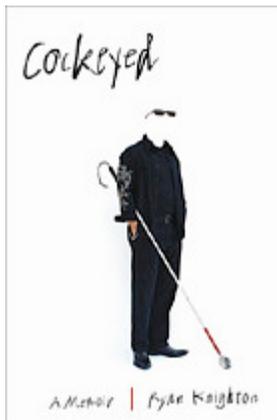


## Review



### COCKEYED: A Memoir

**Ryan Knighton**

PublicAffairs

Memoir

ISBN: 1586483293

At the age of 18, Ryan Knighton was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP), a congenital, progressive illness that begins with diminished night vision and degenerates into total loss of vision. Currently, he has access to only 1% of his eyesight. Yet, instead of wallowing in his predicament, he has written a pithy, moving and delightfully snarky memoir that chronicles the ups and downs of his 15-year relationship with blindness.

Despite the sober truth of Knighton's story and the somber mood that one might expect to accompany its telling, there are many sections in COCKEYED that are immensely funny and lighthearted. His recollections of pre-diagnosis adolescence are priceless and exactly the types of experiences you'd imagine a gawky teenage kid to have --- the time he almost killed his co-worker while driving a forklift; the time he wrecked his dad's car by getting it stuck *on top* of a pile of boulders; the time he (literally) lost his pants while at a punk rock club --- all are incidents worthy of a smile and a knowing grin, if you ignore the reason why they occurred in the first place. COCKEYED is anything but excessively dramatic, and Knighton certainly pays tribute to how funny these events must have seemed at the time from an outside perspective.

On the flipside, COCKEYED's darker moments are full of bleary isolationism, loss and self-deprecation. Yet, Knighton never seems to despair when reliving them, but instead pushes on as if talking about it might somehow redeem him and help others who might suffer similar fates. During the first few years following his diagnosis, he tried to outsmart his failing eyesight and it is painful to read about him bumbling about (again, literally), refusing his disease. It is only after he barely avoided getting hit by an oncoming car that he finally recognized the severity of his

condition. This realization and the bleak period that followed is one of the hardest scenes to digest in the book because it is the first time we see him face the permanence of his disease and finally understand that he must learn to live with its consequences.

In another incredibly moving and painfully honest chapter entitled "Missing," Knighton talks about his younger brother Rory's sudden and seemingly accidental death from a morphine overdose (his new girlfriend slipped him the pills). The way he deals with this loss independently of and in relation to his blindness is so raw, it's almost beautiful: "I know now that Rory's death made me a different man and a different blind man...More than anything, his death forced me to make room for a world that didn't revolve around my blindness...I thought I knew loss, but what did I know? Little. That's why, when we laid Rory to rest, I tried to put something to rest in me, too. That's what I owe him and me." The ever-introspective Knighton clearly has a way with words, even when describing the gravest of circumstances.

In spite of all the hardship, never mind his lack of sight, it is evident from reading COCKEYED that Knighton has moved mountains in his life and the lives of those around him, albeit sometimes by the skin of his teeth. He taught English to kids in Korea and managed to hide the fact that he was blind for months before anyone was the wiser. He traveled to New Orleans with his first girlfriend, Jane (who was deaf), and avoided getting mugged because of his cane. He married his long-time girlfriend (despite a brief separation post-Korea stint) whom he is able to feel "a necessary relief from [his] individuality, from blindness, from all [his] differences, be they subtle or bold." Whether blind or seeing, he was and still is a force to be reckoned with, a person who has decided to take life standing up despite a handicap that had intended to push him down.

There are plenty of touching and insightful moments in COCKEYED --- too many to count. Knighton's natural penchant for getting at the heart of things is both deeply refreshing and highly venerable. He picks at the underbelly of human experience and exposes its tenderness with grace and wit --- a rare and balanced combination, struck by a well-traveled soul. This is a haunting and powerful debut from a truly gifted writer.

--- Reviewed by Alexis Burling

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