

*House Rules, by Jodi Piccoult*

Review for MFC Book Club written by Kimberly Mach

What is it like living in an autistic world? How would you cope if you couldn't bear the touch of cloth against your skin? What if the sound of crinkling paper was amplified and literally grated on your nerves? Most people are simply bothered by these things, but an autistic person may become overwhelmed by the extra stimulation. It is difficult to imagine how debilitating and all-encompassing life with autism can be.

The MFC book club met recently to discuss the novel *House Rules*, by Jodi Piccoult, which featured as its main character a young man with Asperger's Syndrome, a specific type of autism. In the book, the young man, Jacob, is accused of murder. It is a compelling story, but we found ourselves discussing mostly what we had learned about autism, and living with autism, from Jacob's character.

When the voices of Jacob's brother and mother speak, the reader at once understands how autism, like any other condition, impacts the entire family. Meals are designed around colored days of the week, driving routes are rerouted, and the cost of medicine and treatment sinks the family nearly into debt. There is no member of the family that is immune to the struggles and the prejudices Jacob faces. What touches Jacob touches every one he loves. The title, House Rules, refers to the rules the mother set up for her two sons, rules of respect, honor, and unity that help all three of them in times of crises. One of the most important rules is 'take care of your brother, he's the only one you've got.' This is a rule Jacob follows to a fault because rules give Jacob, and many others with autism, structure and security. They help him to live in a world that is not Asperger-friendly.

In addition to learning about autism, we also found an important lesson nesting in this book shown to us by the characters who were meeting Jacob for the first time. It was a lesson on judging others, a lesson as humans we seem bound and determined to repeat. Those characters who were new to Jacob and his family judged first and asked questions later. Those who took the time to ask and listen found out that many of their first impressions were wrong. Perhaps Jacob wasn't antisocial after all; perhaps it was one of the effects of his Asperger's. Jacob did not often look people in the eye when speaking to them, not even his own mother. It was not out of guilt or shyness that he did this, but, in Jacob's words, rather because the sensation of looking into another person's eyes was too powerful, too overwhelming for him to bear. He turned his head to protect himself. One could wrongly assume a character behaving that way may have something to hide.

We don't really know what life is like for another person, especially one with autism, and maybe we shouldn't be too quick to judge. The world would be a much kinder place if we took the time to get to know each other, for we all have issues, some of them categorized and defined, and some not. Read House Rules, by Jodi Piccoult, and let us know what you think.

Our next book club discussion will be May 1 at 7 pm. We will be discussing *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* by Laura Hillenbrand. Pick up a copy at one of our local libraries and join us. Who knows what realizations and lessons you may find between the pages of our next book.