

Sarah Hampson: The Interview

Daddy in the dark: author Ryan Knighton's story of life as a blind father



Ryan Knighton's second memoir, *C'mon Papa*, chronicles the blind writer's journey of fatherhood

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A Rorschach inkblot.

That's what Ryan Knighton sees when he looks at a thing, a person. His right eye can make out shapes. His left eye? Totally dark. Since his early 20s, he has been going blind, slowly, due to retinitis pigmentosa. (The retinas self-destruct, basically.) He can't see the colourful tattoos on his arms: a blindfolded moon, blindfolded mice, a blindfolded dragon.

"They're raised slightly, so I can feel them," the 37-year-old says, running the fingers of one hand up his forearm. "Scar tissue, I guess."

He can't see his new book on the table in front of him, *C'mon Papa: Dispatches from a Dad in the Dark*. To write – this is his fourth book – he types on a computer that reads it back to him. "Like Stephen Hawking on speed," he says of the computer voice, which he hasn't changed in 10 years because he's superstitious about how integral it is to his creative process. "It's my writing voice," he says.

He can't see the name, in large lettering, inked into his forearm: Tess. That's his only child, a daughter, now 3, and the subject of his second memoir, following his critically acclaimed *Cockeyed*, which described his journey into darkness.

"This was a hard book to write," says Mr. Knighton, an English teacher at Capilano University in Vancouver. "It's very hard to fill out chapters when the main character other than myself doesn't talk."

He couldn't see it, either – not in its entirety, not the ending, not what the content would be exactly. He had to feel his way.

He began to write the book when his wife, Tracy, was pregnant. "I could foresee so many things that were going to happen. How am I going to do all this? It was overwhelming. And I realized that everything

Tracy and I were going through was just a hyperbole of what other new parents were going through. It was about new boundaries of responsibility."

The arrival of their daughter turned their world upside down, making his role even harder to navigate. "We were a progressive household. There were no gender lines in our house. When Tess arrived, we had to go to this fifties model," he says. "I had to be the breadwinner and Tracy did all the classically maternal, fifties house-mom stuff. We did it because we felt that Tess didn't have to suffer for me to express my independence. It's not like you change diapers because it's your turn and Tess has to wear an upside down diaper just to prove I can do it. ... In *Cockeyed*, the cure for blindness was me learning to risk things for my own independence. Embarrassment and boredom were my two main enemies, and as soon as I learned to deal with those two issues, blindness was just a mobility issue. But now I had to learn to be responsible for somebody else."

That responsibility made his relationship with his wife more complex. "I can't just say, 'I'm comfortable enough with walking Tess today.' Tracy had to be comfortable too. The first time, it was hard, because she's like, 'That's your kid and you're her father, but it's my kid too and a blind man wants to take her for a walk.' "

He also had to deal with not being able to see the object of his affection. "I felt a strange ambivalence in the beginning," he acknowledges. "I didn't feel connected to Tess for a while, and then when Tracy figured out how to jimmy the digital camera in a way that I could actually get a little piece of Tess in the sliver of sight I had left at the time, that made all the difference in the world."

Still, he often feels lonely in his darkened world. "It's weird to be in a house with somebody where you feel like you miss them. Playing with Tess, I still feel like I'm not totally there, because my sense of what a full experience of playing with her would be like tugs at me."

The book describes Mr. Knighton's growing relationship with his daughter as she learns his limitations. Going from the BabyBjorn carrier strapped to his chest to the task of walking with Tess when she became a toddler was a major challenge. "I didn't want to use leashes, and be the un-fun parent," he says. "I wanted her to learn to be responsible for walking with me in a way that was different than how she does with Tracy." But what toddler obeys rules? "She would say, 'I don't want to hold your hand!' " he recalls. "One time I had to carry her all the way to the grocery store." He couldn't manage to carry her back – not with grocery bags. "So I said, 'Want to carry the bag like Mommy does? And can I hold your elbow like I do with Mommy so she can guide me home?' There was this shift of power, and there I was with a three-year-old, hunched over, holding her elbow, and she was carrying the grocery bag."

The title of the book comes from a moment at the end of the book when Mr. Knighton describes what every parent – even a sighted one – fears the most. He lost her when they were outside in the snow. "I panicked like I never panicked before, and that's saying a lot," he writes. "Every molecule commanded me to run, but I jerked with indecision on the spot. What if one direction took me further from her? What if I lost that bit of time?"

But then a little hand took his. "C'mon Papa," his daughter said.

"Tess coming to learn my blindness had a similar gradation to how I went blind," Mr. Knighton says. "The blindness happened over 15 years. There's no moment when Tess understood it. She still doesn't totally understand it. But there were wonderful revelatory moments, like when she expressed an understanding that she had to come to me, I couldn't come to her. I thought, 'That's the beginning of when everything will start changing.' "