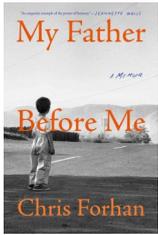


My Father Before Me: A Memoir



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The story of a man's life always includes his father—and even more so when the father takes his own life. In this moving memoir, a poet and professor describes growing up in a big Catholic family in Seattle during the 1960s.

Chris Forhan begins by introducing his parents, Ange and Eddie, who met on the dance floor of a high school. Eddie was a bold dancer, not afraid to entice another guy's date right out of his arms to sweep her away. Soon, the couple fell in love and were inseparable.

Eddie, whose own father had abandoned him, wanted more than the poor grandparents who raised him could provide: a career where he could make a good living and not have to worry about putting food on the table. But with no money or prospects, Eddie joined the Marines at the end of the Korean War. Eddie hated leaving Ange behind, but she agreed to wait for him. His luck held, however—he secured a posting to Hawaii, far from any conflict, and once he served, he could use the GI Bill for college.

Yet already there were ominous signs. Eddie fell asleep on guard duty and was court-martialed (luckily, he kept his GI benefits); on his honeymoon to Victoria, Canada, he slept through most of the short weekend. But patiently, Ange missed a show, a carriage ride, and a great supper—and even more, she did not hold the pitiful honeymoon they shared against Eddie.

Chris himself is one of a brood of eight. He treasures time alone with his dad, which in his case means baseball games in downtown Seattle. By this time Eddie has become a respected accountant, in charge of the financial affairs of an international company, and he takes frequent business trips to Alaska. He has also, however, developed diabetes and a mental illness, and travel often causes complications for him. He does not come home each night, and he once wrecks the family car, almost dying.

This creates problems in the Forhan marriage. Realizing she will probably have to support her kids at some point, Ange, who's smart and very capable, decides to get her teacher's degree. A couple of years later, when she can no longer handle the emotional turmoil caused by Eddie's erratic behavior, she kicks him out.

In one of the interesting threads in the book, both Chris and his older brother, Kevin, take up poetry writing in high school, and both pursue it seriously, although in different ways. Chris decides to get an MFA, while Kevin writes daily and gives readings, but keeps his day job schlepping fish on the Seattle wharves.

The great tragedy in the book is Eddie's suicide, and how it affects the children. As the author says, "Suicide is the last word: perfect, unanswerable." Yet this memoir gives many last words on the topic: the importance of continuing after a family tragedy; the need to stay connected to other family members, sharing secrets with those you love; and, especially, not letting one random act by someone who suffers from depression ruin your own life.

Posted by Dory L. on December 19, 2017

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