

A “silent count of limbs and landmarks”

Abortion in Jodi Picoult’s *A Spark of Light* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of abortion and its attendant moral conflicts in Jodi Picoult’s *A Spark of Light* (2018). Positioned within a growing corpus of abortion narratives, the novel responds to current debates and restrictive abortion legislation in the United States. Set during a hostage crisis in Mississippi’s last abortion-providing clinic, *A Spark of Light* employs shifting perspectives and a reverse-chronological structure to explore the diverse experiences, emotions, and ideological positions of patients, clinic staff, abortion opponents, and the hostage-taker. Published in 2018, before the US Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion, the novel depicts the increasing polarization of public discourse about abortion, as well as the diverging views and assumptions regarding issues of reproduction. Picoult’s in-depth engagement with a controversial and hotly debated topic stands out not only in *A Spark of Light* but is a hallmark of most of her novels. However, although she is one of America’s best-selling authors, her work has received little scholarly scrutiny thus far. Critics have frequently dismissed her novels as non-serious literature and commercial fiction that prioritizes entertainment and profit over literary merit. Challenging such dismissals, the article shows that *A Spark of Light* deserves critical attention for its nuanced exploration of abortion experiences and contribution to contemporary abortion debates. Through a close reading that is informed by feminist scholarship on reproductive politics, the article illustrates how Picoult’s narrative portrays abortion as a complex decision influenced by intersecting social, economic, emotional, and medical factors, while critiquing the impact of restrictive

laws and limited access to reproductive health care services. The article further contends that, by incorporating authoritative medical insights and providing a detailed portrayal of a procedural abortion, the novel counters misinformation and thereby challenges the stigmatization surrounding abortion. Diversifying mainstream representations, *A Spark of Light* exemplifies the potential of popular fiction to engage in pressing cultural and political debates and foster nuanced discussions about reproductive rights.

KEYWORDS

Abortion, Fetal Representation, Popular Fiction, Jodi Picoult, Reproductive Rights

I will choose what enters me, what becomes / flesh of my flesh. Without choice, no politics, / no ethics lives. I am not your cornfield, / not your uranium mine, not your calf / for fattening, not your cow for milking. / You may not use me as your factory. / Priests and legislators do not hold / shares in my womb or my mind. / This is my body. If I give it to you / I want it back. My life / is a nonnegotiable demand.

Marge Piercy, "Right to Life"

Introduction

In early July 2022, shortly after the US Supreme Court issued its decision in the *Dobbs* case that upheld Mississippi's near-total abortion ban, the Jackson Women's Health Organization permanently closed its doors.¹ Locally known as the "Pink House" because of the color of the building, the clinic was the last remaining abortion care provider in Mississippi. It had previously challenged the state's 2018 Gestational Age Act, which banned most abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy. This legal battle resulted in the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* – the constitutional right to abortion that had been in place for nearly half a century. Even before this decision, the

¹ Currently, Mississippi enforces a trigger ban that prohibits abortion with the only exceptions being to save the life of the pregnant person and in cases of incest and rape.

state had served as a testing ground for restrictive abortion legislation, with some of the most stringent laws in the United States. For years, the Pink House had been a flashpoint for ideological conflict and fierce battles had been fought over its existence. Jodi Picoult's 2018 novel *A Spark of Light* centers on a fictionalized version of the Pink House, called the Center for Women and Reproductive Health. Based on actual events, such as the violent attacks on clinics and abortion care providers, the novel stages a hostage crisis at the Center, locking together individuals with opposing views on the ethics and implications of terminating a pregnancy. Through shifts in focalization, it reveals the complexity of emotions, experiences, and ideological positions from the perspectives of clinic staff, patients, an antiabortion activist, and the attacker. By exploring the characters' polarized and seemingly irreconcilable stances, it reflects the current debates about reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. As such, *A Spark of Light* is part of a growing corpus of recent abortion narratives that engage with the socio-political discussions surrounding the issue and critically respond to the steady tightening of restrictive laws and the erosion of reproductive freedoms in the United States.

Jodi Picoult is widely known for tackling socially relevant and highly topical issues in her novels, including teenage suicide, sexual abuse, and school shootings. This has resulted in several of her books being banned by school districts across the United States.² With nearly thirty novels to her name and approximately forty million copies in print (Picoult, “Published Books”), she ranks among America's best-selling authors. However, despite this success, her work has received limited scholarly attention. This neglect is at least partly due to her work being categorized as popular fiction – a genre typically defined by its broad appeal, entertainment value, accessibility, plot-driven narratives, reliance on stock characters, and a perceived absence of originality, complex narrative style, and literary innovation (Murphy 4-9). Critics frequently dismiss Picoult's novels as women's fiction or commercial literature, focusing on entertainment rather than aesthetic value and literary

² According to the PEN America Index of School Book Bans, Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* (2007) tops the list of the books most banned in the 2023-2024 school year. In 2024, *A Spark of Light* was removed from classrooms in Orange County, Florida.

merit. From this perspective, the immense popularity of her work in the wider public sphere has been interpreted as a sign of non-serious writing. Moreover, her style has been described as “formulaic and carefully contrived” (Hayes-Brady 147) and “clumsy and sentimental” (France), lacking the perceived distinction and quality associated with “highbrow” literature. Yet, while Picoult’s work, including the novel on which I focus in this article, exhibits traits typical of popular fiction, it also challenges some of these conventions. As my reading of *A Spark of Light* will demonstrate both the novel’s intriguing engagement with a controversial topic and the narrative techniques it employs deserve critical attention.

Drawing on recent feminist scholarship on reproductive politics as well as cultural and literary studies, I scrutinize the representation of abortion in *A Spark of Light*. To contextualize my analysis of the novel, I begin by examining how abortion is treated in both public debate and popular culture, particularly focusing on the use of fetal imagery in antiabortion discourse. The main section of my article offers a close reading of Picoult’s novel that focuses on its portrayal of abortion as a complex decision shaped by intersecting social, economic, emotional, and medical factors. My analysis shows that the novel critiques restrictive access to abortion services and challenges the misconceptions about abortion that are prevalent in mainstream public discussion. I maintain that such a representation can serve an important role in advancing reproductive justice and fostering nuanced discussions. This underscores the capacity of popular fiction to respond to urgent cultural concerns and intervene in contentious debates – a perspective that aligns with that of Brenda Boudreau and Kelli Maloy, the editors of *Abortion in Popular Culture: A Call to Action* (2023), who assert the cultural, social, and political significance of popular culture and its potential to shape public perceptions and encourage critical reflection (xiii).

Abortion Discourse, Fetal Representation, and Popular Culture

Despite its prevalence, the experience of terminating a pregnancy is often marginalized and shrouded in taboo in public discourse. According to the

Guttmacher Institute, roughly one in four women in the United States will have an abortion by the age of forty-five (Guttmacher). Nevertheless, fear of social disapproval prevents many from openly discussing their experiences. The resulting silence fosters stigmatization and reinforces the false perception that abortions are rare – a misrepresentation that, as Paula Abrams observes, “transforms into a social norm that labels abortion, and the women who have them, as deviant, furthering a cycle of secrecy and stigma” (184). This stigmatization is entrenched in “negative social attitudes toward women who decline maternity” (183). Judgment and enduring stereotypes vilify women who exercise their reproductive autonomy, either by depicting them as victims misled or coerced into the decision, or by portraying them as selfish, irresponsible, morally deficient, and monstrous. Such stereotypes are key in antiabortion discourse and contribute to harmful narratives that both marginalize women who have chosen abortion and discredit the complexities of their individual circumstances and decision-making processes.

Within the abortion debate, fetal imagery – the prime signifier of abortion – is especially contested. Antiabortion movements have long sought control over fetal representations in an effort to influence public perceptions by demonizing abortions and those who obtain them. As Lena Hann and Jeannie Ludlow note, one of their most effective tactics is leveraging the cultural and emotional resonance of the fetus through violent and emotionally charged language as well as grotesque graphic visuals that seek to provoke moral outrage and disgust in order to dissuade people from ending a pregnancy (119). The pro-choice movement, on the other hand, “has no strong or effective narratives to counter this tactic” (119). Instead of engaging directly with narrative and visual fetal representations, pro-choice discourse often obscures or erases the presence of the fetus. Problematically, this avoidance creates “an absent presence” where the aborted fetal body is unacknowledged in public advocacy (Ludlow, “It’s a boy! borted” 50).

The hijacking of fetal imagery by the antiabortionists was intensified as reproductive technologies developed, particularly with the emergence and dissemination of ultrasound technology. Introduced in the 1950s and gaining widespread use in subsequent decades, the sonogram allowed for

a visualization of what had previously been invisible aspects of pregnancy. This new obstetrical technology produced images that revolutionized the way antiabortion advocates spoke about abortion. The by-now-standard black-and-white images of the fetus floating in the dark depict it as autonomous and obscure its dependence on the pregnant body. The erasure of the woman in these images made it possible to imagine the fetus as an independent entity and gave rise to a new view of women's bodies (Weingarten 7). Importantly, as Sara Dubow lays out in her study on the history of the fetus in the United States, the visualization "enabled the identification of a fetus as a 'person' separate from the mother, and constructed the fetus as a 'citizen' with rights subject to the protection of the state" (6). For antiabortion activism of the 1960s and 1970s, such images of the fetus were crucial. Leslie J. Reagan insists that "[t]he most significant ideological work of the antiabortion movement was the separation in American cultural and legal thought of both the pregnant women from her own pregnancy and the developing fetus from the pregnant body" (xix). The notion of the fetus as a distinct and autonomous entity has since been a cornerstone of fetal rights advocacy. It has contributed to the criminalization of pregnant women who opt for abortion and are thus deemed to act against the fetus's best interests.

In her seminal 1987 article on fetal images and the significance of visual culture for reproductive politics, Rosalind Pollack Petchesky shows how antiabortionists successfully used visual culture "to make fetal personhood a self-fulfilling prophecy by making the fetus a public presence [in] a visually oriented culture" (264). Meanwhile, creating abortion-positive representations remains a challenge. As Petchesky observes, "feminists and other prochoice advocates have all too readily ceded the visual terrain" (264). The strategic use and manipulation of the visual is exemplified by the influential 1984 short film *The Silent Scream* which epitomizes the alleged horror of abortion. Petchesky's analysis of the film reveals its pivotal role in shaping antiabortion rhetoric and imagery. The film features gynecologist Bernard Nathanson, an abortion provider turned antiabortion advocate, who comments on the ultrasound of a 12-week-old fetus during an abortion procedure. Narrating the moving images with medical authority, Nathanson is in control of

their interpretation and proclaims to be showing the “truth” about the procedure. He describes the fetus as a child in distress, sensing mortal danger and struggling to avoid the lethal instrument. The film’s most iconic moment shows what Nathanson interprets as the fetus opening its mouth in a scream, declaring that “this is the silent scream of a child threatened imminently with extinction” (Dabner 16:56-17:03). Here, abortion is framed as an act of violence against a vulnerable child. Rendering a legal abortion as a “gothic spectacle” (Valerius 32), *The Silent Scream* clearly belongs “in the realm of cultural representation rather than medical evidence” (Petchesky 267). Although the medical community quickly discredited the film’s central claims – such as the claim that fetuses can feel pain in the first trimester – it marked a turning point in the way abortion was discussed. By politicizing fetal imagery, it transformed visual representations of the fetus into effective tools for antiabortion advocacy that have a remarkable staying power.

Scholars in Abortion Studies and Reproductive Rights argue that contemporary cultural texts have the potential to challenge dominant antiabortion imagery, dismantle stereotypical representations, and break the silence surrounding abortion. For example, Boudreau and Maloy affirm that “popular culture can play an integral role in increasing public knowledge and humanizing the way we talk about abortion through accurate and nuanced narratives” (xii). They also reason that cultural narratives wield significant influence as they shape public perception, challenge restrictive policies, and even inspire political activism (xii-xiii). Considering the current political climate in the United States, this role has certainly gained new urgency. Indeed, in recent years, abortion has become a recurring topic in literature and film. The research project “Abortion Onscreen” shows that abortion plotlines in movies and TV series persistently increased each year since the project’s start in 2016. Additionally, as reproductive rights are rolled back in numerous states, forcing people to travel across state lines for abortion procedures, the so-called abortion road trip movie has emerged as a result of these circumstances (Upadhyaya; Andreescu). This new genre highlights the legal, logistical, and financial barriers that restrict access to abortion care. Similarly, a variety of literary narratives has been published that range from realist fiction (e.g. Jennifer Haigh’s *Mercy Street*, 2022) and

feminist dystopias (e.g. Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks*, 2019) to historical novels (e.g. Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Wench*, 2010, and *Take My Hand*, 2022) and memoirs (e.g. Honor Moore's *A Termination*, 2024).

Through complex, empathetic storytelling, such texts can encourage readers' critical engagement with the topic while countering dominant stereotypes about women who have an abortion, their motives, and the procedure itself. Jodi Picoult's *A Spark of Light*, which I will discuss next, exemplifies this potential. Written and published before the *Dobbs* decision, the novel powerfully captures the sociopolitical currents and increasing polarization of public discourse that marked the cultural context in which it emerged. The 2022 Supreme Court decision was the culmination of a decades-long campaign to dismantle the constitutional right to abortion, fueled by conservative legislative efforts that were accompanied by a history of attacks on medical personnel and clinics. Picoult's novel addresses these realities by referencing real-life incidents of antiabortion extremism. It thus represents a meaningful intervention in contemporary debates that aims to stimulate discussion while maintaining a firm stance on the importance of reproductive autonomy.

Representing Abortion in *A Spark of Light*

A Spark of Light opens with a description of the Center for Women and Reproductive Health, which symbolizes the contested nature of reproductive rights and healthcare: positioning the Center as a site for ideological conflict, simultaneously a sanctuary for those in need of care and a target of vehement opposition, it is described as squatting "behind a wrought-iron gate, like an old bulldog used to guarding its territory," "a small rectangle of a structure painted a fluorescent, flagrant orange, like a flag to those who had traveled hundreds of miles to find it" (Picoult, *Spark* 10). Its depiction as scarred "from the cuts of politicians and the barbs of protesters" (10), yet defiant and enduring, reflects the resilience of abortion care providers who persevere despite incremental restrictions. This opening is not only a vivid portrayal of the Center's precarious existence but also a critical commentary on the nationwide erosion of reproductive rights.

Post-*Dobbs*, it can be read as a lament for what has been lost and a tribute to the ongoing efforts of those fighting to preserve reproductive rights.

The depiction of the Center sets the stage for the unfolding drama in *A Spark of Light*. Inside this embattled clinic, a gunman holds staff and patients hostage. Through alternating focalizations, the hostage drama is related from the points of view of those trapped inside the Center: obstetrician Dr. Louie Ward; patients such as Joy Perry, who is at the Center for an abortion procedure; a teenager seeking a prescription for birth control; a retired professor with cervical cancer; and antiabortion activist Janine Deguerre, who has come to the Center disguised as a patient wanting to expose the alleged violence of this "abortion factory" (Picoult, *Spark* 213). In addition, the novel also integrates the perspectives of the attacker, George Goddard, who seeks revenge because he believes that his teenage daughter had procured an abortion at the Center; and the detective, hostage negotiator, and father of one of the hostages; as well as Beth, Goddard's daughter, who is being held in a hospital and is about to be prosecuted for fetal homicide for illegally ordering and taking abortion pills.

Through these different characters – their respective circumstances, experiences, and beliefs – *A Spark of Light* outlines and contrasts different positions. The multiperspectivity, a defining characteristic of Picoult's narrative style, effectively mirrors the complexities of contemporary abortion debates. Although the narrative does not offer simple conclusions or definitive resolutions to these conflicts, it seeks common ground by highlighting shared human experiences. This is particularly evident in the dynamic between Joy, who has an abortion at the Center, and the abortion opponent Janine, who after the hostage crisis is resolved, offers to accompany Joy home. The two characters are clearly positioned on opposite sides of the abortion debate, and neither woman changes her stance: Joy remains relieved that she was able to receive the care she sought, while Janine continues to see herself as a 'savior of the unborn.' However, in a brief yet poignant moment, Joy shares the ultrasound image she received before her abortion, and Janine responds with a silent gesture of support: "Janine covered Joy's hand with her own. She didn't respond. / She didn't have to. / She just had to be here, one woman holding up another" (40). Despite their irreconcilable views, Joy and Janine momentarily connect on

a deeper, more personal level – not as ideological opponents, but as women. The novel does not suggest that this connection resolves their differences; but, it does reveal a shared experience of womanhood that transcends the ideological divide over abortion, if only temporarily.

By exploring and contrasting various perspectives and standpoints, the novel allows readers to witness shifting opinions and evolving arguments. The juxtaposition of discrepant positions on reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and the beginning and value of human life, allows for the presentation and evaluation of arguments, while also exposing the limitations of individual perspectives. The fact that individual perspectives are inherently limited is also made apparent through the novel's structure: Narrated in reverse chronological order, it first presents the outcomes and results of the decisions made by the characters, and only later explores the circumstances that led to these choices – thus gradually revealing a deeper and more nuanced insight into the characters' motivations and beliefs. In this context, it has been noted that "the characters experience a pivotal reevaluation of their preconceived notions about life and death, right and wrong, compassion and hatred, and must reconcile with themselves that what they may have felt was a non-negotiable stance is much more complicated than they previously considered" (Hansen 6). Read in a pedagogical vein, this insight can also be extended to the readers of the novel, who are invited to critically engage with the characters' beliefs and – potentially – to reassess their own assumptions. The narrative approach reinforces one of the central concerns of the story and its didactic purpose, which is to ask readers to withhold judgment, question their moral responses, and reconsider their positions on the issue as more context is provided. Ultimately, it guides readers toward recognizing abortion as a legitimate option for individuals seeking control over their reproductive lives and an essential part of reproductive justice.

The temporal register of the novel foregrounds the centrality of time, both as a structural framework and as a thematic concern. Spanning a single day, the story begins with the detective fatally shooting Goddard in the late afternoon and then unravels backward to detail the events of that morning. Each chapter is dedicated to an hour, providing a mosaic of perspectives on the unfolding crisis. This narrative reversal draws attention

to the temporal urgency of the crisis and underscores time as a force that governs the gunman's volatile emotions, the negotiator's tactics, and the health of the patients and staff held hostage. But the significance of time extends beyond the immediate hostage crisis, as the novel sheds light on its crucial role within the context of pregnancy and reproductive healthcare: while pregnancy is measured in weeks and months, involving a future-oriented trajectory, abortion access is critically time-bound and constrained by legal restrictions that are tied to gestational limits. Commenting on regulation that prohibits abortion after six weeks of gestation, Jaime Leigh Gray notes that

temporality has become a particularly fraught concern regarding abortion care. Time manifests in multiple ways, affecting the mobilities and bodies of abortion-seekers: the availability of doctor's appointments, the effects of mandatory waiting periods, the sometimes-slow process of ordering abortion pills by mail, the need to travel to access the procedure. Negotiating these impediments takes time. (95)

In various respects, time dictates the options available to individuals and shapes their experiences, particularly in the post-*Dobbs* era, where many states have implemented stricter restrictions on abortion access. *A Spark of Light* foregrounds time as a critical factor and confirms Gray's observation that "[r]ecent abortion narratives invest in the passage of time – of duration – to shed light on the obstacles to accessibility and subsequently the physical and emotional labor involved in obtaining an abortion" (95-96). For example, the novel gestures to the ways in which mandatory waiting periods prior to the procedure, while ostensibly providing time for reflection and informed decision-making, actually undermine the pregnant person's autonomy. Such policies suggest a lack of trust in women's ability to make decisions regarding their own bodies and lives, thereby effectively infantilizing them. In the novel, a character aptly comments on this matter, noting that "this was indeed some crazy world, where the waiting period to get an abortion was longer than the waiting period to get a gun" (Picoult, *Spark* 227).

To illustrate the challenges of accessing legal abortions, *A Spark of Light* depicts the experiences of two characters seeking to end their pregnancies and shows how time intersects with legal and financial barriers. Joy is forced to delay her abortion because she cannot afford the procedure, only to face even higher costs as her pregnancy progresses. Beth, the gunman's teenage daughter, is unable to receive a legal abortion because Mississippi law requires parental consent for minors. Desperate, ashamed to confide in her father, and unable to procure a parental consent statement in time, she purchases abortion pills online. Her self-induced abortion leads not only to her hospitalization and impending prosecution but also sets off the disastrous chain of events that culminates in her father's violent actions at the Center. Through the experiences of Joy and Beth, *A Spark of Light* shows how the lack of necessary resources and restrictive abortion legislation impacts women. In fact, it insistently suggests that denying individuals control over their reproductive lives can have fatal consequences.

The temporal dimension of *A Spark of Light* highlights the interconnectedness of time, choice (or its absence), and consequence. Significantly, by drawing attention to the barriers to legal abortion, the novel also complicates the idea of "choice" often invoked in debates about reproductive rights. Imbricated with neoliberal notions of individualism, autonomy, responsibility, and self-reliance, the concept of choice conceals the stark inequalities in access to abortion care and "masks the different economic, political, and environmental contexts in which women live their reproductive lives" (Ross and Solinger 47). For many abortion-seekers, a lack of financial resources, emotional support, or other necessities creates what Ross and Solinger call "choiceless choices" (102).

The novel critiques not only the restriction of access to reproductive health care but also debunks misleading conceptions about abortion prevalent in mainstream public discussion. This is accomplished through the character of Dr. Louie Ward. He is significant not only because he conveys medical expertise but also because he embodies a unique perspective: as a Black man and practicing Catholic who was raised in southern Louisiana, Dr. Ward reconciles his faith with his unwavering advocacy for women's reproductive rights. Throughout the novel, Dr. Ward plays a pivotal

role, serving as both an authoritative medical voice and a character who examines the broader sociopolitical dimensions of reproductive justice. For example, he provides accurate knowledge and dispels common myths, such as exaggerated abortion risks and the unfounded claim that fetuses at sixteen weeks can feel pain – an assertion that has shaped restrictive abortion laws like those in Mississippi. Furthermore, Dr. Ward strives to normalize abortion by pointing to its long history and the fact that it is an integral part of the human experience. In doing so, he challenges associations of abortion with danger and instead reframes it as a common and shared reality.

It is also from the point of view of Dr. Ward that a procedural abortion at 15 weeks of gestation is narrated step by step. This depiction is noteworthy for its detailed portrayal of the process. Eschewing abstraction and euphemisms, the procedure starts with the ultrasound, followed by the injection of local anesthetic, the rupture of the membranes to release amniotic fluid, and the disarticulation and extraction of the fetus using aspiration and forceps. The procedure concludes with Dr. Ward’s “silent count of limbs and landmarks” (Picoult, *Spark* 246) to ensure the complete removal of fetal tissue. The narration of the process focuses on the materiality of the fetus, while Dr. Ward’s silent musings raise complex questions about the beginning of human life, the value ascribed to it, and the reproductive autonomy of women:

In that boggy mess of blood and tissue were recognizable parts. They were familiar enough to be upsetting. The bottom line was this: a zygote, an embryo, a fetus, a baby – they were all human. But at what point did that human deserve legal protection? [...] Whether or not you believed a fetus was a human being, there was no question in anyone’s mind that a grown woman was one. Even if you placed moral value on that fetus, you couldn’t give it rights unless they were stripped away from the woman carrying it. Perhaps the question wasn’t *When does a fetus become a person?* but *When does a woman stop being one?* (245; emphasis original)

This passage spotlights the presence of the fetus and draws attention to its status as a contested symbol in the abortion debate. Alternately described

as a “boggy mess of blood and tissue,” “a baby,” and “a human being,” the fetus occupies a liminal position between a life-like form and a person. This liminality mirrors the broader cultural and societal ambiguities surrounding the legal and moral status of the fetus.³ It is this ambiguity that reinforces Ward’s belief that the lived reality of the patient must take precedence over the abstract idea of life. *A Spark of Light* thus underscores what scholarship on abortion has long emphasized: that the fetus, “located on a continuum that stretches from a single sex cell [...] to a newborn human infant” (Luker 4), is ambiguous, and that abortion – and the question of when life begins – is less a medical issue than a moral one. Shifting the focus from the fetus to his patient Joy, Dr. Ward attempts to navigate the complexities of personhood and rejects the notion that the fetus holds rights that outweigh those of the pregnant woman. For Dr. Ward, stripping women of their reproductive autonomy and eliding their right to bodily integrity amounts to their dehumanization because it erases their personhood and humanity.

Although the description of the abortion process is delivered in a dispassionate voice informed by clinical expertise, Dr. Ward nonetheless reflects personally on the procedure and the impact it has on him: “At the fifteen-week mark, [...] the calvarium had to be crushed to fit through a 15-millimeter cannula. As a provider, you could not unfeel that moment. And yet. Was it a person? No. It was a piece of life, but so was a sperm, an egg” (Picoult, *Spark* 244). Here, Dr. Ward asserts his position that the fetus is life-like, but he rejects the idea of personhood, which would elevate the fetus’s rights above those of the pregnant individual. At the same time, he acknowledges the reality of terminating “a piece of life” and its emotional weight. By foregrounding the presence and the materiality of the fetus and acknowledging the experience of abortion providers, the novel depicts abortion as a complex, felt process – “you could not unfeel that moment” (244) – without compromising its abortion-positive stance.

³ A similar liminality of the fetus is evoked after Beth’s self-induced abortion. The remains of her pregnancy are described as recognizably human, yet far from complete: “pink and unfinished,” with “translucent skin showing dark patches of future eyes and organs” (Picoult, *Spark* 281), the fetus is depicted as being at the threshold of life.

Dr. Ward's patient has similarly complex emotions after the procedure. While Joy feels relief, she still experiences a sense of grief: "she had gotten what she wanted, but she also felt the pain of loss, and they were not mutually exclusive" (40). Joy's acknowledgment of her emotions is significant because it challenges the binary framing of abortion experiences as either purely traumatic or entirely liberating. Instead, the novel recognizes the coexistence of conflicting emotions without undermining Joy's agency or the legitimacy of her decision. By doing so, *A Spark of Light* resists oversimplified narratives and acknowledges the deeply personal, embodied, and sometimes ambivalent nature of reproductive choices. This treatment of abortion is particularly significant in light of the erasure of the fetus in pro-choice discourse, which, as critics have pointed out, has allowed antiabortion politics to claim ownership of fetal representations (Ludlow, "No Bigger" 240). Erasure of the fetus certainly limits the stories that can be told about abortion and further contributes to its stigmatization. It also risks alienating patients and providers whose emotional and lived experiences may feel unacknowledged. By including the fetus's presence in the text and illuminating the ambivalent emotions that accompany abortion, *A Spark of Light* expands the scope of pro-choice discourse. Indeed, Ludlow insists that "prochoice discourse could be strengthened – not weakened – by attention to the material and emotional reality of the fetus" (234). The novel thus provides an example of an abortion-positive representation that foregrounds the fetus as well as the experiences of patients and caregivers.

Conclusion

Jodi Picoult's *A Spark of Light* demonstrates that popular fiction plays a significant role in dissecting pressing social and political issues. As I hope to have shown, the novel offers an important contribution to the contemporary abortion debate, potentially opening up discussions about reproductive rights. By dramatizing moral dilemmas and juxtaposing the characters' different views and convictions, it reflects the conflicts unfolding in political and public spheres while avoiding ideological

oversimplifications. Importantly, *A Spark of Light* maintains a clear emphasis on reproductive autonomy – including safe and legal access to abortion – as a fundamental right. At the same time, it does not shy away from addressing the complex corporeal and emotional realities faced by those who seek to end a pregnancy, and the challenges faced by abortion care providers. The novel not only reinforces the moral and political stakes of reproductive justice but also seeks common ground by engaging with the contradictions, struggles, and evolving viewpoints on abortion.

In her introduction to the edited collection *Representing Abortion* (2021), Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst underscores the capacity of cultural texts to challenge dominant portrayals of abortion by centering the pregnant person as the subject of the experience (1). Highlighting the crucial role of current abortion storytelling, she stresses that such “imaginative intellectual-political work reclaims images and narratives about abortion from anti-abortion rhetoric, but it also creates new images and narratives while destabilising anti-abortion attempts to fix the meaning of the fetal image” (1). *A Spark of Light* contributes to this cultural work by challenging the politicized framing of abortions, normalizing the procedure, and challenging the silence and stigmatization surrounding it. Moreover, by focusing on the materiality and the presence of the fetus instead of erasing it, the novel carves out a path to depict the contested figure of the fetus in an abortion-positive way. Following Karen Weingarten’s assertion that “novels and other forms of popular culture have the potential not only to represent but also to create material realities” (3), it could be suggested that *A Spark of Light* may reshape cultural narratives of abortion. Furthermore, bestselling works of popular fiction, such as Picoult’s novel, can reach a broad audience and foster critical engagement with the issue. In the post-*Dobbs* era, where antiabortion activism and right-wing populism threaten reproductive autonomy, the novel is certainly a timely read. It demonstrates how popular fiction can serve as a space for social and political reflection, offering readers a way to engage with the moral, legal, and personal dimensions of abortion in a nuanced and accessible way.

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