

The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio: How My Mother Raised 10 Kids on 25 Words or Less

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The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio: How My Mother Raised 10 Kids on 25 Words or Less Terry Ryan Evelyn Ryan, wife of an alcoholic husband and mother of ten children, lived in a small town in a time and place when women did not seek jobs outside the home. When finances ran low, feeling desperate, she turned to her parish priest who suggested she "take in laundry." Ryan had to laugh at the advice because she could barely keep up with her own family's washing and ironing. A lesser woman might have succumbed to poverty, but she was determined to keep her family financially afloat and to teach her children that the life of the mind was important. In the early 1950s, Ryan started entering contests, composing her jingles, poems, and essays at the ironing board. She won household appliances, bikes, watches, clocks, and, occasionally, cash. She won a freezer, and several weeks later, she won a supermarket shopping-spree. When the family was faced with eviction, she received a \$5000 first place check from the regional Western Auto Store. Ryan's unconventionality and sense of humor triumphed over poverty, and her persistence makes the reader cheer her on.

The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio: How My Mother Raised 10 Kids on 25 Words or Less Details

Date : Published (first published April 1st 2001)

ISBN : 9780739416389

Author : Terry Ryan

Format : 496 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography, Biography Memoir

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From Reader Review The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio: How My Mother Raised 10 Kids on 25 Words or Less for online ebook

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Kinda makes you wish they still had contests requiring skill, rather than the random drawings of modern sweepstakes. I'm pretty good with words. I probably coulda won me some cool stuff.

LeAnne says

Made me want to drink Dr Pepper! Really adorable and sober at the same time. Its as if Ralphie's mom from "A Christmas Story" had been real and had a doorknob-turning cat. Loved this.

Danae says

This kind of story always makes me feel really feisty-- it's about the author's mother who overcame the disadvantages of an alcoholic husband and poverty to raise 10 children; and then I realize, I am not living in poverty, and my husband is about as far from abusive as you can get. So, I guess the real take-home message is not to let your disadvantages define you, and to be the sort of person who gets out and does something about their problems rather than sit by and whine about them. This story was well-written (with the exception of listing out twenty examples of the entries she wrote for each contest mentioned--I just didn't care that much, although a few of them were amusing; also, one conversation with her mother about how she felt powerless against her father's alcoholism that felt apocryphal-- no one, let alone a 13-year-old girl, manages to get their deepest parental-related angst out in one two-page conversation that actually begins about their mother not winning a contest.) and interesting, and it was fun to learn a bit more about these contests companies would sponsor through the '50s and '60s. In some ways you have to feel like our culture has lost a bit without them. I was surprised to learn that there were actual clubs and magazines for people who more-or-less professionally entered them. Who knew? I was also a bit jealous--the closest I've ever come to anyone winning anything even remotely major was when my sister Danielle won 1st place in the K-Mart easter egg hunt and won a brand-new Super Nintendo when she was...what, 7? Maybe not that old, but it was a big deal for us!

Bonnie says

4 stars

This is such a heartwarming story that I am surprised it has taken me until now to add it to my "read" shelves, let alone take the time to at least write a short review. Perhaps it is because it was on loan for so long to family and friends!

Now that I actually have it in hand, all I need to do is flip through the pages, complete with black and white pictures of family members, contest entries and/or rules, sometimes blank, sometimes completed with a

typewritten entry, to remember why I read this biography – written by middle child, Terry – in one sitting.

Terry Ryan was fortunate to have memorabilia and hosts of people to assist her in memories of those days during the 1950's and '60's. Not to take anything away from the author, because it is Terry's perceptive portrayal and fluid writing that makes this biography so unique.

Terry's love and respect for her mother can be read between the lines throughout the story. And well she would: Who would believe a woman could, despite her alcoholic husband, write enough winning jingles to keep a family of ten children fed, clothed, sheltered and loved, throughout their years growing up in post-war America.

The book brought back many memories for me, for which I appreciated the read very much. A bonus was turning to the Afterward to read this, written by sister, Betsy:

Looking through these things she left for us in the months after she died allowed us to see, piece by piece, what she was all about, and to appreciate her true accomplishment.

I have a recurring dream about my mother: She is sitting on her living room couch, holding this book in her hands. "This is wonderful," she is saying, with tears in her eyes. "But where did you find all of this material? Where did it all come from?"

From you, Mom. It came from you.

As I said at the outset, this is a touching, inspirational story. That's why it appears to have been passed from person to person before finding its way back to my bookshelves.

Alyne says

Below I've included a touching anecdote on atonement.

I find this book to be compelling because it gives a deeper look into the life of an intelligent, hardworking, midwestern mom with 10 kids, living a life of poverty in the middle of nowhere, with an alcoholic husband who consistently ferried away any savings. In this true story, "Mom" makes ends meet by winning contests where you mail in limericks, 25 words or less type poems, and the last line of whatever jingle the company has created. She works hard and wins an astonishing amount, especially considering that many of the contests have upwards of 250,000 entries! This story shows how this mother finds meaning in her life, and how she stays positive in what seem like very bleak situations despite the odds. Towards the end of the biography, you, along with her 10 children, discover that the reason she married "Dad" was because of a pregnancy. The children had always wondered why their mother hadn't followed what could have been a glorious and glamorous career in publishing, and now they knew why. Her determination in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds is inspiring and admirable to say the least.

One of the most touching stories was this: (possible spoiler)

"Dad was diagnosed with diabetes in the mid-1970's. He quit drinking, but not in time to save his body. After his leg was amputated, he became dependent on Mom, spending most of his time in the kitchen in his wheelchair, listening to baseball on the radio. He died in 1983 at the age of seventy-five.

My father left a legacy of atonement that stunned my mother and all of their children. He told Betsy about

his plans ten years before his death. "I go down to First Federal every month, Bets, and I just put this pension check right in the bank, see? It's a surprise for Mother. It belongs to her. You make sure she uses it. Will you do that for me?"

When Dad died, we discovered that he had saved over \$60,000, more money than my parents had ever dreamed of having in their lifetime, and left it all to Mom."

I cried when I read this, because this was a man who had pushed his wife so she fell unconscious, who had secretly taken a second mortgage on the house and spent it all, who was more angry and volatile than he needed to be. I wondered how a woman could live with him, how she could stand it. But I guess she saw the good in him, and was dedicated, and ultimately he showed that he did love her, and that he wasn't all bad. Very beautiful.

Julie says

I feel like my review of this book can best be summed up in 25 words or less:

In Honor of Mrs. Evelyn Ryan

The rhymes... too many;

The laughs... too few.

Glad that I read it,

but more glad I'm through.

Penelope says

What a great book! I read this right after reading Eat, Pray, Love and you couldn't find two more opposite stories. This story is about a woman who raises 10 children with her husbands meager income and her prize winnings from jingle contests. She enters this contests as much to give out let to her creative energy and wit as for the money. She shows her children how to give it your all and never give up and that the process is the enjoyment and outcome is a lucky byproduct.

What a great book!!

Marin says

My mom would love this book.

It's a worshipful biography of a woman who would supplement her husband's too-small-for-ten-kids income by writing advertising jingles and entering them in contests. The highlight for me was the anecdote about Mrs. Ryan's ten-minute grocery shopping spree. This homemaker was determined to fill her freezer (another contest win) with food items other than fish sticks, and she approached her one chance at free groceries with military strategy.

I also thought that the author's stories of growing up in a large family were dead-on at describing the right combination of disorganization, energy, teamwork, and the craving for treats and personal attention.

This book is hugely optimistic about some of this family's darkest times, financial and otherwise. If you read it, it will make you feel genuinely happy.

Jennie Menke says

Audible. *

On the heels of *The Goldfinch*, and all the dialogue that has surrounded that review, I am giving up -- yes, **GIVING UP** -- on this book. I am taking to heart the many (the hundreds) of people who said "if you don't like the book then stop reading it!" I never do that. For one, I'm too cheap. For another, I always assume I'll be missing some nugget of brilliance.

But I am going to "just do it" and stop. This book is driving me mental. The very things that others love it for, I loathe it for. Call me mean spirited or calloused, but her perpetually sunny disposition in the face of heartbreak, alcoholism and more just strike me as dumbness. [Is dumbness even a word?]

I know that sounds horrible, but it's true. "My father was a raging, mean alcoholic, but heck! it wasn't so bad! We kids had an apple tree to climb and life was **GRAND**..." [I made that up, but it pretty much sums up the prose]

And interspersed every few pages, she reads something like 708 different entries to the same contest submitted in a variety of names, all starting the same way: "Dove soap is **SUPER DEE DUPER** because..." And curiously, all ending with the same rhyming syllable. --As if the different contest entries all had to rhyme with each other. "in the month of May" "Clean as a summer day" Germs... **aWAY!**" and on and on and on until I feel I might scream.

Yes. it is time to stop.

*a paper book (or kindle) would have at least allowed me to skim. Do not recommend Audio version.

Kathy says

Mom read a review of this book and one day went to the bookstore with several reviews and told the clerk she wanted all of them. She hadn't read it yet. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and kept quoting it the whole time I was there on vacation.

The author was number six of ten children born into an Irish Catholic family. The father drank a large proportion of his already insufficient paycheck. The mother, Evelyn Ryan, entered contests constantly to try to keep the family afloat. She also kept meticulous notebooks (mostly by the ironing board) of her entries and of her poetry, which she could also sell to the newspapers and magazine for usually \$1 each.

She did manage to keep them off of the street with a couple of major "in the nick of time" wins. There was always a constant flow of small wins of cash and prizes (she kept a closet full for later use.)

The book is full of the hilarious happenings of the Ryan family and peppered with mom's limericks and dad's tirades.

I probably should have been underlining favorite parts but it wasn't my book.

Maren says

I LOVED this book! It read like good fiction & was totally engaging. As a mother myself, I really could relate to Evelyn's life & situation. I only had one tiny quibble. I didn't like how the author (Evelyn Ryan's daughter) kept going back to the fact that Evelyn left behind what could've been a promising career writing to raise her 10 kids. She made a couple comments about how she would've been a high level executive in an advertising company if she hadn't gotten pregnant out of wedlock and gone on to have so many children. Her worth is clearly, clearly not measured by how good her jingles were or how proficient her writing was, but what a wonderful mother she was, despite dealing with poverty & an alcoholic spouse. She truly is a shining example of motherhood & a positive outlook on life.

Jennifer says

What I learned from this book is that you don't have to have a perfect life to be happy. Evelyn Ryan chooses to be happy in spite of numerous trials and setbacks, which would turn someone like me into a bitter old woman. Reading this book made me think that if she could raise her 10 children under her circumstances without regret, then maybe I can do a little better with my three kids, and keep a more positive outlook.

I also love the writing in this book, both Terry and Evelyn's writing! I am reminded of my aunt, who has an amazing vocabulary and a talent for poetry and witty phrases. I wish I had a little more of that ability!

K says

I don't want to mislead anyone. I usually reserve five star ratings for books that are life-changing and a profound reading experience, and this was neither. But, try as I might, I couldn't come up with a good reason to take off a star and felt dishonest doing it simply to preserve a snooty image.

This family memoir was honest and revealing without being bitter, sweet and uplifting without being sentimental. Like *Cheaper by the Dozen*, it was the story of a quirky but happy large (10 kids) family. Unlike *Cheaper by the Dozen*, there was a dark side to the story with the father's alcoholism and abuse and the family's dire poverty. Yet, this book was not *Angela's Ashes* or *The Glass Castle* either. Evelyn Ryan, the family matriarch, maintained her relentless optimism against serious odds and supplemented the family income in a creative and unusual way by addictively participating in jingle contests for a wide variety of products and frequently winning both useful and useless prizes. More than a hobby, Evelyn's "wins" kept the family afloat. Eventually, Evelyn learned that "contesting" was a popular activity among other 1950s housewives and discovered a support system of women in similar situations who helped each other by sharing news of new contests and giving each other helpful feedback on their entries.

This book won't change your life in any way, but it's a touching and enjoyable read.

Christy says

Mix together “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn,” or “The Glass Castle” (for the drunken dad and the poverty) and “Cheaper by the Dozen” or even our own home in Orem, Utah, in the 50's, and you get the feel of this book. Author Terry Ryan lived in my own era, and she captures it perfectly. Hey, their family was even more deprived than we were! And I remember entering those contests, where you complete a jingle in 25 words or less. But I had no idea I was competing against women who wrote jingles full-time, while they did their ironing, and I didn't know you could submit dozens of entries for each contest. But I'm not bitter. I don't mind that I never won, especially now that I know the prize money went to a family who needed it so much. So I highly recommend this book. But if you listen to the narrated version by Carrington McDuffie, I have to warn you, she's way over-dramatic and over-enthusiastic. You're probably better off with the print version.

Wendy C says

I really enjoyed this nonfictional account of a 1950s stay-at-home mom of ten children who kept the family clothed and fed by winning slogan contests. Her husband Kelly had a job at a machinery but drank away a big chunk of his paycheck (a pint of whiskey and a six pack of beer every night), so Evelyn Ryan relied on her clever wit to compensate.

The film based on the book is pretty true to the story. What I like about the book, though (which I read after seeing the movie), is reading all the rhymes -- the winners and the losers -- Evelyn wrote while ironing or doing other chores. Terry Ryan weaves these verses well into the narrative so that it all flows. For example, if the dad has had an alcohol-fueled episode, we get to read a touching yet completely fantasy-based poem about why Kelly Ryan should be named father of the year, or the following contest entry for Dial Soap:

I'm glad I use Dial
It's the one "bar" in town
With a "chaser" for "troubles"
Plain water can't drown

I also enjoyed all the anecdotes and disaster stories you'd expect to happen in a family with 10 kids. Through it all, Mrs. Ryan never loses her positive attitude and always makes the best of every situation. The part where she goes on the 10-minute grocery store shopping spree brought a tear to my eye while I was reading on the bus.

I felt sad for this family's situation during many points of the story, but as I kept reading I felt increasingly angry with those current-day families who are stretched to the limit on credit yet still buying luxury items as if they need them. If the Ryans didn't have the cash, they didn't buy milk or new shoes. They never went out to dinner. Twelve people slept in a two-bedroom house before Mrs. Ryan won a \$3,000 grand prize that afforded them the opportunity to buy a home with four bedrooms.

There is so much to love about this true story; I would recommend it to anyone.
