

# talking with Susan Jacoby

BY KELLY McMASTERS  
Special to Newsday

When did *old* become a dirty word? And when did the sexy sky-diving centenarian become the mascot for aging well? In "Never Say Die: The Myth and Marketing of the New Old Age" (Pantheon, \$27.95), Susan Jacoby, former Washington Post reporter and author of 10 books of nonfiction, including the bestselling "The Age of American Unreason," mixes rigorous reportage and tart-tongued criticism with memoir and history, slashing through romanticized versions of the golden years and delivering tough truths.

**You talk about marketing terms such as "real age," "young old" and "welllderly." How do you identify?**

I'm 65, and while I don't think of myself as old, I don't mind using the word. I'm certainly not middle-aged — how many 130-year-olds do you see walking around? The deadline is in sight, literally. I'm never going to be healthier or more energetic than I am today, so it is more important to do more now than it was 20 years ago.

**Old age isn't pretty. Jacoby says: Face it**

**You make the point that life after 80 is unglamorous and often, frankly, sad. Why do we want to live to 100?**

It's natural for humans to think living longer is a good thing. Real lives of the old-old are out of the picture. The media only show financially secure, healthy, happy old people — and I wrote some of those articles. People in their 50s and 60s are happier than those in their 30s and 40s, but in the 80s, happiness levels drop; you've lost your partner,

your health has declined and half of people over 85 have dementia. Look, I'd love to be the writing equivalent of Betty White. But that's just not the norm.

**We learn that 200 years ago, some townships in America auctioned off impoverished old residents to farm owners in need of workers.**

It is such a myth that Americans always respected old age. There were no provisions — only when the Social Security Act was passed was life any good. We are going to see a rise in old age poverty again. Those who are retiring and becoming old in the next 20 years are going to have a much tougher time than anticipated because of the recession — this will be a huge challenge to our society.

**The prospect of having no one to care for you as you get older is terrifying. What's the answer?**



PHOTO BY MARION EITLINGER

I can plan all I want, but if I have one wrong gene — Alzheimer's — it will be for nothing. You can plan for autonomy only as long as you have a working brain. There are a lot more people like me now than in my parents' generation, without kids or a husband. You need someone to make basic medical decisions for you and you need to put it all in writing. But this kind of planning is not easy. This requires looking the unthinkable in the face.

## An infertility tug of war that delivers

**SING YOU HOME,**  
by Jodi Picoult.  
Atria Books, 466 pp., \$28.

BY MARION WINIK  
Special to Newsday

Call me late to the party, but I just read my first Jodi Picoult novel, and it probably won't be my last. I used to think I'd rather read a months-old People magazine than one of Picoult's endless chain of bestselling "women's" novels. But it turns out she's one of those rare ultracommercial authors, like Stephen King, who really can write: not just clever, headlong plots, but also crisp, interesting sentences and realistic characters. You could do a lot worse on an airplane.

"Sing You Home" is the 17th work of fiction from the Long Island prodigy who constructs stories around controversial current issues that raise intense moral dilemmas for her characters and, by extension, her readers. The latest maneuvers four causes celebres — gay rights, the controversy over the beginning of life, the clash between religion and



**"Sing You Home" is Jodi Picoult's 17th work of fiction.**

politics, the erosion of privacy — like giant cruise ships into one small harbor.

Here's how it's done: Music therapist Zoe Baxter and her husband, a landscaper/recovering alcoholic/surfer named Max, are trying to have a baby. Infertility issues have driven them to high-tech solutions, but Zoe keeps miscarrying. She's obsessed with getting pregnant, and Max can't deal with it anymore: "Our sex life had become like Thanksgiving dinner with a dysfunctional family — something you have to show up for, even though you're not really having a good time." The marriage crumbles.

Out on his own, Max relapses

into alcoholism, but then finds Jesus and moves in with his born-again brother and sister-in-law. Zoe is hired by a school counselor named Vanessa to work with a troubled teenager, then is shocked to find herself falling in love for the first time with a woman. (The religious conversion is as lame as the lesbian one is enthralling.) Zoe and Vanessa cross the Rhode Island-Massachusetts border to marry, then decide to reclaim Zoe's remaining embryos so they can have a baby.

But they need Max's permission, and Max is now the pawn

of a high-profile leader of the religious right. He wants to get the embryos and give them to his brother, who has the same infertility issues he does. The whole group ends up in court, along with the lawyers, the media and a cascade of plot twists. Both Zoe and Max have secrets that won't be secret much longer.

At first, I could almost hear the dramatic machinery whirring but soon found myself swept up by the voices of the three rotating narrators — Max, Zoe and Vanessa. Picoult is trying to make you think, but she also wants to make you laugh, as in the scene where Zoe and Vanessa imagine a silly sequel to "Romeo and Juliet" ("Romeo grows a mullet and becomes addicted to online poker").

I felt no need to listen to the CD that comes with the book, including a song for each chapter performed by a singer-songwriter friend of the author's. I can't stand this sort of thing, and I can't say my mind was changed when I listened after all.

Or maybe I'd just had enough mind-changing for one day.

**LOCAL AUTHOR**  
Picoult grew up in Nesconset

## this week

Readings & events on LI

### Monday

**Kathleen Collins** discusses her book "Watching What We Eat: The Evolution of Television Cooking Shows" (Continuum). At 7 p.m., *Sachem Public Library, 150 Holbrook Rd., Holbrook; 631-588-5024, sachemlibrary.org*

**Steven Rattner** reads from "Overhaul: An Insider's Account of the Obama Administration's Emergency Rescue of the Auto Industry" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). At 7:30 p.m., *Great Neck Library, 159 Bayview Ave.; 516-466-8055, greatnecklibrary.org*



### Wednesday

**Rocker Sammy Hagar** signs copies of "Red: My Uncensored Life in Rock" (It Books). At 7 p.m., *Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com*



### Friday

Merrick author **Jen Calonita** reads from her young adult book "There's No Place Like Home" (Poppy). At 4 p.m., *Merrick Library, 2279 Merrick Ave.; 516-377-6112, merricklibrary.org*



### Saturday

**Frank Brady** discusses his book "Endgame: Bobby Fischer's Remarkable Rise and Fall — From America's Brightest Prodigy to the Edge of Madness" (Crown). At 1 p.m., *Mineola Memorial Library, 195 Marcellus Rd.; 516-746-8488, nassaulibrary.org/mineola*