



LITERARY BOOK CLUB

January 2020 Selection

***A Spark of Light* by Jodi Picoult**

The warm fall day starts like any other at the Center--a women's reproductive health services clinic--its staff offering care to anyone who passes through its doors. Then, in late morning, a desperate and distraught gunman bursts in and opens fire, taking all inside hostage.

After rushing to the scene, Hugh McElroy, a police hostage negotiator, sets up a perimeter and begins making a plan to communicate with the gunman. As his phone vibrates with incoming text messages he glances at it and, to his horror, finds out that his fifteen-year-old daughter, Wren, is inside the clinic.

But Wren is not alone. She will share the next and tensest few hours of her young life with a cast of unforgettable characters: A nurse who calms her own panic in order to save the life of a wounded woman. A doctor who does his work not in spite of his faith but because of it, and who will find that faith tested as never before. A pro-life protester, disguised as a patient, who now stands in the crosshairs of the same rage she herself has felt. A young woman who has come to terminate her pregnancy. And the disturbed individual himself, vowing to be heard.

Told in a daring and enthralling narrative structure that counts backward through the hours of the standoff, this is a story that traces its way back to what brought each of these very different individuals to the same place on this fateful day.

One of the most fearless writers of our time, Jodi Picoult tackles a complicated issue in this gripping and nuanced novel. How do we balance the rights of pregnant women with the rights of the unborn they carry? What does it mean to be a good parent? *A Spark of Light* will inspire debate, conversation . . . and, hopefully, understanding.

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Discussion Questions:

1. This novel is told in reverse, counting back in time the hours of the hostage stand-off. Why do you think the author chose to structure the book this way? How does this unique structure affect your reading experience? How would your reading experience be altered if the book had been told in a more traditional chronological format?
2. The story is narrated from the points of view of ten different characters: Wren, Hugh, Bex, George, Beth, Olive, Joy, Janine, Louie, and Izzy. Why do you think the author chose to include so many different perspectives? Was there a voice that you connected to most strongly? Why? Was there any character that you had difficulty connecting to? Why do you think that was?
3. Hugh discovers that his daughter is one of the hostages in the Center after he has already begun negotiating with George. What do you think of Hugh's decision to remain on the case when he had a personal stake in it? Do you think he has a stronger ethical responsibility to his police force and the community at large or to his family?
4. As Bex reveals to Hugh that she—behind his back—took Wren to the Center to get birth control, she wonders, "Were some betrayals kinder than others?" Discuss the different types of betrayals that appear in the book. How would you answer Bex's question? How do you define "betrayal"? Is there ever a time when betraying someone is the right thing to do?
5. Financial security is one of the issues identified as a reason why some women choose to have abortions, and it is certainly a factor in Joy and Izzy's decisions. How have their experiences with poverty impacted each of their choices? Do you think financial security should be a factor when considering abortion, and if so, how big of a role should it play in one's decision?
6. We learn that Janine, a pro-life protester, has had an abortion herself. What do you think of her decision to have an abortion despite her pro-life beliefs? What do you think of her choice to commit her life to pro-life protests even after securing an abortion for herself? Do you find this behavior hypocritical or understandable?

7. Joy and Janine are often framed in parallel to one another within the book. Initially, they both seem to stand on opposite sides of the pro-life/pro-choice debate. By the end, do you think they have found common ground? Do you understand where each one's beliefs are founded? Is it possible to form a connection with someone "opposite" you and still maintain a commitment to one's beliefs?
8. At one point, Rachel, the employee who escaped from the Center, accuses Allen and his fellow protestors of being responsible for the hostage crisis situation, saying, "If people like you didn't spout the bullshit you do, people like him wouldn't exist." Is this a fair accusation? Is there a point at which one does not have the right to voice one's beliefs? If so, where should that line be drawn?
9. Louie Ward states that, as someone pro-choice, he has no problem with wanting to give rights to an unborn child...as long as it can be done without taking away the rights of the pregnant woman. Is this a viable position to take? Is it possible to reach common ground, with this condition?
10. Much is made of the fact that current laws governing abortion rights wind up inadvertently hurting women, because of the variations in the circumstances that brought them to choose termination. If one starts with the basic belief that no one wants to get an abortion, are there ways to decrease the number of terminated pregnancies that do not involve legislation?
11. Beth finds herself in a devastating situation in the hospital after performing her own abortion when she could not secure it by legal means, nearly dying, and now facing arrest for her actions. Do you think the Mississippi abortion laws are applied fairly to Beth? Do you think her situation is unique? Could Beth have taken another course of action? Why or why not?
12. Dr. Ward questions whether there is a moral distinction between chopping down a hundred year old tree and stepping on an acorn. In what ways do you agree, or disagree? How does this inform the question of reproductive rights?
13. George thinks that he has to make Hugh understand his actions, and says, "Sometimes doing the right thing...means doing something bad." In order to accomplish this, George shoots at Wren as he releases her, and Hugh immediately returns fire at George. Do you think Hugh's act of violence and rage toward George can be equated with George's act of violence and rage



toward the Center? Why or why not? How are these actions similar? How are they different?

14. Throughout the novel, each character grapples with their actions and weighs them as right versus wrong. For instance, Wren goes back and forth between thinking that she is doing the right thing by seeking out birth control in the way she feels most comfortable and worrying that she has actually done something wrong by deceiving her father and putting her aunt in danger. Discuss the other moral battles each character faces internally. What do they think they have done right, and what do they think they have done wrong? Do you agree with their assessment of their actions? Why or why not?
15. By the end of the book, we discover that these characters' lives are interwoven in more ways than one and that each individual has much more to their story than what we first see on the surface. Were you surprised by any of the interconnections that were revealed? Which twist struck you the most strongly?

Review or Comment about this book:

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Recommendations:

- If you liked *A Spark of Light*, you might like [*Small Great Things*](#)
- You might also enjoy [*Nine Perfect Strangers*](#)