

from the June 22, 2000 edition

Murder sparks a clash of values in this Amish whodoneit

Kristina Lanier

PLAIN TRUTH, by Jodi Picoult, Pocket Books 405 pp., \$24.95

Dairy cows and criminal defense attorneys don't usually share office space in truth or fiction. But they do in Jodi Picoult's newest novel, "Plain Truth."

Her seventh book in as many years crosses lawyers and Holsteins, children and parents, and two worldviews as different as right and left shoes.

When a dead infant is discovered on an Amish dairy farm, all the evidence points to the farm owner's daughter, Katie Fisher, an unwed 18-year-old.

But in this tightknit "Plain" community where obedience, piety, and kinship reign and modern conveniences have no place, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy is as unheard of as telephones and electricity. Infanticide, of course, is even more shocking.

Though an autopsy of the infant suggests murder and her body shows the undeniable signs of childbirth, Katie denies guilt - or even memory of the incident. But murder is murder. The American - "English" - police and court system descend, ready to gobble up the girl.

Enter Ellie Hathaway, a big-city criminal defense attorney in mid-career crisis. She's escaped to her great-aunt's house in Paradise, Penn., for some R & R. But that's not to be. Jolly Aunt Leda is connected with the Fisher family, and Ellie finds herself impulsively thrust into the middle of Katie's hopeless case.

The cynical lawyer and wide-eyed Amish girl make unlikely companions, but through their unexpected association and the subsequent unfolding of their life stories, Picoult does more than a stale take on "The Odd Couple." Instead, she uses the dissimilarity to explore the often awkward relationship between America's secular and religious worlds.

To make her point, Picoult frequently leaves the reader to watch helplessly as the two groups stubbornly - and sometimes maddeningly - persist in misunderstanding each other.

The solidly drawn cast of characters and supporting story lines boost the mounting cultural tension initiated by the criminal trial. There's the rigid father, an outcast son, and a hidden love.

And through Katie's Amish community, Picoult creates a poignant portrait of the nature of deeply held beliefs.

There's still a good dash of "whodunit" suspense to keep things moving, and holding it all together is Ellie, who strives to reconcile the divergent worldviews in time to keep Katie out of prison while also fumbling with her own ghosts.

Picoult sets a big task for herself in "Plain Truth," but she pulls it off - avoiding sentimentality and even maintaining the cultural tension and thriller-like guessing game into the book's final scenes.

Picoult's strength, though, lies in sculpting solid characters and a thoughtful, well-researched, and well-paced yarn.

**Kristina Lanier is a freelance writer in Boston.*