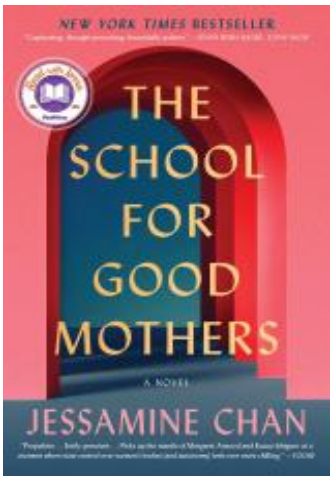
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The School for Good Mothers

by Jessamine Chan



About the Book

In this taut and explosive debut novel, one lapse in judgment lands a young mother in a government reform program where custody of her child hangs in the balance.

Frida Liu is struggling. She doesn?t have a career worthy of her Chinese immigrant parents? sacrifices. She can?t persuade her husband, Gust, to give up his wellness-obsessed younger mistress. Only with Harriet, their cherubic daughter, does Frida finally attain the perfection expected of her. Harriet may be all she has, but she is just enough.

Until Frida has a very bad day.

The state has its eyes on mothers like Frida. The ones who check their phones, letting their children get injured on the playground; who let their children walk home alone. Because of one moment of poor judgment, a host of government officials will now determine if Frida is a candidate for a Big Brother-like institution that measures the success or failure of a mother?s devotion.

Faced with the possibility of losing Harriet, Frida must prove that a bad mother can be redeemed. That she can learn to be good.

A searing page-turner that is also a transgressive novel of ideas about the perils of ?perfect? upper-middle class parenting; the violence enacted upon women by both the state and, at times, one another; the systems that separate families; and the boundlessness of love, THE SCHOOL FOR GOOD MOTHERS introduces, in Frida, an everywoman for the ages. Using dark wit to explore the pains and joys of the deepest ties that bind us, Chan has written a modern literary classic.

Discussion Guide

1. Consider the epigraph from Anne Carson. How does this excerpt set the tone for the story? What do you think the relationship is between fear and motherhood?

2. The novel centers around Frida?s ?one very bad day? (1). What are the stressors in Frida?s life that make this bad day not only possible but likely? In other words, what odds are stacked against her?

3. Throughout the book, Frida thinks regularly about ?the house of her mind." What does this phrase mean to you? How does it take on new meaning for Frida over the course of the book?

4. After Harriet is taken away, Frida goes to the home of Gust?s best friend. What is Frida looking for at Will?s house? How is it similar or different to what she?s looking for when she flirts with Tucker?

5. Throughout the book, the women are subjected to a narrow definition of what makes a ?good? mother. According to the school, what makes a good mother? How does that compare with how Frida defines what makes a good mother? Or how you would define it?

6. During her first psychological evaluation, Frida says that ?you can?t judge [my parents] by American standards? (46). How does Frida approach motherhood as a Chinese American woman? How is this different from how her own mother approached parenting? How does the school approach cultural differences in parenting?

7. Frida often compares her own experiences as a woman with what she wants for Harriet. What does Frida want for her daughter? What are the things Frida wants to protect her from?

8. THE SCHOOL OF GOOD MOTHERS depicts parenting as entwined with a new surveillance state. Discuss how this relates to our current cultural climate. Is there, as Renee says, ?It?s not like there?s any privacy anymore? (18)? What are the rights that parents give up when they encounter the state --- both in this book and out in the real world? Do you think those loss of rights are worth the cost to keep children safe?

9. With Susanna, we see a different model of mothering than Frida is used to. Describe it. How are she and Frida philosophically different? How are they the same? How does Frida?s attitude toward her shift over the course of the book?

10. Helen, Frida?s roommate, is at the school for coddling, which is described as a ?subset of emotional abuse? (86). Do you think a mother can ever love too much? What are the different ways a mother?s love can manifest?

11. How do Frida and her cohort first react to the dolls? How does their relationship with the dolls change over the course of the book?

12. Which mother do you identify with the most? Were there any to whom you felt especially sympathetic --- or perhaps especially judgmental?

13. Early on, Lucretia guesses that the fathers? program probably has ?workbooks and multiple-choice quizzes. All they

have to do is show up. Isn?t that always how it goes?? (106). What are the differences between the men?s and women?s programs? Do you believe that women are routinely held to a higher standard in parenting? How and why?

14. What do you make of Frida?s final act? How does she decide that what she?s risking is ultimately worth the cost? What does this decision say about her as a mother? As a person?

15. How did this book make you think about motherhood? Did it prompt you to reconsider mothering, either as a parent yourself or your experience as a child or in observing other parents around you?

Author Bio

Jessamine Chan?s short stories have appeared in *Tin House* and *Epoch*. A former reviews editor at *Publishers Weekly*, she holds an MFA from Columbia University?s School of the Arts and a BA from Brown University. Her work has received support from the Elizabeth George Foundation, the Bread Loaf Writers? Conference, the Wurlitzer Foundation, the Jentel Foundation, the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center, the Anderson Center, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and the Ragdale Foundation. She lives in Philadelphia with her husband and daughter.

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