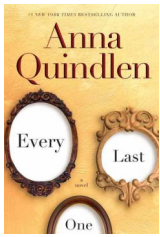


The Perfect Family Until--



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When this compelling novel starts, Mary Beth Lathem's biggest problem is taking sass from her truculent teenaged daughter, Ruby. The narrative starts at the beginning of Mary Beth's busy day as she goes through the house waking up her three children, the eldest daughter and two twins, Alex and Max. Mary Beth owns a landscape business but soon you can tell that her family is the center of her life and passions.

Alex is a soccer jock, immensely talented and popular while Max, his fraternal twin, is a computer nerd with social anxiety problems. Glen, Mary Beth's husband, is an extremely practical and thoroughly unromantic eye doctor--solid as hardwood--though Mary Beth is not necessarily aware of that.

Ruby breaks up with her boyfriend Kiernan who used to live next door when the children were babies and whom Mary Beth has mothered through the years. She's against the break-up at first, but after Kiernan starts leaving a ring under Ruby's pillow and notes for her throughout the house, Mary Beth agrees reluctantly that he should stay away from the family.

Mary Beth cooks for her children's friends and invites them to stay over and to parties. She's very connected to them. Meanwhile, Max's situation goes downhill. He becomes very depressed--so much so that Mary Beth finds a shrink for him to visit.

No other author captures contemporary family life as well as Quindlen does. The dialogue in *Every Last One* captures contemporary speech. And her characters worry about the world and try to live as morally as possible in a way similar to Barbara Kingsolver's characters.

About halfway through this book, violence erupts, and Mary Beth's life changes dramatically. Now her other son, Alex, visits that same psychiatrist. Quindlen's mom died when she was young, so she has written often about grief and about how much trouble young people have dealing with it in other places.

This rich, evocative novel with its strong believable characters will stick with you. I love how Quindlen develops the bonds of friendship in this novel, particularly between Mary Beth and her close friend Alice and between Ruby and her two friends, Rachel and Sarah. All three wear a friendship bracelet that they promise not to remove unless they all do at once.

For another bittersweet novel with a tragedy at its center try Anne Packer's nuanced *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*.

Posted by Dory L. on June 15, 2013

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