

House Rules: A Novel

By Jodi Picoult

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The astonishing novel from the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Jodi Picoult about a young boy with autism falsely accused of murder.

When your son can't look you in the eye...does that mean he's guilty?

Jacob Hunt is a teen with Asperger's syndrome. He's hopeless at reading social cues or expressing himself well to others, though he is brilliant in many ways. But he has a special focus on one subject—forensic analysis. A police scanner in his room clues him in to crime scenes, and he's always showing up and telling the cops what to do. And he's usually right.

But when Jacob's small hometown is rocked by a terrible murder, law enforcement comes to him. Jacob's behaviors are hallmark Asperger's, but they look a lot like guilt to the local police. Suddenly the Hunt family, who only want to fit in, are directly in the spotlight. For Jacob's mother, Emma, it's a brutal reminder of the intolerance and misunderstanding that always threaten her family. For his brother, Theo, it's another indication why nothing is normal because of Jacob.

And over this small family, the soul-searing question looms: Did Jacob commit murder?

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A Conversation with Author Jodi Picoult



Q: How did you first decide upon Asperger's Syndrome as the focus for this novel?

A: I have a cousin who's autistic. Several times, my aunt found herself in a public place trying to control one of his meltdowns--and people who didn't understand why she was restraining him contacted authorities and made allegations of abuse. As he got older, and moved into a group home, his frustrations became more intense because of his size--he'd break in windows with his fist, for example--and several times the police were called. It got me thinking that the legal system works really well, if you communicate a certain way. But if you don't, it all goes to Hell in a handbasket really quickly. A lot of the hallmark behaviors of autism--flat affect, stimming, not looking someone in the eye--could very easily be misinterpreted as signs of guilt.

Q: You have been known to do extensive research about the topics in your books. What was the research process like for this novel?

A: In addition to meeting with attorneys to get the legal information accurate, I met with six teens with Asperger's, and their parents--face to face. Even though some of the kids were very awkward in a direct setting, I needed to experience that to understand how the rest of the world would feel coming in contact with Jacob. But kids with Asperger's, who are so smart, shine when you let them answer questions on paper. So another 35 teens and their parents answered lengthy questionnaires for me about themselves, their reactions to situations, their lives, their hopes, their frustrations. It made for some incredible reading, and many of their direct experiences wound up in Jacob's life. One of these young women with Asperger's Syndrome was so detailed in her writing and so open about her experiences that she volunteered to help me further. She read the manuscript for accuracy and told me, based on Jacob's voice, what seemed consistent and what, in her opinion, Jacob would never say or do. The last bit of research I did was incredibly fun--I shadowed a CSI for a week. I got to learn blood spatter analysis, to do presumptive semen tests, to check out crime scenes, and to observe an autopsy. It was fascinating!

Q: When your central characters are in a real-life situation that affects so many people around the world--in this case, dealing with the effects of Asperger's Syndrome and autism on a family--is there more pressure on you as the author to "get it right"?

A: It doesn't really matter whether it's Asperger's or a rape victim or a cancer patient--when research subjects open up to me with such honesty I ALWAYS feel a responsibility to "get it right."

Q: If you could say one thing to the families who are dealing with the effects of having an autistic child, what would it be?

A: That you're not alone--and that, hopefully, more and more people will come to understand that a child who's "different from" is not one who is "lesser than."

Q: In a previous interview, you referred to your novels taking part in a long line of "moral and ethical fiction." When you first began writing, did you have the intention of using your work as a springboard for conversation about moral and ethical issues? Or did that come later on?

A: I think I started gravitating toward that sort of niche as I kept writing. I have always written about subjects that engage me--questions I can't answer myself. They apparently tend to be big moral and ethical issues! But I never lose sight of the fact that before I was a writer, I was a teacher. I still am. My classroom's just gotten a little bigger.

Q: *House Rules* is your seventeenth novel. Do you feel your writing has changed since your first novel? If so, was it an intentional change, or is it something you've noticed over time?

A: I think my writing has become "cleaner." By that I mean that technically I've improved--I might turn a metaphor in five words now, where years ago, it would have taken me a paragraph. I can't say it was intentional--but you know what they say about practice making perfect…!

Q: Why did you choose to end the book when you did, rather than going into what happens to the characters in the aftermath of the trial?

A: Because at heart, this is Jacob's book. And remember, to Jacob, there was never any real mystery here, was there?

Q: Could you talk for a moment about Emma's character and her struggles throughout the book? You've said that your characters' voices come to you, that they take on a life of their own. Did you find yourself agreeing with Emma's choices as the novel progressed?

A: I think Emma is a very typical, very overwhelmed mom. A lot of the moms of autistic kids I met are so consumed with being their child's advocate that there's no room for anything else--least of all themselves. It's why so many marriages end in divorce, when a child is diagnosed on the spectrum. Emma's journey in this book is one of unwinding--allowing herself to define herself as more than just Jacob's mother, because that's been completely eroded by his autism.

Q: If the main characters in this novel had favorite books, what do you think they would be?

A: What a great question! I think Jacob's would be, clearly, anything written by Dr. Henry Lee. Oliver would love *Presumed Innocent* by Turow--it's probably why he decided to go to law school. Theo would read Vonnegut. He wouldn't understand Vonnegut, but he'd think it's the kind of thing a rebel would read. Rich--I think he's a closet softy, the kind of guy who's got a dog-eared copy of *The Sun Also Rises* in his nightstand. And dare I hope that Emma reads Jodi Picoult novels?

Q: Could you give us a glimpse into your next project?

A: *Sing You Home*, the 2011 book, is the story of Zoe Baxter, who has spent ten years trying to get pregnant. After multiple miscarriages and infertility issues, it looks like her dream is about to come true--she is seven months pregnant. But a terrible turn of events takes away the baby she has already fallen for; and breaks apart her marriage to Max. In the aftermath, she throws herself into her career as a music therapist--using music clinically to soothe burn victims in a hospital; to help Alzheimer's patients connect with the present; to provide solace for hospice patients. When Vanessa--a guidance counselor--asks her to work with a suicidal teen, their relationship moves from business to friendship and then, to Zoe's surprise, blossoms into love.

When Zoe allows herself to start thinking of having a family, again, she remembers that there are still frozen embryos that were never used by herself and Max.

Meanwhile, Max has found peace at the bottom of a bottle--until he is redeemed by an evangelical church, whose charismatic pastor--Clive Lincoln--has vowed to fight the "homosexual agenda" that has threatened traditional family values in America. But this mission becomes personal for Max, when Zoe and her same-sex partner say they want permission to raise his unborn child.

Sing You Home explores what it means to be gay in today's world, and how reproductive science has outstripped the legal system. Are embryos people or property? What challenges do same-sex couples face when it comes to marriage and adoption? What happens when religion and sexual orientation--two issues that are supposed to be justice-blind--enter the courtroom? And most importantly, what constitutes a "traditional family" in today's day and age?

Also--in a very unique move--readers will get to literally hear Zoe Baxter's voice. I am collaborating with Ellen Wilber, a dear friend who is also a very talented musician, to create a CD of original songs, which will correspond to each of the chapters. This CD will be packaged with each hardcover book. So--literally--stay tuned!

From Publishers Weekly
Perennial bestseller Picoult (*Handle with Care*) has a rough time in this Picoult-esque blend of medical and courtroom drama that lacks her usual storytelling finesse. Eighteen-year old Jacob Hunt has Asperger's syndrome, and his devoted single mother, Emma, has built their family's life around Jacob's needs, sacrificing her career to act as his caregiver and all but ignoring a younger son, Theo. But when Jacob is accused of murder, that carefully crafted life comes apart, and all of the hallmarks of Jacob's diagnosis begin to make him look guilty. Emma hires a young attorney whose attachment to Jacob brings him close to the family as he struggles to mount a defense for Jacob, whose inability to read social cues makes him less than an ideal client. While Picoult's research is impeccable and she deals intelligently with charged questions about autism and Asperger's, the whodunit is stretched sitcom-thin and handled poorly, with characters withholding information from the reader throughout. Picoult's writing, line by line, is as smooth as ever, and she does a great job of getting into Jacob's head, but the wobbly plotting is a massive detriment. *(Mar.)*
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From Bookmarks Magazine
Picoult has a formula, and it usually succeeds. As in her other novels, Picoult tells Jacob's story from multiple perspectives, weaves together complex subplots, and builds suspense in a final courtroom drama. Although House Rules fits into her general schemata, critics diverged somewhat in their reviews. Most praised Picoult's handling of character and grasp on what, exactly, daily life looks like for those suffering from Asperger's. A few, however, cited forced subplots and a predictable conclusion, which diminished their enthusiasm for this whodunit. But Picoult's superb, compassionate portrayal of Jacob will keep most readers engaged the whole way through--even as they struggle to overlook the author's formulaic storytelling.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Don Numbers:

Why don't make it to become your habit? Right now, try to ready your time to do the important act, like looking for your favorite book and reading a publication. Beside you can solve your condition; you can add your knowledge by the reserve entitled House Rules: A Novel. Try to the actual book House Rules: A Novel as your good friend. It means that it can to get your friend when you sense alone and beside that of course make you smarter than ever before. Yeah, it is very fortuned for yourself. The book makes you a lot more confidence because you can know every thing by the book. So , let me make new experience in addition to knowledge with this book.

Alma Medina:

Book is to be different for each and every grade. Book for children till adult are different content. As it is known to us that book is very important for us. The book House Rules: A Novel ended up being making you to know about other information and of course you can take more information. It is quite advantages for you. The guide House Rules: A Novel is not only giving you far more new information but also being your friend when you really feel bored. You can spend your spend time to read your guide. Try to make relationship with the book House Rules: A Novel. You never feel lose out for everything when you read some books.

Joe Dix:

The publication untitled House Rules: A Novel is the publication that recommended to you you just read. You can see the quality of the book content that will be shown to an individual. The language that publisher use to explained their ideas are easily to understand. The copy writer was did a lot of analysis when write the book, so the information that they share to you personally is absolutely accurate. You also can get the e-book of House Rules: A Novel from the publisher to make you considerably more enjoy free time.

April Harry:

A number of people said that they feel uninterested when they reading a publication. They are directly felt the item when they get a half regions of the book. You can choose the actual book House Rules: A Novel to make your personal reading is interesting. Your own skill of reading skill is developing when you including reading. Try to choose basic book to make you enjoy to study it and mingle the feeling about book and reading through especially. It is to be very first opinion for you to like to open up a book and learn it. Beside that the book House Rules: A Novel can to be a newly purchased friend when you're truly feel alone and confuse with the information must you're doing of the time.

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