

The School for Good Mothers

[oprahdaily.com/entertainment/books/a38677378/school-of-good-mothers-jessamine-chan](https://www.oprahdaily.com/entertainment/books/a38677378/school-of-good-mothers-jessamine-chan)

January 5, 2022

Jessamine Chan's Explosive *The School for Good Mothers* Probes a Parent's Worst Nightmare

Chan's first novel forces the reader to contend with this uncomfortable question: If the state were to quantify what it means to be a good mother, would I pass the test?

By Arianna Rebolini Published: Jan 5, 2022



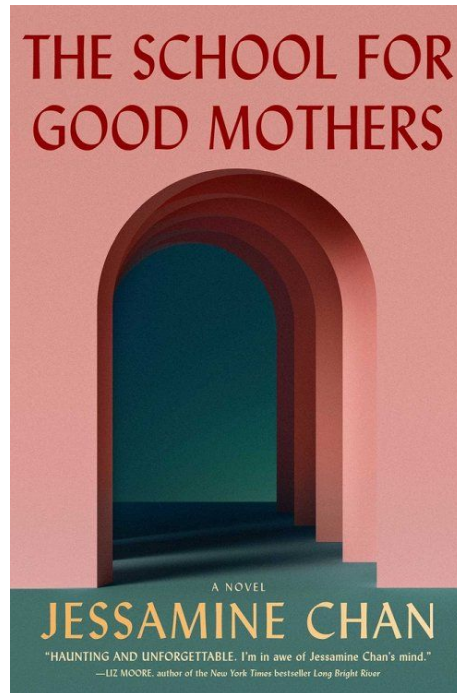
Simon & Schuster

There was the morning I took the garbage out and didn't rush back inside, instead enjoying a beat of quiet solitude while my 2-year-old son sat alone in the living room. There was the time I turned on the YouTube app, plopped him in front of the television, and stopped paying attention long enough for the algorithm to find a nightmarish CGI car crash simulator. There was the raised voice at the playground, the dinnertime bribery, the countless times I've sat at the kitchen table on my laptop while he asked, with a lisp so sweet it's almost too on the nose, "Can you play with me, *pleathe*?"

These are the moments that ran through my mind while reading Jessamine Chan's excellent, provocative debut novel, *The School for Good Mothers* (the January *Today* show Book Club pick, which is being made into a television series by Jessica Chastain's production company). It forces the reader to contend with an uncomfortable question: If the state were to quantify what it means to be a good mother, would I pass the test? Frida Liu, our doomed protagonist, fails miserably.

Frida is a 39-year-old Chinese-American mother and writer, and when we meet her, the police are calling to tell her they have her 18-month-old daughter, Harriet, in their custody. It's the end of a chain of things gone very wrong, from Harriet's birth (a traumatic emergency C-section) to her husband leaving her for another woman (three months post-partum) to trying to manage a toddler as an unexpectedly single working mom, in a city she only moved to for her (now) ex. Who wouldn't crack? But Frida has messed up in a big way: Functioning on little sleep and late on a deadline, she decides to leave Harriet home alone, happily strapped into a bouncer, while she runs out to get coffee. And then, since she's out, she runs to the office to grab an important file. And then, while she's there, why not quickly catch up on some work? When she gets the call from the officers, it's two and a half hours since she left. Her neighbors heard Harriet crying. She swears she never meant to be out that long.

Harriet goes home with her father, Gust, and his soon-to-be second wife, Susanna, a white 28-year-old former dancer who seems to exude maternal instincts, or at least the traits that have become de rigueur in the American mommysphere. Frida spends months under surveillance in her own home, now set up with cameras, and during supervised visits with Harriet, but ultimately her judge isn't convinced she's learned her lesson. So Frida is sentenced to a year at a brand-new state-run facility that exists somewhere between school and prison. There, working with a robot girl the same age as Harriet, Frida will "demonstrate her capacity for genuine maternal feeling and attachment, hone her maternal instincts, show she can be trusted." If she fails, her parental rights will be terminated. (Mothers and fathers are sent to separate facilities with separate curricula; unsurprisingly, the fathers' programs are much more lenient.)



The school's metrics for success are clinical and data-reliant, misguided attempts at pinpointing the mechanics of maternal love. Frida's class works through units on "motherese" ("the delightful high-pitched patter that goes on all day between mother and child"), appropriate types and time lengths of hugs, getting the dolls to eat enough vegetables or fall asleep in a reasonable amount of time. The problem, of course, is that data ignores nuance. What a relief it would be if such an intangible, high-stakes concept like good parenting could be hacked, reduced to action items; but precision doesn't guarantee results, for the mother or the child. It's no surprise that the mothers are the only ones who see the inanity of the workshops, useless in the face of the real, impossible-to-predict world—the instructors don't have children of their own.

There's no such thing as passing these tests, either in the school or throughout the trials preceding it. While she's home alone and under surveillance, Frida obsesses over how to appear appropriately remorseful, but everything she does is read with suspicion. Why doesn't she cry? Where are her friends? Why is her house so clean? In her supervised visits with Harriet, Frida's tears and affection are evidence of her "neediness," eventually used in testimony against her. The prevailing wisdom for mothers is to trust your intuition. In theory, it's an inclusive affirmation, but in function it's a way to blame mothers when they inevitably get the unspoken rules wrong.

This is the through line of the book—the doomed pursuit of something that doesn't really exist, this Platonic ideal of the good mother. The closest approximation is Susanna, whose crunchy, demonstrative, "toxin-free" love is utterly foreign to Frida, the hyper-successful daughter of Chinese immigrants who lived their love rather than displaying it. Frida has everything stacked against her, and she knows it, from as early as her first meeting with the social worker who skews everything about her into a liability: her career ambitions (she left

her child to go to *the office?*), her history of mental illness (is it true she's on antidepressants?), and especially her ethnicity. The social worker tells Frida her parents "sound withholding" when she describes the lack of demonstrative affection in her childhood, but she insists he can't "judge them by American standards." At the same time, he's disappointed to hear Frida isn't teaching Harriet to speak Mandarin, just as Susanna is surprised she isn't stocking her home with ancient healing crystals. Frida is both too Chinese and not Chinese enough; there is no winning.

It's tempting to slot *The School for Good Mothers* into sci-fi—robot children! state surveillance!—but as the book continues, and as it becomes clearer that success in the school is close to impossible, I couldn't help wondering if those more explicitly dystopian details were even necessary. At times I found myself sidetracked by the logistics of the AI dolls, and their existence opened big questions about consciousness and humanity that linger. They function ultimately as tools of discomfort, which is where Chan really shines. In a book full of characters obsessed with the idea of who is and who isn't a good mother, Chan is sure-footed in her ambivalence, never allowing the reader to get too comfortable in a clear answer. From the second sentence of the book and onward, Frida's mistake is described in purposeful isolation, referred to as her "one very bad day." "What happened last week, what I did, doesn't represent... what kind of mother I am," Frida says, and the truth of this defense is so plain it's painful. If we're looking for a moral, an easy and reasonable one would be that a mother is more than her worst mistake.

But two things can be true at once: A person is more than their worst mistake, and one bad mistake can reap irreversible damage. Chan smartly places Frida's bad judgment just past relatability: Frida leaves her toddler home alone for two and a half hours. Indeed, Harriet could have died. Frida knows this, and we know this, but as we get to know Frida and inevitably empathize with her, the nagging fear shifts. The scariest thing about *The School for Good Mothers* isn't that government overreach could allow the state to terminate parental rights based on one mistake; it's that your worst mistake could turn out to be something you'd never think you were capable of. "This wasn't abuse," Frida tells her lawyer. "I'm not like those people." She believes it, but are these distinctions meaningful? Frida assumes the judge will be lenient, will be able to see her error was a lapse in judgment rather than a character flaw, based on the data points Frida herself finds meaningful: She has no criminal record, no history of addiction; she has an Ivy League master's degree and a 401(k). These are her biases, no better indicators of moral fortitude than another mother's ability to get a toddler to stop screaming in the street.

What Frida finds in common with the other women at the school, despite demographic differences and infractions that run the gamut from coddling to beating, is their isolation and alienation—the stripping away of their power while also, always, being reminded that any failures are their fault. Frida's agency was wrested from her in countless ways before her very bad day: She couldn't block Susanna's encroaching (and often borderline dangerous) child-rearing beliefs. The custody schedule was tailored around Gust's job. She was pushed

into an emergency C-section and then scrutinized for her recovery. “Maybe some people weren’t meant to claim their space,” Frida thinks. “She claimed it for two and a half hours and lost her baby.” It’s easy to bristle here at what seems willfully reductive. Leaving a baby unattended for multiple hours is more than “claiming space.” But the two are connected. If Frida had felt able to claim space elsewhere—for herself, for her job, for her opinions about raising Harriet—maybe she wouldn’t have fled. What if mothers in distress were supported instead of punished? What might functional, preventative care look like? These are the book’s biggest questions, the hardest and most important to answer.