



If You Knew Then What I Know Now

By Ryan Van Meter

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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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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

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)

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.

—*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's 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

About the Author

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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