



# Leaving Time

By Jodi Picoult

First published in 2014

## Genre and Subject

Mothers and daughters fiction

Women scientists

Missing persons

## Synopsis

For more than a decade, Jenna Metcalf has never stopped thinking about her mother, Alice, who mysteriously disappeared in the wake of a tragic accident. Refusing to believe that she would be abandoned as a young child, Jenna searches for her mother regularly online and pores over the pages of Alice's old journals. A scientist who studied grief among elephants, Alice wrote mostly of her research among the animals she loved, yet Jenna hopes the entries will provide a clue to her mother's whereabouts.

Desperate to find the truth, Jenna enlists two unlikely allies in her quest. The first is Serenity Jones, a psychic who rose to fame finding missing persons—only to later doubt her gifts. The second is Virgil Stanhope, a jaded private detective who originally investigated Alice's case along with the strange, possibly linked death of one of her colleagues. As the three work together to uncover what happened to Alice, they realize that in asking hard questions, they'll have to face even harder answers.

As Jenna's memories dovetail with the events in her mother's journals, the story races to a mesmerizing finish. A deeply moving, gripping, and intelligent page-turner, *Leaving Time* is Jodi Picoult at the height of her powers.

## Author Biography

Jodi Picoult was born and raised in Nesconset on Long Island; her family moved to New Hampshire when she was 13 years old. She has described her family as "non-practicing Jewish". Picoult wrote her first story at age five.

She studied writing at Princeton University, and graduated in 1987. Picoult published two short stories in *Seventeen* magazine while still in college. Immediately after graduation, she began a variety of jobs, ranging from editing textbooks to teaching eighth-grade English. She earned a master's degree in education from Harvard University.

## Discussion Starters

1. Despite their different backgrounds, Jenna, Serenity, and Virgil form a sort of unconventional family together. What do you think brings them together? Have you ever had a similar experience of finding support from an unlikely source? 2. Alice says that 98 percent of science is quantifiable, leaving 2 percent “that can’t be measured or explained. And yet that does not mean it doesn’t exist.” (p. 392) Do you agree or disagree? Can you think of examples from the book or from your own experience of something that fits into that 2 percent? 3. Virgil grapples with helping Jenna when he suspects discovering the truth might be more painful to her than never knowing. Have you ever been in a situation where you knew a truth that it might hurt someone to hear? What did you do? 4. Serenity’s fake psychic readings are successful, she says, because people look for sense in the nonsensical. Do you agree or disagree? If a psychic reading brings someone comfort or helps them grieve, do you think it matters if the message is faked? Jodi Picoult Book club discussion questions 5. Jenna meets up with another character at the very end of the book. (pp. 394–395) Were you surprised to see who that was? Why or why not? 6. Alice describes some amazing examples of elephants appearing to exhibit grief and empathy, which are drawn from real-life research. Discuss some of the ways elephant grief is depicted. How is it the same as human mourning? How is it different? 7. One of the major themes of *Leaving Time* is loss and how to cope with it. Discuss some of the ways the characters in this novel deal with their losses. Do you identify with any of these coping mechanisms more than others? How do you approach loss? 8. Do you think Thomas’s erratic and upsetting behavior justifies Alice’s affair with Gideon? What would you have done in Alice’s place? 9. Jenna compares her search for her mother to Captain Ahab’s search for the whale in *Moby-Dick*, or Javert hunting Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, saying they are all three defined by their search. Do you agree with this assessment? Have you ever felt defined in this way by something you wanted? 10. Why do you think Serenity loses her gift? And why do you think Jenna is able to help bring it back? 11. Do you believe in ghosts? If you could communicate with anyone who has passed away, who would it be? 12. Discuss the significance of the title *Leaving Time*. What is the literal meaning that Jenna ascribes to the phrase as a baby? What are some other ways the title could be interpreted? 13. “Negative moments get remembered. Traumatic ones get forgotten.” (p. 12) What do you think this means? Do you agree or disagree? Have you ever experienced something and discovered later that someone else remembers it completely differently?

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