptive roles of social behavior. The essential question to consider is that, although families

utilize IVF with PGD, HLA matching, and human tissue typing to create category two savior siblings, these technologies remain fallible.

Not all lessons siblings learn lessons from their interactions are positive, and an increasing focus in the past two decades has been on sibling influences on adolescents' risky behavior and adjustment problems. Sibling conflicts such as bullying, jealousy and favouritism within sibling in childhood. Relationships have been identified as sources of emotional tension, potentially leading to maladaptive behaviors and sibling estrangement.

The bond among siblings is distinctive, as they are often at the forefront of resolving family challenges. Their independence enables them to make complex decisions. "It made me wonder, though, what would have happened if Kate had been healthy. Chances are, I'd still be floating under everyone's radar. It made me wonder, if I had never been born at all" (Picoult 4). This captures Anna's internal conflict of her identity. It highlights the emotional toll on Anna and her relationship with Kate. It overshadows their individuality. The researcher has pointed out that bond is precious and strong and pure. It enables siblings to relieve from the burden of life. In a way the feeling of having siblings itself is a great strength. In harmonious relationship, a type of balancing act is performed in the form of compromise to uphold relationship. In certain context relationship, growing up with a sister leave behind a good impact in society.

The Attachment theory of John Bowlby explains the importance of early relationship in a child's developmental stages. This theory gives priority to the early stages of infants and their siblings. John Bowlby's Attachment Theory explains how early bonds with caregivers shape emotional and social development. A secure attachment fosters stability, while neglect may lead to insecurity and strained relationship. His theory is key in the psychology of child development.

According to the *Guardian* staff, *My Sister's Keeper* is "the most heartbreaking, tear-jerking, and tragic novel [they] have ever read" (Guardian Staff 8). "This book has changed my perspective on parenting, family dynamics, and the contradiction of thoughts. Picoult has uniquely crafted the grey characters; she has defined- what a grey character is through this book. The book is thought-provoking is an understatement; emotionally wrecking is another. The world is not in black and white is the whole narrative of the book" (Chinmaikhare 14 2023).

Some theories can be challenging. Equity theory, which involves the Equity theory framework, highlights the perception of fairness and justice. Research on relationship of siblings highlights the role of parents. Most family relationship provides ample opportunity for learning process to operate. Siblings also promote negative behaviour through deviant talk, often they encourage each other with positive feedback, often through humorous stories and playful behaviors. Adolescence is a momentous period in that the human body undergoes significant physical growth and psychological changes; not only bodily changes but also changes in the brain (Morojele and Ramsommar 2016 Winters et al. 2011). The relationship of siblings can be compared as sunshine and rainbows. Some balancing act is required in maintaining the relation of siblings. Some siblings do have negative thought and actions. They constantly fight one another by remaining selfish. The conflict displayed at the early years may be extended into their adulthood and they ultimately may even set themselves separated. They are at the early years and independent in decision making. Being inexperienced, their mistakes often enable them to acquire experiences. Anyway they are in the process of acquiring knowledge about them and about the environment they occupy. The checks and balances that they make is better for them to become a full-fledged independent individual at the later part of their lives. Thus they are ineligible to donate organs as that of biological siblings.

Murray Bowen (1913–1990) was an American psychiatrist who conceived the family systems theory which he developed based on his many years of professional practice with families (Thompson 2019). Time plays an essential role in the life of siblings. Parent should give equal importance to their children. There are different types of siblings viz. adopted siblings, half siblings, full blooded siblings. They frequently liken their bond to an unbreakable connection, as close as inseparable companions. A full-blooded sibling is also known as a biological sibling have a genetic match. Full blooded siblings alone are compatible in sharing their organ other types of siblings are not permitted to donate their organ. Some bonds are magnificent to admire. It is vital to help these children foster a strong relationship by showing them equal love and care. Step brothers or sisters cannot share biological bond between these siblings. In our everyday life, integrating into a family is a simple task. Though they do not share biological relation, they become an integral part of the family, adding strength to be each of the members in every respect expect probably for the purpose of donation of organs.

Relationship of siblings are often identified by their intimacy and emotional strength. Affection and care among siblings can be strong and long lasting, unlike the parents, spouses, and children (Bank and Kahn, 1997). Siblings can provide a long-term and steady sense of companionship for children, primarily during the social learning periods of early and middle childhood (Dunn, 1985).

"It's scary starting relationships....I'm not very confident of how they're reacting to me, whether I've made a good impression or not. It's fun though. I've found I enjoy that part almost as much as the relationship because it's real excitement and it's scary and you're risking things....(Alison Gray, Teenangels, N.Z.)

A shared goal should be established in their relationship. Some key benefits of sibling relationships include: teaching them to accept and appreciate each other despite their differences, setting boundaries for mutual respect, and fostering strong teamwork. Everyone wears masks at home so Kate won't have to; Kate expresses those statements: "Don't say it. Don't tell me that nobody's going to stare at me, because they will. Don't tell me it doesn't matter, because it does.

And don't tell me I look fine because that's a lie. (Picoult 235)

Anna and Kate, fearing quarrel with the brother Jesse, share the toy with him. Jesse loves to play skateboard. He cannot imagine how amazing the skateboard is. Its sleek design and vibrant colors catch his eye, making him eager to try it out. With each push, he feels the thrill of gliding effortlessly along the pavement, a sense of freedom that he never knew he craved for wanted to be appreciated and acknowledged as a hero. It is quite common for anyone to get elated to a great position in the midst of his friends. Jesse spends his time with his friend Dan where he discusses delightfully cars, rats and playground. He feels lonely when his sisters are taken for treatment. Thus Jesse doesn't find a constant companion to share his emotion and play with so as to get relieved from the struggles of life and attain happiness forever.

"You don't love someone because they're strong. You love them because they make you stronger." (Picoult 186). This quote from Jodi Picoult emphasizes that love is not based on a person's inherent strength but on the ability to uplift and empower others. True love is about mutual support, growth, and resilience rather than individual perfection. It highlights the idea that meaningful relationship strengthen both individuals emotionally and mentally. This statement by Sara, the mother, reflects the interconnectedness of family members. It emphasizes how relationships, particularly between siblings, can empower and sustain individuals even during life's most challenging moments. The love and care they showed for each other were truly sincere. Alejandro, an eighteen-month-old baby, survived the longest fall when he fell 65 feet 7 inches from the window of his parents' apartments in Murcia, Spain. Alejandro became the first infant to survive the longest fall. Recovery plays a wide role. She repeatedly reads the section titled 'Survivors and Life Savers', compiling a list in my memory. Longest surviving parent were ecstatic sister. The night was enveloped in a blanket of clouds. Even the moon seems covered with cotton. "I was born for a very specific purpose. I wasn't the result of an accident, or a love affair, or even a welcome surprise. I was born because a scientist managed to hook up my mother's eggs and my father's sperm to create a specific combination of precious genetic material. My sister needed me" (Picoult 1).

In *My Sister's Keeper*, Anna Fitzgerald acknowledges that she was conceived not by chance or love but to save her sister, Kate. Her statement, "My sister needed me", highlights the burden of being a savior sibling, raising ethical questions about identity and autonomy. The detached tone reflects her struggle with self-worth, as she feels defined by her biological purpose rather than as an individual. Through this passage, Picoult explores themes of medical ethics, family obligations, and the right to self-determination.

If there was a religion of Annaism, and I had to tell you how humans made their way to earth, it would go like this: in the beginning there was nothing at all but the moon and the sun. The moon desired to emerge during the day, but something far brighter appeared to occupy all those hours. The moon grew hungry, thinner and thinner, until she was just a slice of herself, and her tips were sharp as a knife. Millions of stars were compared, like a fountain of tears (Picoult 251).

In this passage from *My Sister's Keeper*, Anna creates a mythical story, "Annaism," where the moon longs for the sun's place but is overshadowed, growing thinner and sharper. This symbolizes Anna's own struggle for identity, as she feels secondary to her sister Kate's needs. The moon's fading and the stars as a "fountain of tears" reflect themes of sacrifice, longing, and grief, mirroring Anna's emotional burden as a savior sibling. Through this, Picoult uses symbolism to highlight Anna's internal conflict and foreshadow her fate. Her preferred color is pink, and her favorite time of day is twilight. Kate survives for ten days with intense transfusions and arsenic therapy. On the eleventh day, she falls into a coma. Her condition is terminal, and she is expected to pass away within a year.

"In the chemistry lab, they keep sodium in little vials of oil, because if it comes in contact with air, it will oxidize so fast that it bursts into flames. It's also water-reactive—drop it in a beaker and it explodes. Ask an elementary kid to name the states of matter, and he'll tell you solid, liquid, gas. But there's another state, too: plasma. It's what happens when you add enough energy to a gas so that its electrons break free, creating light. Fire. The stuff of stars" (Picoult 142).

It highlights scientific elements, notably describing how metallic sodium is stored in small oil-filled containers in a high school science laboratory due to its volatile reaction with air. Additionally, it is highly reactive with water, producing hydrogen and heat. This blend of science and storytelling enhances the novel's realism and depth.

Anna reflects on the concept of Heaven and Hell, questioning what happens after death. She wonders if people can choose their age in the afterlife how they would be recognized? Her curiosity leads her to ponder whether those who die tragically retain their appearance. Picoult blends imagination with deep introspection through Anna's thoughts. She also considers human choices, from personal preferences to life-changing decisions. These reflections highlight Anna's desire to understand existence beyond the physical world.

If the cancer comes back, if this kidney transplant doesn't work, If things don't wind up the way we all wish they would for Kate- well, I will never ask you to help your sister again....

But Anna, will you do this one last thing? (Picoult 268)

Sara pleads with Anna to donate her kidney, despite Anna's fight for medical autonomy. She acknowledges the uncertainty of Kate's survival but asks for one final sacrifice. This moment highlights themes of family duty, ethical dilemmas, and personal autonomy. Picoult emphasizes the emotional weight of Anna's role as a savior sibling. Illusion and imagination plays a vital role in Anna and Kate's life. Campbell seeks clarification, asking "if Anna's voluntary kidney donation would exempt her from any future medical procedures required to extend Kate's life" (Picoult 268).

Anna wanted nothing more than for her sister to be cured. Sara says, 'I represent them equally everywhere, everyplace. I love both of them equally'. Campbell points out that, while Sara claims she wanted to treat Anna and Kate equally, her actions do not reflect equal rights. In this passage Anna spoke about the world of possibility. This dilemma connects to Bowlby's Attachment Theory, as Anna and Kate's bond is shaped by deep emotional ties and familial obligation. Anna's struggle for autonomy reflects the conflict between secure attachment and self-identity, as she grapples with her role in Kate's survival while seeking independence. Anna feels uncomfortable in the courtroom. She is worried about her situation, because informant of her people were discussing her life. She was unable to make decisions under this confused circumstances.

"A diverse group of doctors, RNs clergy, ethicists, and scientists, who are assigned to review individual cases to protect patients' rights. In Western Bioethics, they are six principles we try to follow," He ticks them off in his fingers. 'Autonomy, or the idea that any patient over age eighteen has the right to refuse treatment; veracity, which is basically informed consent; fidelity- that is, a health-care provider fulfilling his duties; beneficence, or doing what's in the best interest of the patient; nonmaleficence - when you can no longer do good, you shouldn't do harm...like performing major surgery on a terminal patient who's 102 years old; and finally, justice- that no patient should be discriminated against in receiving treatment.' Campbell raises parenting question 'Do parents control their children's health-care decisions until age eighteen?'" (Picoult 293).

The excerpt highlights six key bioethical principles—autonomy, veracity, fidelity, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice—that guide medical decision-making. It raises the ethical question of whether parents have full control over their children's healthcare until age eighteen. While legally parents make medical decisions for minors, ethical concerns arise when children disagree, especially in critical cases. Some legal systems allow mature minors to make their own healthcare choices, emphasizing the conflict between parental authority and a child's autonomy. "However, once a child reaches adolescence, although they can't give formal consent, they have to agree to any hospital procedure - even if their parents have already signed off on it." This rule, if you ask me, is like the law against jaywalking. Everyone knows you're not supposed to do it, but that doesn't actually stop you. Dr. Bergen is still talking. 'In the rare instance where a parent and an adolescent patient disagree, the ethics committee weighs several factors: whether the procedure is in the adolescent's best interests, the risk/benefit scenario, the age and maturity of the adolescent, and the argument he or she presents'" (Picoult 293).

This underscores the ethical challenges of medical autonomy for minors, especially in Anna's case, as she fights for control over her own body. Until the age of eighteen, a savior sibling is legally a minor, with medical decisions made by their guardians. However, upon reaching adulthood, they gain full authority over their own medical choices. Anna's bond with Kate is deeply significant, yet she could never take a consolidated stand before Kate's death. The notion that a savior sibling must sue their parents for bodily autonomy seems drastic death parents while taking decision about this children may not take into consideration the emotional impact it may leave behind. Most of the time such decisions affect the children foregoing the individual autonomy.

In the USA approximately sixty children donated their organ during 1987 to 2000. Some as young as ten years old, donate their kidneys (Delmonico 2002, 333-336). The American Academy of Pediatrics accepts young organ donations under specific conditions, including high likelihood of benefit, minimal surgical risk, and exclusion of deceased and living donor possibilities. Among the Sixty percent of the donors were young forty percent were children. It is challenging to maintain the relationship of siblings as often the expression of attaining individual results is uprooting of their bond. Parents need to be adequately informed about the cause and effect of such complicated treatment. The duty of Bioethics Committee is heightened in informing the donor and the parents about such consequences. Ultimately it is essential to get the consent of the donor, after having thoroughly informing everything about the disease risk involved in donating organ after side effects caused by such a drastic decision. The main hypothesis is ambivalent; also there is no existent guidelines to save saviour siblings. The findings may have been more applicable if, we ask them their opinions before moving forward.

"You don't love someone because they're perfect. You love them in spite of the fact that they're not" (Picoult 182). In *My Sister's Keeper*, Picoult explores the fragile balance between love, autonomy, and ethical dilemmas in relationship of siblings. As per Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Anna and Kate display deep love as well as they strive to attain independence. While Anna loves Kate, she seeks control over her own body, highlighting the tension between familial duty and self-identity. Ultimately, the novel challenges the idea of unconditional sacrifice, suggesting that true love also respects personal choice.

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