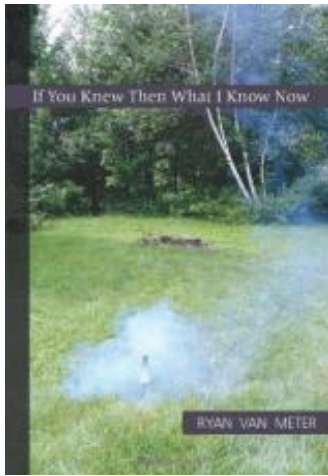


# If You Knew Then What I Know Now

by Ryan Van Meter

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## About the Book

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 14 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.

## Discussion Guide

1. Two of the essays in the book are written in second-person point of view, although in each, the "you" represents a different listener. What are the effects and implications of second-person stances in "personal" essays?
2. In putting the essays in order in the book, I resisted strict chronology because I didn't want readers to expect that this was a conventional memoir, where every section of my life was accounted for. Did you read the book in order? What effect did any interruption of time from essay to essay have on how you understood the overall life experience?
3. Present tense has always been more comfortable for me to write in than past, which would be "correct" for an experience lived long ago. I hope it creates a constant feeling of immediacy, but what do you think? Why do you think the few essays written in past tense purposely get rid of that immediacy?

4. Many of these essays came out specific assignments from writing classes. Two of the essays, though very different as end results, "Specimen" and "Things I Will Want to Tell You?" came out of the same prompt. What do they have in common? Can you guess the original prompt?

5. **If You Knew Then What I Know Now** is the title of the book but also the title of an essay. Is there any other essay title that you think would make an interesting title for the complete book? Why?

6. Most of my essays employ a "classic narrative" strategy --- a story with a beginning, middle and end presented from start to finish. But in several, I tried taking on more experimental forms, like "To Bear, To Carry," "Things I Will Want to Tell You," or "You Can't Turn Off the Snake Light," and perhaps some others. What kinds of experiences seem to dictate unconventional forms?

7. Chickens, fish, snakes, dogs, ducks, spiders and even aliens? animals, natural or otherwise, are apparently an important part of the texture of my essays. What is the effect of so many creatures? Are those creatures ever only just creatures?

8. I can't work on an essay until I have what feels like a compelling first sentence --- one that raises questions and plops the reader into a world that's already in action. What makes a good first sentence of an essay or story, or the first line of a poem? What kind of variation is possible with those aims in mind?

9. I especially enjoy personal essays where the writer isn't afraid of making him or herself unlikable, in at least a few moments. What were the moments in the book where the narrator challenged your sympathy? How did he win you back, if he did?

10. The experiences in this book range from age 5 to 33. I tried hard to match the sensibilities of each age with the voice of each essay. In other words, the five-year-old voice hopefully sounds more wide-eyed and innocent than the fifteen-year-old one, which should come off as a little more guarded and know-it-all. Which voices endeared you to them most?

## Author Bio

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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