



All the Right Mistakes

Laura Jamison

She Writes

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With its insightful portraits of friendships in flux, All the Right Mistakes is an optimistic novel about work-life balance—and how it sometimes unravels.

In Laura Jamison's affecting novel, *All the Right Mistakes*, a group of affluent friends' unmet expectations prompt self-reckonings.

The novel revolves around five women who emerge in alternating chapters. They met at Dartmouth, and they are nearing forty. Carmen is a stay-at-home mother, and she struggles with secondary infertility and a lonely marriage. Martha, a doctor, took time off to raise her children, and she's torn about reclaiming her professional identity. Sara settled into a law career with a middle-range firm, while Elizabeth, who's also an attorney, longs for a second child. Meanwhile, Heather has gone "supernova" as the COO of a tech company. Her friends admire and envy her, but she's too focused on her upcoming book launch to stay in touch.

The women's annual retreat is followed by continued struggles. Martha's newborn dies from SIDS, and Elizabeth has a miscarriage. Carmen's husband wants a divorce, while Sara and her husband continue to argue over who's contributing more in their household. These wrought burdens are punctuated by frequent, earnest, and sometimes heavy dialogues between spouses (husbands are present to offer different degrees of help, though their own work problems are offshoots of the women's stories), while a late, light Christian thread underscores themes of love and forgiveness.

The pressure upon the women builds as they face problems including workplace misogyny and time constraints. Heather seems immune; she's present via tweets, upbeat texts, and emails, most of which promote her book. She's both ambitious and blind to her friends' daily realities—an elusive catalyst for change. Heather becomes a more grounded presence later, when circumstances force a vis-à-vis. Once Heather's book is released, her friends discover that she wrote about their "mistakes." The women have a range of responses—feelings of betrayal; taking the high road; reluctant acceptance—and distance themselves from Heather.

Offstage decisions, including Carmen's resolve to get an MBA and to give up her own fertility dream to let Elizabeth have her frozen eggs, couple with convenient events like Sara's acceptance of a lucrative job offer and Martha's adoption of a baby after her loss. Over a span of months, the women address the issues Heather thought they'd gotten wrong—though if it was Heather's book that motivated them to push through their personal crossroads, that connection is oblique.

The inevitable conversation with Heather about the hurt her book caused leads to the friends regrouping and an apologetic act that is as hopeful as it is abrupt. A speech that Heather gives with her friends in the audience is a pat summation.

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KAREN RIGBY (April 24, 2020)

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