

Publishing Jodi Picoult

by Carolyn Mays, Publishing Director

Publishing Jodi Picoult has been unlike anything I've experienced in twenty years in the business. In just 4 years we have gone from a first printing of 35,000 copies for our first book to 3,500,000 copies of Jodi's novels sold – making her the bestselling women's fiction author in the UK. It's been an extraordinary journey.

So many signs were pointing the way to Jodi before I read a single one of her books that I should have known from the outset what a charmed publishing venture it was going to be. She came to me in three different ways, all during the space of a couple of weeks, and none of them directly. My colleague on the non-fiction side had met, for the first time and through a mutual friend, Jodi's agent, who left her with one of the novels and asked her to see if a fiction editor would be interested in reading it. Hodder's Chief Executive brought back a copy of another book to me after a meeting with the American publisher in New York. And a key buyer from New Zealand (where Jodi had already been published to great success) recommended Jodi Picoult as the one person Hodder should look at publishing.

I clearly had to read a Picoult and the one I read was *Plain Truth*. I found it instantly engaging, utterly absorbing, with a compelling narrative and situations that kept me thinking after I had finished the book. But it wasn't necessarily a straightforward situation. Jodi Picoult had written ten novels, none of which had ever been published in the United Kingdom. I had never read her before, but I had to assume that many other British editors had, and had not seen big enough sales possibilities for her. Could they all be wrong? Things were changing, though: the rise of the reading group gave us a line in to potential readers that we had not had before. Then there was the future: ten previous novels were all very well, but what the author was working on currently was crucial: if the new book was different, or not as good, it would be difficult to invest in the future.

Then the new novel arrived. *My Sister's Keeper* was breathtaking – literally. I think I spoke out loud at the ending – and then cried out loud. Luckily, it was 2 o'clock in the morning and I was in bed: others in the office weren't so discreetly situated, and we

had many embarrassments when they were caught unsuspecting trying to finish the book on the tube on the way in to work. Everyone who read it shared my excitement, and we knew we had to publish Jodi Picoult. But we knew too that it would be a slow build – we thought we would have to hand-sell every copy, buttonholing readers and saying to them, ‘You think you don’t want to read a book about a child dying of leukaemia, but just start this one, and see...’ We were sure that if we could just get a little ball rolling, it would grow and grow, until some day – maybe five to ten years later – Jodi Picoult would have a good-sized audience in this country.

We acquired *My Sister’s Keeper* and two further unwritten novels, and at the same time several of the already published books (the ‘backlist’). We came up with a plan which involved publishing one new book and one or two backlist titles a year. *Plain Truth* would come first, followed by *My Sister’s Keeper*, and so on. We produced some early reading copies of *Plain Truth* for the book trade. The snowball started rolling. The buyers loved it. And when the early reading copies of *My Sister’s Keeper* came in, they loved that even more. It was becoming clear that this wasn’t going to be an ordinary publication: readers were finding something special in Jodi Picoult, and when they did, they became evangelical in their enthusiasm. Many even went and bought all the existing books from Amazon.com so they wouldn’t have to wait for us to publish them.

We stepped up our ambitions – and we realised that the new novel would be perfect for the new-ish Richard & Judy Book Club, just going into its second year. We were lucky: the Richard & Judy Book Club agreed. *My Sister’s Keeper* has now sold nearly half a million copies in the UK alone, replicating Jodi’s huge success in Australia, New Zealand, and America – in a much shorter time! We were lucky to have the backlist novels already programmed, so we could follow up that remarkable success with other publications, keeping Jodi Picoult in the reader’s mind.

We’ve been blessed, too, in Jodi herself. She lives not too far from my sister, in New Hampshire, so I was able to meet her soon after we bought the books, and the combination of further trips to New England and Jodi’s visits to us mean we at Hodder have grown to know her well – and love her. She is smart and funny, incredibly energetic and with incredibly high standards. She has a strong sense of

what she wants to do and what is right for her to do and I've never known her to be wrong. She does a very great deal of research for each of her books, yet manages to write an impressive novel every year. She has been generous to us with her time: she's come over at least once year, for hardcover publication of the new novel, every year since we first published. The work involved in being on the road, being scintillating, for two to three weeks has paid off; we've seen her audiences build to over four hundred at a single event, in just a few years.

We have fine-tuned our publication strategy as time has gone on. Our original jacket style – itself owing to the Australian designer who came up with their stunning image for *My Sister's Keeper* – was so imitated that earlier this year we launched an entirely new, more sophisticated packaging and rolled it out to all the previously published books as well as those we are currently publishing. Each new novel provides us with new and different opportunities for finding new readers. What hasn't changed is the quality of the novels Jodi gives us, and the rich and rewarding experience she gives her readers. She provides us with situations we would find intolerable and asks us questions we don't know the answers to, and peoples them with intensely real characters who are, for the most part, just trying to do the right thing.

Jodi still inspires evangelical zeal in her readers – and awe in me, as I see how much she manages to achieve. She has become that much sought-after thing in publishing: a gold standard, a trend-setter. And we still haven't published all the backlist!