



# Jodi Picoult

## Book club discussion questions

### House Rules

1. 'My mother will tell you Jacob's not violent, but I am living proof that she's kidding herself' (p.11).
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. (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?
5. (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?

6. 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.
7. 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)?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. (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?
11. 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?

12. '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?
13. 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?
14. Who is a better brother, Jacob or Theo?
15. 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.
16. 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?
17. (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.
18. 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'?

19. 'I can smell my mother ... my knees give with relief, with the knowledge that I have not faded away after all' (p.241).
20. 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?
21. 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?
22. 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?
23. 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?
24. 'I think I might be dead.'
25. 'I make this deduction from the following facts...' (p.216).
26. '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)

27. 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?
28. 'Who ... hasn't felt marginalized at some point? Who hasn't felt like they don't belong?' (p.252).
29. 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?
30. 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"?
31. Did you ever suspect Jacob? Or Theo? When did you guess what had happened to Jess? Did you enjoy the story's detective elements?
32. "'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?
33. 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?

34. 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?
35. "'We've always said that Asperger's isn't a disability ... just a different ability'" (p.265).
36. 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?