

The Last Dance: And a Loving Mother

Stephen Manning

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The elegiac memoir The Last Dance dedicates itself to celebrating a woman whose devotion kept her family grounded through her husband's many career advances.

Stephen Manning's *The Last Dance* is both a memoir about his career spent adapting to a fast-changing American economy and heartfelt tribute to the woman who helped make that career possible.

In 1974, Manning began working in the finance and accounting department of Inland Steel Company, where balance sheets helped him to predict the coming decline of the US steel industry and prompted him to pursue a career change. Also because of those early work experiences, Manning met Mary Ann, who worked as a secretary in Inland's sales department, and whom he later married.

Mary Ann became a stay-at-home mom, but the couple faced hardships and heartaches as their family grew. They dealt with health issues that put their ability to have children into question even before their wedding date; decades later, they dealt with the sudden death of their son. Manning's demanding career and rigorous travel schedule left Mary Ann feeling like a single mother at times, putting their relationship in jeopardy.

Much of *The Last Dance* is chronological and devoted to Manning's career trajectory. It records many relocations, including more than one stop in the San Francisco Bay area, where his family of six eventually settled. Leaning on lessons learned from his father and father-in-law's life experiences in dying industries, Manning recalls his moves to top jobs in tech startups and Fortune 100 firms, where he expanded his skill set without relying on notions of long-term job security. Thought-provoking passages reveal elements of the US's corporate evolution in industries ranging from steel to startups to former phone monopolies.

In contrast, Mary Ann is characterized as someone who relished her role as a mother and who made her children her highest priority. But the book's dominant strategy for illustrating her commitment is to italicize key phrases, including the term "loving mother," that are used often throughout the book. The device is soon distracting; it loses efficacy as the book progresses. Occasional lapses in spelling and proper punctuation are a further hurdle.

The book's chapter titles are clear, made to describe the events covered in each. This practice extends to the book's closing chapters, which chronicle Mary Ann's struggles with cancer, and to make it to a crucial milestone in one of her children's lives. The result, though, is a narrative without many surprises.

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CHARLENE OLDHAM (November 16, 2020)

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