



## Magnificent Mess

**Elizabeth Standish**

Thistle and Phoenix Press

(347pp)

978-1-961842-00-7

*A reluctant law student muddles her way through love and work in *Magnificent Mess*, a romance novel that doubles as a realistic exploration of navigating one's twenties.*

In Elizabeth Standish's romance novel *Magnificent Mess*, a confused graduate struggles to establish herself apart from her family's expectations and to find lasting love.

After college, Emmalyn enrolls in a Denver law school—the only one that accepted her. With an impeccable lawyer for a mother, she's encouraged to tread the same path despite her abandoned passion for equine science and veterinary care. There's a strong emphasis throughout the novel on Emmalyn's resentment over having her future planned out by others when she'd rather decide her future plans for herself.

Despite feeling so adrift and disappointed with herself, Emmalyn accepts a friend's proposal to set her up on a blind date. In this way, she meets Patrick, whose looks and easy conversation strike her more than she'd like to admit. Their fast connection intensifies throughout the semester, but they avoid defining the terms of their relationship, even as Emmalyn's discomfort about this lack of clarity grows. Further complicating their connection: Patrick, who works with AmeriCorps and adopts a casual demeanor, is quite different from Emmalyn's polished classmates, making him an unacceptable partner in her mother's view.

Meandering through Emmalyn's coming-of-age concerns (she juggles her coursework and social opportunities; she struggles to maintain civil boundaries with her family members), this is an earnest novel whose heroine sometimes seems too hard on herself. Patrick is drawn in less compelling terms, though—in part because Emmalyn views him as distant and unavailable. This emotional gulf results in surface strains and miscommunications that lead to narrative lags. The couple is indecisive; their back-and-forth comes to span years and becomes too repetitive.

The book's secondary storylines are more engaging, and its second half is a partial antidote to its first. Emmalyn's elder sister and friends are warm yet firm in sharing their perspectives with her. They guide her toward asserting herself in her relationship and career choices. She extends herself for a brief study abroad program and via a visiting law student program, gaining fresh independence. She meets new people. Still, Emmalyn wavers between using her natural gifts and relishing newer contexts in which to exercise them: her competitive show jumping past, she realizes, prepared her to deliver court statements as a legal intern. Emmalyn also develops empathy toward her driven and critical mother, though their relationship progresses little.

Featuring a sweet, realistic resolution, *Magnificent Mess* is an introspective romance novel in which a reluctant law student discovers that she's capable of embracing change.

KAREN RIGBY (January 25, 2024)

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