

From Narrative to Record: Neurodivergence and Legal Memory in Jodi Picoult's *House Rules*

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Abstract: *Disability Studies has recently gained prominence in cultural studies with the view to establishing a society free from preconceived notions concerning physical disabilities in general and cognitive disabilities in particular. Jodi Picoult's House Rules portrays how Jacob, a 17-year-old boy diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, navigates the legal system constructed by the rigid norms and binaries such as normal/abnormal and ability/disability. The paper presents House Rules as a counter-narrative archive, exposing the stigmatizing perceptions of the legal system, a powerful institutional archive that fails to acknowledge the neurological variation. Furthermore, it is complicated by the fact that autistic memories are effaced within the ableist society in order to maintain the supremacy of order and ability. Algorithmic forms of evaluation draw no attention to the cognitive requirements of Jacob, such as a serene state with minimal sensory stimulation. Viewing this novel through the lens of the social model of disability, the research paper advocates inclusiveness when addressing the sensitive memories of the whole autistic community. House Rules seeks to re-examine the socially attributed values imposed on Jacob in order to subvert the biased notions of legal and cultural archives, thereby fostering a healthy environment for individuals with disabilities.*

Keywords: *Asperger's syndrome; Legal Memory; Neurodivergence, Social Model Disability and Counter-narrative archive.*

1. INTRODUCTION: Medical Background

A brief Introduction: Autism Spectrum Disorder, a neurologically cognitive disorder often characterized by impaired communication, inconsistent social interactions and Echolalia. Asperger's syndrome was initially diagnosed as a separate medical condition; however, at present, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), 5th edition, published by the American Psychiatric Association, mentions that individuals diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome may receive the same medical interventions as autistic individuals do.

2. ANALYSIS

The conflicting trial between Jacob's subjectivity (Narrative) and the Ableist legal system (Record)

Addressing the complexities of cognitive disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, within an ableist society requires a robust legal framework that facilitates their everyday needs, such as food, accommodation, medical interventions, travel, procurement of AI tools and education. This research paper aims to advocate for the framework SPACE to accommodate the five autistic requirements through Jodi Picoult's *House Rules*. SPACE stands for Sensory needs, Predictability, Acceptance, Communication, and Empathy. The paper argues that the legal framework fails to account for cognitive differences on account of its intense predilection for linear narratives, emotional coherence, and procedural uniformity. The SPACE for Jacob is often excluded from legal calculations, thereby leading to a fragile equilibrium in the Hunt's family. Not only does *House Rules* portray the constrained agency of Jacob and his mother, Emma's minimal prospects of resolution, but it also depicts how cultural archive (discourse) governs Henry and his

ideologies about Autism Spectrum Disorder, leading him to familial disinvestment. *House Rules* attempts to challenge the ableist legal framework, effacing Jacob's lived experiences and his requirements.

This research paper is grounded in the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault's Discourse Analysis and Panopticism.

Foucault's Discourse Analysis is considered a significant methodological framework within Disability Studies. It defines discourse as a system of statements shaping knowledge, practices, and norms governing what can be produced and how subjects are recognised, thereby demarcating the social categories such as ability and disability in medicine. Discourses within the medicinal field are at the intersection of educational and juridical institutions.

Panopticism is Michel Foucault's idea that modern societies use systems of constant observation to regulate people's behaviour. It comes from the image of the *Panopticon*, a prison design where inmates can be watched at any time without knowing when they are being observed. The power of this system lies not in physical force but in the awareness of surveillance, which leads individuals to monitor and discipline themselves. In everyday life, Panopticism explains how schools, courts, hospitals, and even families create environments where people feel they are always being watched, shaping their actions to fit social norms. In this way, visibility becomes a tool of control, producing conformity and marginalizing difference.

In *House Rules*, Jacob's life is shaped by constant observation, reflecting Michel Foucault's idea of Panopticism. He is watched by Detective Matson, the court, and even his own family, creating a sense that he is always under scrutiny. This surveillance does not simply record his actions; it actively defines him as someone whose neurodivergent reasoning is judged against legal and social norms. The Hunt household itself mirrors this panoptic gaze, reinforcing expectations of normalcy and sidelining Jacob's lived experience. Through this lens, the novel shows how visibility becomes a form of control, turning Jacob's coping strategies into suspicion and highlighting the systemic pressures faced by neurodivergent individuals.

Jacob's predilection for forensic science and his practice of reconstructing the crime or murder scene form the crux of the plot, serving as his coping mechanism to mitigate the symptoms of Asperger's syndrome. However, the ableist legal system undermines his subjectivity to fit into the established categories of normalcy, ability and uniformity. The plot, moreover, highlights the complexities associated with monitoring Jacob and addressing his specific needs. Not only does Emma represent maternal responsibilities, but also the socio-political challenges faced during Jacob's trial. Theo's acrimony towards Jacob stems from his perception of neglect, precluding him from developing a mutual bond with his brother. *House Rules* examines the complex relationship among Jacob, Emma, Theo and Henry, illustrating neurodivergence, motherhood, acrimony and abandonment respectively.

The narrative intensifies when Jess Ogilvy disappears inadvertently, creating an atmosphere of tension within the Hunt family. Dismayed, Emma is divided between her maternal responsibility to safeguard Jacob and her ethical obligation to ascertain the cause of Jess's disappearance and her subsequent death.

Thus, the identity of Jacob is situated at the intersection of medical care, societal norms, and family dignity. In addition to this interplay, the ideologies of medical institutions, society and family are shaped by the discourses of the legal system, privileging logical narratives, psychological equilibrium, and normalcy. It underscores the fact that Jacob is invariably observed and disciplined by the neurotypical authorities, namely Matson, the detective and judges of the court, demonstrating the construction of his identity and narrative shaped by normative assumptions.

Detective Matson probes Jacob in connection with Jess's death, and records his statements by making Jacob engage in the constructed crime scene. Jacob's statements implicitly hint at the possibility of his involvement in her death, leaving room for speculation and suspicion. The investigation conducted exemplifies the coercive practices of the system.

3. TRIAL AS THE DISCURSIVE BATTLEFIELD

Oliver Bond, hired by Emma to acquit Jacob of the charge, attempts to rescue him and twist the death of Jess, arguing that the statements obtained through the investigation are invalid due to the breach of Jacob's right. The courtroom has become a site of discursive conflict with Oliver Bond and Matson attempting to substantiate their arguments. Oliver

endeavours to prove that Jacob's Asperger's syndrome significantly impedes his comprehension and actions, while Matson argues that the death of Jess was premeditated, and he submits the statements recorded to the court that Jacob admitted to moving the body to the culvert; however, he did not admit to having murdered Jess. The legal system reads and interprets Jacob's literal compliance with the house rules as incriminating.

House Rules is closely aligned with the aesthetics of postmodernism: Fragmented narratives through polyphonic structures, such as Jacob, Emma, Oliver, Matson, and Theo; constructed truth; the interplay of High (Legal) and Low (neurodivergence) discourse; and an unambiguous conclusion.

Those House Rules are:

1. Clean up your own messes.
2. Tell the truth.
3. Brush your teeth twice a day.
4. Don't be late for school.
5. Take care of your brother; he's the only one you've got. (Picoult, 24)

Jacob's acknowledgement in relocating (clearing) Jess's body, without recognising the legal consequences, illustrates his neurodivergent reasoning and uniformity. However, the legal system fails to accommodate these forms of cognitive reasoning, and they are disregarded.

4. CONCLUSION

Misinterpretations of the Neurodivergent Jacob: Jacob's inclination towards forensic science, inconsistent eye contact, and adherence to predictable routine patterns are interpreted as incriminating evidence, disclosing the disjunction between lived experience and the legal framework. The legal system mandates persuasive narratives and coherence, resulting in the marginalisation of the neurodivergent voices. It underscores the ineffectiveness of the trial in distinguishing between neurodivergent logic (House Rules) and criminal intent.

Jacob's identity in *House Rules* is shaped by discourses that define ability and disability within medicine, law, and family. Foucauldian discourse analysis shows how these institutions construct categories that marginalize neurodivergent reasoning. Panopticism further explains how Jacob is constantly observed—by detectives, judges, and even his family—producing him as a subject under surveillance. This visibility transforms his coping strategies into evidence of suspicion, illustrating how power operates through observation and normalization. Together, discourse and panopticism reveal the systemic injustice of an ableist legal framework that disciplines rather than accommodates difference.

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