

Million Dollar Party: A Restaurant Memoir

Robert Mark Ihrig

Susan Jean Butherus Ihrig

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Million Dollar Party is a beautiful look at the life running beneath the surface of one's work.

Million Dollar Party by Robert Mark Ihrig and Susan Jean Butherus Ihrig is an engaging memoir about opening, running, and closing a restaurant, and how that enterprise changed the way that the Ihrigs thought about themselves.

Concentrating primarily on Robert, the Ihrigs' compelling story begins at the end: their restaurant is closing for good, and their staff has gathered for one last raucous time together. The opening scene details each person in attendance, giving a sense of the authors' care for people and knack for characterization.

From there, the narrative goes back to Robert Ihrig's childhood. The book continues to alternate between present day, in the aftermath of the restaurant's closing party, and flashbacks from earlier, until the two streams join to form a coherent picture of Robert Ihrig and the story of his restaurant.

This is far from a tell-all account. Instead of exhaustively gathering details, the book weaves a well-rounded picture of Ihrig's life, concentrating particularly on notions such as how parents shape a person's dreams and identity, or on how one event may build on another fluidly, right up to the point of an unexpected junction, or a break, that opens the floodgates to something new.

The appealing narrative is aptly paced, moving smoothly, with concentration varied to reflect the importance of each scene. The Ihrigs' story is warmly, generously, and unsentimentally voiced, with clear, detailed descriptions that evoke emotion and a sense of character. The work has a strong sense of closure, even as the Ihrigs look ahead.

Relatable elements make it easy to connect to the story, including, of course, details about food and drink. This will appeal to anyone who's ever dreamed about a life in the fast-paced restaurant industry. But this is more than just the story of a restaurant—the restaurant is simply where Ihrig's story culminates.

The deepest concentration comes as Ihrig examines the lasting effects his father left on him. Old pains can be destructive in the present, but can also help determine the future. The book also muses on the healing power of new relationships, and on how even supposed failures sometimes manage to provide new insights.

Ihrig's dreams are traced to his childhood, and his story of sustaining that dream, even facing its failure, is moving. *Million Dollar Party* is a beautiful look at the life running beneath the surface of one's work.

MELISSA WUSKE (December 14, 2017)

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