

SFGate.com**Author Terry Ryan, 60, dies in S.F. home**

Heidi Benson, Chronicle Staff Writer

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(05-17) 11:11 PDT -- Terry Ryan, author of the bestselling book, "The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio: How My Mother Raised 10 Kids on 25 Words or Less," died Wednesday at her home in San Francisco. She was 60.

The cause of death was cancer, according to Pat Holt, her partner of nearly a quarter-century. She is survived by her nine siblings and their children. Near the end, Ryan was surrounded by family and close friends, including Amy Rennert, her literary agent.

A technical writer, book editor, reviewer and poet, Ryan was also the author of the pithy prose for the long-running Chronicle cartoon "T.O. Sylvester." But the work that brought her a popular audience was the 2001 memoir that critics called "unforgettable."

It told the story of her mother, Evelyn Ryan, a 1950s housewife with 10 children and a husband with a habit of drinking his paycheck. Her indomitable optimism and talent for writing product jingles kept her family afloat.

"Their mother could have been so bitter, but she wasn't," Holt marveled. "She imbued in all of them the belief that no matter what was happening, they each had their own strength," said Holt. "It was just such an enlightened sensibility about life."

Ryan's mother had a special knack was for winning big prizes in the nick of time. When one son crashed his bike, leaving the family without his paper-route income, her paean to the Western Flyer Bicycle won a new one -- plus enough cash for a down payment on a house. A jingle praising frozen spinach won a grocery shopping spree, netting thousands of dollars worth of edible treasures to fill the family's often empty freezer, which she had also won by writing a jingle.

"The joy of the phrase just gripped her, and she passed that on to us," said Ryan's sister, Betsy Ryan, who holds a doctorate in theater and is also an author.

Terry Ryan, the sixth of 10 children, was born on July 14, 1946, in Defiance, Ohio. Growing up in the middle, with five brothers, she earned the nickname "Tuff." Always athletic, she was the first girl pitcher in the town's summer baseball league and led the Defiance team to intramural victory. "She could throw so accurately by thinking ahead," said Holt. "It's a Zen thing. Terry always had this way of calming her mind and pushing out all the chatter."

In the late '60s, Ryan earned her bachelor's degree from Bowling Green State University in Ohio, and moved to Chicago. The city was still reeling from the riots at the '68 Democratic Convention. She landed an editing job at the Journal of the American Medical Association, where she met Irene

Ogus. Anxious to see the United States, they contracted to take "drive-away" cars across country.

"We got in a car one night in Chicago when it was about 40 below," recalled Ogus, now a San Francisco mortgage broker. "We had all our possessions in this big old Buick and drove for 30 hours to deliver it to Fort Lauderdale." From there, they went west, settling in San Francisco and joining the Daughters of Bilitis, a social group founded in 1955 that was the first lesbian rights organization.

In 1983, Ryan met Pat Holt, who was then the editor of the Chronicle Book Review. The paper's top editor found the section "too gray," Holt recalled. "He said, 'Get something to brighten it up.' Word got out that I was looking for something, and in walked Terry and her cartooning partner, Sylvia Mollick." The cartoon ran for 16 years.

Its humor was "ironic, subtle, sweetly observant, never at anyone's expense," Holt mused. "Terry was just that kind of person. She had that kind of tender, thoughtful humor."

Over Valentine's Day weekend in 2004, Holt and Ryan were married by Mayor Gavin Newsom at City Hall. An account of the day -- called "We Do!"

-- was edited by Rennert and published by Chronicle Books; Terry wrote most of the text. "She was a person who knew she was gay from the age of 5," said Holt. "She just accepted herself. I was so admiring of that. I still am."

The Ryan kids "were always encouraged to be ourselves," Betsy recalled. "I was not expected to be like Tuff. Barb was not expected to be like me. Mom waited for some indication from us of who we were, and she helped us go there. Today we differ on every last thing because we were never expected to fit into a mold."

Their mother continued writing almost until the day she died, Ryan wrote, "her spirit and sense of humor unflagging to the end." In 1998, all 10 kids flew home to be there during her last weeks. They found she had left a paper trail, including this poem:

Every time I pass the church

I stop and make a visit

So when I'm carried in feet first

God won't say, 'Who is it?'

"When she died, I knew I had to write her story," Ryan has said. She hauled home a cedar chest and seven dressers full of 50-year-old contest entries, workbooks and letters announcing the prizes -- and her mother's parrot, Clancy, who still speaks in Evelyn Ryan's voice (saying, among other

things, "That's not FUNNY!").

When the book was published by Simon & Schuster, readers and critics fell in love with Evelyn Ryan and her story. The Chronicle review called it "a testimonial to her mother's success in carrying off a prize far greater than cars, washing machines or piles of much-needed money -- bringing her children through potentially horrific times with their spirits intact." Betsy, the youngest sister, said: "We regained our mother through this book. Tuff gave this to us. It was a gift from Tuff."

The book's popularity thrust Terry Ryan into the spotlight. Soon Dreamworks and "Forrest Gump" director Robert Zemeckis optioned it for a feature film starring Julianne Moore and Woody Harrelson. During the 2004 filming in a small town near Toronto (a stand-in for Defiance, pop. 16,000) the Ryans -- and their kids -- visited the set.

The author called the filming "a highlight of my life." But while she was there, she began to show symptoms that were soon diagnosed as Stage IV cancer. Lesions were found in her lungs and brain; she underwent surgery, chemotherapy and radiation.

"Following the shock of hearing her diagnosis for the first time, Terry said, 'Well, my old life is over and my new life has begun,' " Holt recalled. "It sounds like something her mother would have said -- and probably did."

Even as the cancer progressed, "Her sense of humor was simply unstoppable," said Holt, recounting the day Ryan quipped: "It's hard to tell the difference between brain cancer and advanced menopause. In both cases, you're always walking into a room and wondering why you're there."

Author Isabel Allende -- who became a good friend, largely through shared activities at Book Passage in Corte Madera -- said, "Terry had a very soft, lovely sense of humor. When she lost her hair, she said, 'But now I have better eyelashes!' And she did. She had these gorgeous giraffe lashes.

"So many people related to that kind of soft humor and the forgiveness in her," Allende said. "There was no bitterness in that book. That was part of the book's success -- it exposed the truth, but with great tenderness."

When she appeared at a local screening of the film in 2005, cancer was clearly sapping her energy. Still, Ryan told a reporter, "You have to always, always look at the positive side and don't get lost in the negative." It is an attitude that Evelyn Ryan passed along like a legacy.

"We have a choice in life to either define ourselves by the terrible things that have happened to us or to define ourselves by the joy that we feel in the good moments," said Jane Anderson, who wrote the screenplay for "Prize Winner" and directed the film.

"And Terry quite instinctively knew how to do that."

In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations be sent to the Defiance College Evelyn Ryan Endowment at Defiance College, 701 N. Clinton Street, Defiance, OH 43512. There will be a San Francisco celebration of Terry Ryan's life at a date to be announced.

E-mail Heidi Benson at hbenson@sfnchronicle.com.

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