

APPENDIX 8 *NINETEEN MINUTES* BY JODI PICOULT BOOK REVIEW

By Rebecca Skane
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As a parent, I understand knee-jerk reactions when it comes to my kids, but much less so when it comes to book banning. Last year, *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult came under fire in Gilford, NH when some high school parents objected to the contents of this assigned book. At the time, I knew little about the book, only that it involved a school shooting much like Columbine. I assumed the violence to be at the heart of the matter. I finally got around to reading it and then looked back upon the arguments in old newspaper articles. Nope – it wasn't the violence. It was the depiction of nonconsensual sex, a one-page incident which wasn't very graphic but fit the narrative perfectly.

I should re-title this article "**The Ignorance of Gilford, NH Parents**", subtitle: "Those who clearly did not bother to read the book nor understand its content, meaning, relevance, or why it had been assigned."

In the small fictional town of Sterling, NH – not unlike Gilford (oh, sweet irony!) – student Peter Houghton plants a homemade bomb inside a car in the school parking lot and uses the explosion as a diversion to enter the school while heavily armed. For nineteen minutes, Peter goes on a shooting spree while screaming students and teachers scramble to get out of his way. At the end, ten people are killed and several more wounded.

"In nineteen minutes, you can mow the front lawn, color your hair, watch a third of a hockey game. You can bake scones or get a tooth filled by a dentist. You can fold laundry for a family of five. Or, as Peter Houghton knows ... in nineteen minutes, you can bring the world to a screeching halt."

As only Jodi Picoult can, a difficult subject matter is unveiled and then brilliantly dissected through character analysis rather than making it plot-oriented, always leaving room for a character-enhanced plot twist at the end. She has a way of getting the reader to see and feel empathy for both sides, even when the reader doesn't want to.

In this story there is Peter Houghton who has been horribly bullied since day one in public school. His parents are successful and normal people – his mother, a midwife, his father, a professor of economics. After the event, it was easy for the people to turn on the parents as a collective and judge them to be monsters, for who else could have raised such a person? But Picoult shines light on the parents' fear, guilt, and grief surrounding their otherwise normal existence, allowing the reader to explore a kinder side of humanity.

The more interesting facet to this story is with Josie Cormier, daughter of the local judge and former best friend to Peter. Josie was also a "nobody" until they were a bit older. Suddenly, Josie was in the limelight and surrounded by the popular crowd. She clung to her boyfriend Matt, a popular jock, and used him as a shield to stay popular. But he was manipulative. While she outwardly pretended to hate Peter, she hated herself but was too afraid to go against the popular crowd and do anything that would reveal her "nerdiness".

Cue the revolt in Gilford. Josie's boyfriend Matt is abusive and controlling. He tells her that he'll kill himself if she ever leaves him. And when she resists his sexual advances, he rapes her. This is the scene that had parents in an uproar. It isn't very graphic, nor very long, but the word "semen" is mentioned. Yes, a biological product of the human body is mentioned. Gasp!

Some people didn't think this was relevant to the story line when it absolutely was. Both Peter and Josie fall victim to the pressure and pain of being outcasts in school and they deal with it in very different ways. When becoming the victim of bullies and date rape are extremely high possibilities for young adults, these are issues that they SHOULD read about and have the chance to discuss in a safe environment. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, one in five women will be raped. One in five. Getting upset over your daughter reading about sexual abuse when there's a good chance she'll become a victim at one point in her life is asinine¹. And to be more upset about a sex scene over the jaw-dropping violence – wow – priorities.

Knowledge is power. The more information you provide your children with, the better equipped they'll be to handle certain situations.

There are plenty of benefits for young adults when they read about real world issues and dangers. First of all, reading literary fiction (fiction that revolves around character interaction and growth) creates empathy – a proven fact. Young women might be able to relate to Josie, understand her position and angst, and even learn from it, thereby preventing another statistic. And most everyone can identify with the horrors of being bullied, and more easily so within a narrative.

As far as *Nineteen Minutes* goes, the bullying seemed a little bit disproportionate for such a small town where everyone knows everyone. Perhaps I have more faith than others (*cough* Gilford *cough*) that educators will do the right thing; someone should have stepped forward in this case, if not many – the bullying was that severe. We have good reason to trust our public educators with our precious growing minds, and they've proven that time and time again. We've seen teachers die for their students while trying to protect them at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and we've seen them put their lives at risk while jumping on top of students during the Moore tornado. Just recently, they've continued to brave small-town minds of ignorance and fear by assigning this book.

SOURCE: <http://portsmouthreview.com/nineteen-minutes-by-jodi-picoult-book-review/>

¹ extremely stupid