

Introduction

Life in the Hunt family is not exactly easy. Emma's eldest son, Jacob, has Asperger's Syndrome and lives a life driven by routine. Certain meals must be prepared on certain days, certain television shows much be watched at certain times, and all change must be planned for weeks in advance. Any unannounced break from the routine could send Jacob into a panic.

Like many other kids with AS, Jacob has a fixation on a particular subject—in his case, forensic science. Jacob keeps a police scanner in his room and likes to show up at crime scenes, providing analysis of the situation to stunned police officers—and, Jacob's analysis is usually correct. But when his social skills tutor is found dead, the police turn their attention to Jacob. He is ultimately arrested and charged with murder, and he has to stand trial to prove his innocence.

Due to Asperger's Syndrome, Jacob has trouble making eye contact and has constant tics and twitches, which seem suspicious to law officers and a jury. Jacob knows he is innocent, but he can't seem to make anyone around him understand.

In *House Rules*, bestselling author Jodi Picoult explores how a family deals with the effects of autism, and how those who communicate differently are challenged by a justice system that will not accommodate them.

Discussion Questions

1. *House Rules* is narrated by five characters: Emma, Jacob and Theo Hunt, lawyer Oliver Bond, and Detective Rich Matson. How do each of these characters bring a different perspective to the novel? How would the reading experience have been different if one of the narrators' perspectives was removed from the novel?
2. How do you feel about Jacob's initial decision to cover up Jess's death and falsely implicate Mark Maguire? Do you think he was fully aware of the consequences of his actions from the beginning? If not, is there a point in the novel where he begins to realize the enormity of what he's done?
3. "*I don't get into trouble because rules are what keep me sane. . . . I do what I'm told; I just wish everyone else would do it, too.*" Discuss what an ideal world for Jacob would be like. Other than a strict adherence to the rules, what values do you think Jacob would like for others to hold as strongly as he does?
4. Emma maintains that she loves both of her sons equally, although she acknowledges that most of her time and attention is taken up by Jacob. What are your feelings regarding the way Emma treats Theo? Do you hold her or Jacob accountable for letting Theo go unnoticed and friendless to the point of breaking into other people's homes? Why or why not?
5. "*It's wrong, I know that. But all the same, I go inside.*" Discuss Theo's hobby of breaking into and stealing from other people's houses. What are his reasons for doing so, and what does he gain from these experiences—other than a few cups of tea and a video game he can't use?
6. "*It's a room with no windows and no doors, and walls that are thin enough for me to see and hear everything but too thick to break through. I'm there, but I'm not there. I am pounding to be*

let out, but nobody can hear me.” Children with Asperger’s Syndrome can have what Emma refers to as an “autistic meltdown,” where they are helpless to their sudden, overwhelming panic. This quote describes how Jacob feels when he has entered this state. Discuss the range of emotions Emma feels during Jacob’s meltdowns. Do her feelings differ when they are in public as opposed to when they are in private?

7. After seeing Jacob’s rainbow quilt on the news, Emma describes herself as feeling “caught between what you want and what you should do” (159). Ultimately, she decides to call Detective Matson and bring Jacob down to the police station. Do you think Emma does the right thing? What do you think she is trying to accomplish by doing so?

8. How does Theo’s interaction with his father in San Francisco change his attitude toward Henry? Why does he erupt into laughter when Henry offers him a few twenty-dollar bills? Is the short trip also a turning point for Emma? If so, how?

9. Henry plays a significant role in the novel, even if he didn’t play a significant role in Jacob and Theo’s lives prior to the trial. Yet despite his importance, the author does not grant him the opportunity to narrate a single chapter from his point of view. Why do you think this is?

10. “...if I can convince a suspect I’m the second coming of his long-dead grandma and the only way to salvation is to confess to me, so be it.” The delicate balance between right and wrong is a balance Jodi Picoult often explores in her novels. Detective Matson may be the perfect example. Take a look at some of his actions throughout the novel. Can any of them be considered absolutely right or absolutely wrong? Or do they all fall into the gray area in between? Ultimately, what is your group’s verdict on him? Is he a “good cop” or a “bad cop”?

11. Emma and Oliver come together romantically when they are both in times of distress; Emma is drained from the trial and a lifetime of trying to protect her son, and Oliver is frightened and insecure about his competence as a lawyer. Do you think their relationship will last past the trial? What are some of the obstacles they face, and how might they overcome them?

12. Oliver has to fight for the accommodations necessary to give Jacob a fair trial. In your opinion, whose responsibility is it to ensure each suspect is given this fair trial? Ultimately, do you think Jacob receives the fair trial he deserves?

13. Discuss how the balance of honesty versus deception is played out in the novel. Which characters are willing to compromise honesty to get what they want? Are any of the characters *not* willing to compromise honesty, no matter what the cost?

14. The final case study in the book—“Case 11: My Brother’s Keeper”—outlines the events that occurred in the course of the novel. It ends with a single line: “*I’d do it all over again.*” Does this line reveal anything new about Jacob? Does it change your feelings toward him in any way?

Reading Group Enhancers

1. Learn more about Asperger’s Syndrome and autism by visiting the Autism Society of

America's Web site.

2. Emma mentions that she had to fight for Jacob's Individualized Education Program (IEP), just like she and Oliver had to fight for Jacob's accommodations in the courtroom. Research the availability of IEPs in your state. What is the process for obtaining one?

3. There are many ways to help children with Asperger's Syndrome and autism, whether by volunteering your time or donating money to research programs.

4. Emma prepares gluten-free, casein-free (GFCF) meals for Jacob because she believes this type of diet helps him function. Research what foods can be consumed on this type of diet, and try to plan a day's worth of GFCF meals. Discuss with the group what it would be like to suddenly make this dietary switch in your own family.

5. If your group is interested in learning more about Jodi Picoult's upcoming projects, try following her on Facebook, Twitter, or her website.