***House Rules***  
*Jodi Picoult, 2010*  
*Simon & Schuster*  
*532 pp.*  
*ISBN-13: 9780743296441*  
  
 **Summary**    
Jacob Hunt is a teenage boy with Asperger's syndrome. He's hopeless at reading social cues or expressing himself well to others, and like many kids with AS, Jacob has a special focus on one subject—in his case, forensic analysis.  
  
He's always showing up at crime scenes, thanks to the police scanner he keeps in his room, and telling the cops what they need to do...and he's usually right.  
  
But then his town is rocked by a terrible murder and, for a change, the police come to Jacob with questions. All of the hallmark behaviors of Asperger's—not looking someone in the eye, stimulatory tics and twitches, flat affect— can look a lot like guilt to law enforcement personnel.

Suddenly, Jacob and his family, who only want to fit in, feel the spotlight shining directly on them. For his 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 of why nothing is normal because of Jacob. And over this small family the soul-searing question looms: Did Jacob commit murder?

Emotionally powerful from beginning to end, *House Rules* looks at what it means to be different in our society, how autism affects a family, and how our legal system works well for people who communicate a certain way—and fails those who don't.

Good schools, solid values and a healthy real estate market. It’s the kind of place where parents are involved in their children’s lives–coaching sports. (*From the publisher*.)

**Author Bio**  
• Birth—May 19, 1966  
• Where—Nesconset (Long Island), New York, USA  
• Education—B.A., Princeton University; M.Ed., Harvard University  
• Currently—lives in Hanover, New Hampshire  
  
  
Jodi Lynn Picoult is an American author. She was awarded the New England Bookseller Award for fiction in 2003. Picoult currently has approximately 14 million copies of her books in print worldwide.  
  
**Early life and education**  
Picoult was born and raised in Nesconset on Long Island in New York State; when she was 13, her family moved to New Hampshire. Even as a child, Picoult had a penchant for writing stories: she wrote her first story— "The Lobster Which Misunderstood"—when she was five.  
  
While still in college—she studied writing at Princeton University—Picoult published two short stories in *Seventeen* magazine. To pay the bills, after graduation she worked at a variety of jobs, including copy writing and editing textbooks; she even taught eighth-grade English and attained a Masters in Education from Harvard University.  
  
In 1989, Picoult married Timothy Warren Van Leer, whom she met in college, and while pregnant with their first child, wrote her first book. *Song of the Humpbacked Whale*, her literary debut, came out in 1992. Two more children followed, as did a string of bestseller novels. All told, Picoult has more than 20 books to her name.  
  
**Writing**  
At an earlier time in her life, Picoult believed the tranquility of family life in small-town New England offered little fodder for writing; the truly interesting stuff of fiction happened elsewhere. Ironically, it is small-town life that has ended up providing the settings for Picoult's novels. Within the cozy surroundings of family and friends, Picoult weaves complex webs of relationships that strain, even tear apart, under stress. She excels at portraying ordinary people who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances. Disoriented by some accident of chance, they stumble, whirl, and attempt to regain a footing in what was once their calm, ordered world.  
  
Nor has Picoult ever shied from tackling difficult, controversial issues: school shooting, domestic violence, sexual abuse, teen suicide, and racism. She approaches painful topics with sympathy—and her characters with respect—while shining a light on individual struggles. Her legions of readers have loved and rewarded her for that compassion—and her novels have been consistent bestsellers.  
  
**Personal life**  
Picoult and her husband Timothy live in Hanover, New Hampshire. They have three children and a handful of pets. (*Adapted from a 2003 Barnes and Noble interview and from Wikipedia. Retrieved 9/28/2016*.)

**Book Reviews**   
Throughout the long unfolding of House Rules, Picoult keeps so many storyline streamers whirling in the air that it would be easy just to praise her technical mastery. But though the multiple plots and narrators are, indeed, adroitly managed, what most readers will cherish is the character of Jacob Hunt, an 18-year-old high school student with Asperger's syndrome.… Picoult's depiction of Jacob and his family is complex, compassionate and smart…. But, again, it's Jacob who will linger with readers. Desperate to connect with other people and yet hampered in his ability to do so, he is painfully glassed off from the world of his peers, as well as from most adults. Picoult's superb novel makes us inhabit Jacob's solitude and abide his yearning.  
***Maureen Corrigan - Washington Post***

Picoult is a skilled wordsmith, and she beautifully creates situations that not only provoke the mind but touch the flawed souls in all of us.  
***Boston Globe***

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.   
***Publishers Weekly***

The prolific Picoult crafts a cunning whodunit that explores what it's like to be not only a teenager with Aspberger's syndrome but also as an AS kid accused of murder.... Faithful Picoult fans will whisk this off the shelves, but devoted readers of savvy courtroom dramas should also give it a try— *Carol Haggas*  
***Booklist***

A young autistic man obsessed with criminology is charged with the murder of his tutor, in Picoult's suspenseful but anticlimactic latest (*Handle with Care*, 2009, etc.). Jacob, now 18, first exhibited signs of Asperger's syndrome at three, shortly after his first vaccination series. Highly verbal and analytical, but flummoxed by the most ordinary social interactions, Jacob negotiates a world fraught with terrors by adhering to a rigid set of rules and calming rituals. Jacob's life centers around a CSI-esque TV show called *CrimeBusters*, which he must watch each afternoon as punctiliously as Rain Man watches Wapner. Usually, Jacob beats the CrimeBusters cast to a solution of each episode's mystery by about 20 minutes. He's created his own forensics lab in his bedroom, and, alerted by a police scanner, has snuck out at night to "crash" crime scenes in his small Vermont hometown. His mother, Emma, is a financially struggling, part-time advice columnist. Jacob's father fled the chaotic household after Jacob knocked his younger brother Theo's highchair over, wounding the infant. Theo, now 15, resents the oxygen sucked out of his family life by Jacob and, yearning to observe "normal" domesticity, has begun breaking into homes. Circumstances converge, resulting in the death, from blunt head trauma, of Jacob's tutor, Jess, a college student. Theo enters a home where, unbeknownst to him, Jess is housesitting, and flees after surprising her in the shower. Her loutish boyfriend Mark had been observed quarreling with her earlier. Jacob, arriving for an appointment with Jess, finds her body and expertly sets up a crime scene to focus suspicion on Mark. The body of Jess is discovered in a culvert, and, on the pretext of seeking his advice, a police detective interrogates Jacob, who handily incriminates himself, even reciting his own Miranda Rights from memory. Emma hires a rookie attorney who gamely cobbles together a defense, with Jacob's coaching. Worth the read for the detailed dramatization of Asperger's; however, like Jacob, the reader will solve this whodunit far in advance of the principals.   
***Kirkus Reviews***

**Discussion Questions**   
1. "My mother will tell you Jacob’s not violent, but I am living proof that she’s kidding herself" (p.11).   
As with many of Jodi Picoult’s previous novels *House Rules* is written from the perspective of several different characters, each taking turns to narrate a chapter. Why do you think Picoult favours this narrative device, considering the nature of her stories? Is it a successful technique?

2. Jacob’s meltdown give the reader many clues into what Emma’s like is like taking care of Jacob. What does it tell us about Emma and her personality?

3. (p. 20) Jacob says, “Why would I want to be friends with kids who are nasty to people like me anyway?” What does this tell us about Jacob?

4. (p.20) There are 12 things listed that Jacob can’t stand. Do you see his logic? We all have things we could put into such a list. What would yours be?

5. The rules of the house are listed on page 21. Do they seem appropriate or unusual? Would they be rules that would work in your house? Why should a rule that works in one situation not work in another? (p 75) "If a bully taunts him and I tell him it’s all right to reciprocated….why shouldn’t he do the same with a teacher who humiliates him in public?" Discuss.

6. Theo is the younger brother but he has to take care of Jacob. How does Theo handle the conflict of his position in the family? Do you agree that he has it "worse than Jacob" (p.107)?

7. Asperger’s Syndrome is a relatively new term. Do you know someone who has been diagnosed with AS? Have you read any other books that deal with autism as a theme, or that depict autistic characters? How does House Rules compare? Does autism make good subject material and, if so, why? What challenges does AS pose in the telling of a story? How well does Jodi Picoult deal with those challenges?

8. Theo breaks into houses and Jacob saves the Christmas cards. Both boys are trying to have the same thing—what they consider to be a real home. What makes their home not a “real” home to them? What do they want?

9. (p. 146) Jacob says being on the other side of dead isn’t that different from having Asperger’s. What do you think he means by that?

10. The evidence points to Mark as a suspect. He claims he’s innocent. What does Emma see on the news that changes everything? How would you react? Would you call the police?

11. "I’m new to practicing criminal law, period, but I don’t tell her that" (p.231). Is it fair of Oliver to take on Jacob’s case, considering his inexperience? Does he prove himself a good lawyer? How might he have done things differently?

12. Mark Maguire perceives AS as a "Get Out of Jail Free card" (p.285), whereas a defender general observes that "Vermont’s decidedly crappy when it comes to psychiatric care for inmates" (p.231) and Neurodiversity Nation believes ‘neurotypicals’ are trying to "destroy diversity" for autistic people (p.321). Who is closest to the truth? What kind of social provisions are made for Jacob at home, at school and in the wider community? Are they excessive, inadequate or inappropriate?

13. Who is a better brother, Jacob or Theo?

14. Oliver makes a request for accommodations for Jacob in court. Do they seem fair? The first 5 minutes of the trial show the constant vigilance needed to keep Jacob from having a meltdown and how much Emma does know about her son. Discuss.

15. Emma’s been a single mom for about 15 years. She doesn’t appreciate her ex-husband showing up. Would you? How does she change later?

16. (p. 454) Jacob’s concept: "The concept of Asperger’s is like a flavoring added to a person and although my concentration is higher than those of others, if tested everyone would have traces of this condition too." Discuss.

17. Look again at the novel’s opening passage, and at some chapter endings. What literary devices does Jodi Picoult employ to arrest your attention and keep it engaged? Consider how Picoult has crafted this novel. How might it be different without certain plot elements, such as Jacob’s love of forensics or Emma’s single mother status, or Oliver’s professional inexperience? Does Jodi Picoult deserve her reputation as a "master plotter"?

18. "I can smell my mother…my knees give with relief, with the knowledge that I have not faded away after all" (p.241).   
How would you describe Jacob’s ability to feel emotion and relate to people — particularly Emma, Theo and Jess? Is he capable of love, despite his AS?

19. In her acknowledgements, Jodi Picoult reveals that when researching House Rules "I spoke with numerous people who have personal experience with Asperger’s syndrome’ (p.viii). How important is this sort of authentication for a work of fiction?

20. How does Picoult deal with the highly contentious issue of autism and childhood vaccinations? What are her responsibilities, if any, to present a balanced view?

21. How do you think you might have voted if you were on Jacob’s jury? Why do you think Jodi Picoult omits the verdict from the end of the book? Is it a good ending?

22. "I think I might be dead. I make this deduction from the following facts…" (p.216). "Oliver…spoke to me in the language of nature. That’s all I’ve ever wanted: to be as organic as…the spiral of a shell" (p.241) What did you make of Jacob’s narrative? Does his account differ to the others’? Did it help you get to "know" Jacob, and to understand his Asperger’s?

23. "Who…hasn’t felt marginalized at some point? Who hasn’t felt like they don’t belong?’ (p.252).

24. Rich’s empathy for Jacob is based on "the things that, against all odds, we have in common" (p.254). Do you agree that you have to feel a connection with someone to empathise with him/her? How did you engage with this book emotionally, and whom did you empathise with most? Which bits did you find most moving — the domestic back-story, or the dramatic present?

25. House Rules is intersected with real-life criminal case studies. What do they bring to the novel? What did you make of "Case 11: My Brother’s Keeper" and the "I" that appears on the book’s final page? Who is this "I"? Does it change your understanding of what came before? Does it change your view of the "house rules"?

26. Did you ever suspect Jacob? Or Theo? When did you guess what had happened to Jess? Did you enjoy the story’s detective elements?

27. "You’re either a father twenty-four/seven or not at all" (p.448). Is Emma’s admonishment of Henry fair? What does *House Rules* have to say about parenthood and its responsibilities?

28. Many of Jodi Picoult’s novels pivot on a court case or legal dispute. What does the legal contention in *House Rules* lend to the book? How might it be different without it?

29. Who are the "baddies" in House Rules? Who are the "goodies" and the victims? Who tells the truth? Whose rules are best? Does the book challenge our idea of right and wrong and of legal justice?

30. "We’ve always said that Asperger’s isn’t a disability…just a different ability" (p.265). What did you know about autism and AS before reading House Rules? Did the novel challenge your views on the subject, or on disability more generally? Is it an educational book?  
(*Questions from the author's website*.)