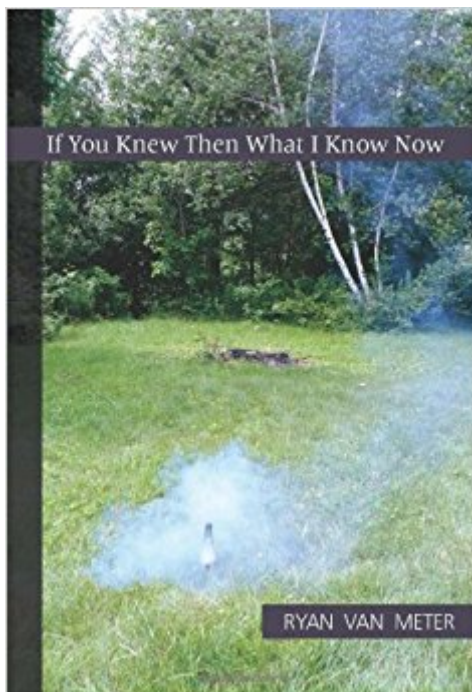


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If You Knew Then What I Know Now



Synopsis

New York Magazine's The Year in Books pick
The Millions' A Year in Reading pick
Salon.com's Writers Choose Their Favorite Books
The middle American coming-of-age has found new life in Ryan Van Meter's coming-out, made as strange as it is familiar by acknowledging the role played by gender and sexuality. In fourteen linked essays, *If You Knew Then What I Know Now* reinvents the memoir with all-encompassing empathy; for bully and bullied alike. A father pitches baseballs at his hapless son and a grandmother watches with silent forbearance as the same slim, quiet boy sets the table dressed in a blue satin dress. Another essay explores origins of the word "faggot" and its etymological connection to "flaming queen." This deft collection maps the unremarkable landscapes of childhood with compassion and precision, allowing awkwardness its own beauty. This is essay as an argument for the intimate; not the sensational; and an embrace of all the skinned knees in our stumble toward adulthood.

Ryan Van Meter grew up in Missouri and studied English at the University of Missouri-Columbia. After graduating, he lived in Chicago for ten years and worked in advertising. He holds an MA in creative writing from DePaul University and an MFA in nonfiction writing from the University of Iowa. His essays have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Arts & Letters*, and *Fourth Genre*, among others, and selected for anthologies including *Best American Essays 2009*. In the summer of 2009, he was awarded a residency at the MacDowell Colony. He currently lives in California where he is an assistant professor of creative nonfiction at the University of San Francisco.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In this moving debut, a collection of 14 linked essays, Van Meter charts the repercussions of growing up in Missouri with a secret. He delicately charts episodes from his youth, such as baseball practice with his increasingly frustrated father, who couldn't hide his disappointment in his son's disinterest in sports, despite the promise of a new TV. "Every time, I'm the small kid who slouches at the quiet corners of the action, stands still and tries not to be noticed." A season of practice culminating in a painful injury allows a new perspective to emerge: "This summer, we've been trying to be certain kinds of men we probably weren't ever meant to be." Van Meter recalls, with sensitivity, finally coming out of the closet and the strain it put on his relationship with his best college friend. "Before finally speaking those words, I had known I was gay but wasn't ready to admit it...before that, for almost all of my teenage years, I thought I might be gay and was afraid so I prayed every night for it to be taken away. And before that, I didn't know I was gay, but I knew I was different, and I didn't want to be that either." Thanks to Van Meter's honesty, essays on his own childhood, identity, and love have a profoundly universal appeal. (Apr. 1)

In this moving debut, a collection of 14 linked essays, Van Meter charts the repercussions of growing up in Missouri with a secret. He delicately charts episodes from his youth, such as baseball practice with his increasingly frustrated father, who couldn't hide his disappointment in his son's disinterest in sports, despite the promise of a new TV. Every time, I'm the small kid who slouches at the quiet corners of the action, stands still and tries not to be noticed. A season of practice culminating in a painful injury allows a new perspective to emerge: This summer, we've been trying to be certain kinds of men we probably weren't ever meant to be. Van Meter recalls, with sensitivity, finally coming out of the closet and the strain it put on his relationship with his best college friend. Before finally speaking those words, I had known I was gay but wasn't ready to admit it...before that, for almost all of my teenage years, I thought I might be gay and was afraid so I prayed every night for it to be taken away. And before that, I didn't know I was gay, but I knew I was different, and I didn't want to be that either. Thanks to Van Meter's honesty, essays on his own childhood, identity, and love have a profoundly universal appeal. Publishers Weekly (starred review) Reading Ryan Van Meter's collection of 14 ruminative essays, *If You Knew Then What I Know Now*, feels like sitting in the priest's side of a confessional. As Van Meter drifts elliptically between his childhood as a closeted young boy and his life now as an openly gay man, he draws the reader inexorably to this book, and its compelling weight. Vikas Turakhia, *Cleveland Plain Dealer* "Van Meter has come a long way from the 5-year-old who held his

bestie's hand and said, 'I love you.' But in these moving pages, what he tells us about the years in between is every bit as shining and true." Gina Webb, Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Van Meter has come a long way from the 5-year-old who held his bestie's hand and said, 'I love you.' But in these moving pages, what he tells us about the years in between is every bit as shining and true. This exploration is crafted with beautiful language and innovative attention to form, surprising the reader as often with humor as with heartbreak. In the end, *If You Knew Then What I Know Now* makes the coming out story and the coming of age story new again." Bookslut

Ryan Van Meter is both a charming and wounding intelligence. To read a book this observant, this fiercely honest, and this effortlessly beautiful is to feel the very pulse of contemporary American essays." John D'Agata

If You Knew Then What I Know Now reconstructs the pain and astonishment of coming to know oneself deeply. These essays are insistently honest, darkened by melancholy and yearning, yet polished by prose so lithe, so elegant that Van Meter's human presence brightens every line. It is truly rare for an essayist to marry dramatically compelling storytelling to rigorous investigations of language; Van Meter investigates both intimate and public forms of language with a highly refined sense of craft and a curious, open heart." Lia Purpura

In a culture hungry for consolation and easy answers, it's a relief to come across a memoir that's only hungry for the truth. "So how do we learn to be in love?" asks the speaker of Ryan Van Meter's *If You Knew Then What I Know Now*. We don't know, says the soul of his book, which is why I'll keep coming back to these pure, generous pages again and again." Paul Lisicky

There were few essays in this collection that didn't leave me misty-eyed for some reason or another, yet I never once felt manipulated. Van Meter's collection is a series of essays, in mostly chronological order, about his childhood. Many of the essays revolve around coming to terms with his sexuality. Because most of the essays were published in a variety of publications (I think maybe all of them), and not written explicitly for a book, there is sometimes an overlap of detail. This might annoy me, but with van Meter, it was like "Oh! I remember when he talked about that!" in a way I might if a friend was telling me a story and he repeated himself. There is a great interview with Van Meter on bookslut, and two of his responses stood out to me. The interview mentions how he finds empathy in his "antagonist" characters, and he responds, "I care very much about most of the people in the essays. The technical challenge was writing about them in a way that the reader cares about them too." And the way van Meter talks about the title essay fascinates me. In this essay, he

writes about an incident that happens in sixth grade that is never spoken again... until a reunion. He says, "Back when I was trying to just write it as a story, before that apology at the reunion, it wasn't a story. It was just an anecdote of suffering, and that's not interesting. After the reunion, I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that I wasn't the only one who'd been bothered all those years by that one day in sixth grade. What I thought was private wasn't just mine. So the anecdote started being an essay, because as I hint at in the finished piece, a short story with a bully apologizing at a high school reunion would be hokey and sentimental. But it happened in actual life." There's so much interestingness in that paragraph. The fact that stories that might seem trite in fiction are suddenly exciting when they actually happen. The mention that "an anecdote of suffering" is NOT INTERESTING. It just isn't! The age of the misery memoir is over, and there needs to be a greater context (like empathy) to these stories. Okay, I'll stop gushing. I have a total literary crush on him. Also, he and I own the same taco socks. I saw them on his Tumblr. I recommend this to everyone in the world.

I read one of the short stories in this book online before purchasing the book, so I knew that it was likely I would love it - and I absolutely did. Ryan's talent as a writer contains a specific beauty to capture those moments of childhood that words seem to not be able to describe - feelings, emotions, fears. This is particularly true for a young child wrestling with their sexuality. I'm extremely thankful to Ryan for sharing this beautiful insight into his childhood and for his contribution to LGBT literature. The heartbreak is the same, the innocence is the same, the love is the same - no matter who you are or who you love.

I took a Non-Fiction writing class a semester ago and we had an anthology we needed. It was filled with short stories and essays and interviews, and one day in class I was bored with the discussion and I didn't like what we had read that day, so I just thumbed through my anthology until I found something that looked decent. I ended up reading *If You Knew Then What You Know Now*, the short story from which the book took its title. It was amazing. When I got home I immediately bought this book and read it in a few days. It just really opened my eyes up to his world. I loved the stories. I felt for him. It is a fantastic collection of interconnected essays that you will definitely be able to take something from.

I loved the book. It was sensitive yet straight forward. The descriptions of thoughts, feelings and situations were so clear I could really feel myself experiencing them. The author has no axe to grind,

he's just presenting a wonderful narrative that is sensitive, thoughtful and insightful. Through several short stories the book gave insight into another aspect (being gay) of self discovery from age 5 through adulthood. I found the writing style to be quite engaging.

This book was so artfully written. Van Meter manages to convey deep, complicated emotions with just a few light touches. Each essay in itself is a small gift.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. I found myself reflecting on my own adolescence and thinking how similar my experiences were, yet Van Meter puts into words and reflects in a way that I never could have.

This is book is easily one of my new favorites. This is the author's first book and I do hope he writes others. The LGBT community will relate closely with this book, but the straight community can easily fall in love with the sometimes funny, and other times emotional nature of this book. Once I began reading I couldn't put the book down. Don't hesitate to buy this because it is worth every dollar.

Ryan Van Meter is an amazing author, the story of his childhood carries with it both the vulnerability and uncertainty of a child, as well as the delicate knowledge of his adult self.

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