



Small Great Things, by Jodi Picoult
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, June 2017

Best-selling novelist Jodi Picoult often tackles social issues in her books, which invariably feature dramatic courtroom scenes. Racial injustice is the theme of *Small Great Things*, her latest novel. The story is told from the view point of three disparate characters: an honorable black nurse, a vindictive white supremacist, and a spunky public defender.

Ruth Jefferson, an African American, is a well respected labor and delivery nurse at a public hospital in New Haven, Connecticut. A war widow, whose husband had served in Afghanistan, Ruth is raising their teenage son Edison on her own. For twenty years, she has had a sterling nursing career. Quite often, doctors and other nurses seek Ruth's advice on their cases.

However, things abruptly change for Ruth when a white supremacist couple, Turk and Brittany Bauer, comes to her maternity ward for the birth of their first child, whom they name Davis. Turk, in his first-person chapters, describes how he became a hate-filled white supremacist. Years ago, his brother was killed in a car accident in which a black man was the driver, and Turk took his bitterness out on all African Americans. And after his baby son Davis is born, Turk insists that a note be attached to the baby's chart: "No African American Personnel to Care for this Patient."

Ruth is stunned when the hospital capitulates to Turk's outrageous demand. Her supervisor equates Turk's racist request with someone issuing a religious preference. Disheartened, Ruth keeps her distance from Davis as instructed. But when Corinne, the baby's nurse, is pulled into another case, she asks Ruth to monitor Davis for a few minutes. Unfortunately, Davis goes into distress, and Ruth is faced with a life-or-death situation.

Enter public defendant Kennedy McQuarrie, an attorney with a picture-perfect life. A Columbia law-school graduate, Kennedy and her surgeon-husband Micah are the parents of Violet, a precocious four-year-old. Kennedy eagerly takes up Ruth's case,

smugly convinced that she is not racist. However, as the trial unfolds, Kennedy has to confront some painful truths about herself and our society in general.

Although the plot of *Small Great Things* is well paced and fascinating, a few of the characters are weakly drawn and somewhat stereotypical. Still, the topics the novel raises are important and intriguing.