

Frozen Dinners: A Memoir of a Fractured Family

Elaine Ambrose

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Affecting and sometimes poetic, Frozen Dinners paints a complex portrait of a twentieth-century Idahoan family and its business empire.

Elaine Ambrose's memoir *Frozen Dinners* details the emotional roller coaster of her father's agriculture and refrigerated transportation business over the course of forty years, from its stressful inception to its startling crash.

Moving chronologically, the book begins with Ambrose's birth, then moves through her childhood and into her college years. It includes sibling dramas, parents' abuses, school difficulties, and retroactive observations, influenced by research and later experiences, of her father's growing business. Desperately poor, he began driving trucks to transport frozen television dinners, which were a new craze in the 1950s. He then launched his own trucking company and a massive farming empire, purchasing thousands of acres of land from families in Idaho who had fallen on tough financial times. When Ambrose's story moves into her adulthood, the book skips ahead to her father's death and the decline of his multimillion-dollar empire in the hands of her older brother, as well as the impact of that takeover on their mother's health.

The first section of the book is composed of emotional scenes that reveal Ambrose's childhood distress. Her father was angry, and his own upbringing in poverty shaped him into a frugal workaholic. Her submissive mother raised their children mostly on her own because of her husband's ambition. Illustrative prose brings the anecdotes to life, describing the Idaho landscape and muddy potato farms with poetic imagery. Ambrose's passion for poetry and her journalism career are detailed; they deviate from the book's main focus, but remain interesting.

The second section of the book concentrates on the downfall of the family businesses after her attorney brother, Tom, takes them over. There is little context given to explain Tom's detailed disrespect for his mother and siblings. His lack of fiscal sensibilities and betrayal of the family prove shocking. These later portions are laden with legal and financial jargon that decrease the book's dramatic tension. It is otherwise a heartbreaking memoir. Aside from its numbers, terms, and legal processes, the book's affecting descriptions of Ambrose's mother's experience of stress make the businesses' destruction all the more tragic.

Elaine Ambrose's tense memoir, *Frozen Dinners*, shows what *not* to do when inheriting a family business. It also paints a complex portrait of a twentieth-century Idahoan family.

AIMEE JODOIN (December 20, 2018)

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