

He Gets That from Me

Jacqueline Friedland

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Family, parenthood, and belonging are at the center of Jacqueline Friedland's heartwarming and thought-provoking novel *He Gets That from Me*.

Donovan and Chip have successful careers and a beautiful home—all they could ask for, except for a family. With the help of an agency, they advertise for a suitable surrogate. They find Maggie, who dropped out of college and is somewhat adrift, but who is also determined to improve. She's in a stable relationship with Nick, has a son, and has a job as a cashier; she wants to go back to school, but she can't afford tuition.

Donovan and Chip's surrogacy with Maggie results in twins, after which Maggie gets her degree, and Donovan and Chip raise their sons. All is well until the twins' school project DNA test reveals that Maggie is one of the twins' biological mother.

The novel concerns the hopes, fears, and expectations around parenthood, including when they come up against child custody laws. Questions are raised about what constitutes a family, who represents a child's true parent, children's legal rights, and surrogacy as social engineering. Still, the focus stays on the emotional turmoil that Maggie, Nick, Donovan, and Chip experience.

Credible legal and medical explanations are incorporated into the story in creative ways, though the book's descriptions of cultural and religious affiliations include unnecessary explanations and examples of erasure: characters explain their shared cultures to each other, and unique traits are smoothed over or treated as odd. And the internal life of the twin at the center of the custody battle is revealed only in the epilogue; it undermines their personal integrity. Nonetheless, *He Gets That from Me* is a touching and provocative novel about the collisions of the emotional and legal meanings of family.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (September / October 2021)

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