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10 for the Top 10: Ryan Knighton

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The panelists are in the process of deciding which book they want to bring into the ring for the February debates. We'll reveal who they are — and the titles they choose — on November 23 on CBC Radio's Q and right here on CBC Books.

In the meantime, we want to introduce you to the authors you voted onto the *Canada Reads: True Stories Top 10* list.

Today, get to know Ryan Knighton, author of *Cockeyed*.



Vancouver-based Ryan Knighton is an author, journalist and screenwriter. His work has appeared in the New York Times, the Globe and Mail, Esquire and The Walrus, as well as online in Salon. Knighton's a film adaptation of *Cockeyed* is in development as a feature film, with Jodie Foster as the director. His most recent book is *C'mon Papa: Dispatches from a Dad in the Dark*.

Q: In three lines or less, describe your book to Canada.

RK: *Cockeyed* is my memoir about growing up, going blind and getting both wrong.

Q What inspired your book?

RK: A funny thing happened. Then about a dozen more. And they kept piling up. But few memoirs about my disability seemed to reflect this with any care. Yes, going blind is tragic. But much of its revelation about the world arises from attention to the comedy. My story is also universal. Everyone's body will betray them. Stephen Hawking knows this. So does Wile E. Coyote when he runs off the cliff and makes the mistake of looking down. I'm interested in stories that grow comedy and tragedy from the same DNA. As well, I wrote *Cockeyed* out of a

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biological imperative. I haven't seen my own face in 15 years. I'm forgetting how to see. It takes a moment to recall which way a "b" points. Or is that a "d"? It's been so long since I saw either. Such a throttling of the mind's eye means that I'm also forgetting the visual memories of my life prior to blindness. So I wrote the pictures down. I had to. Before my disease progressed far enough that it could go back and eat my past.

Q: What do you most enjoy about writing non-fiction? What are the biggest challenges?

RK: I'll try not to sound foofy here, but I probably will. An interesting life is not necessarily an interesting story. An interesting person or circumstance is likewise not necessarily a book. We measure what we can know in beginnings, middles and ends. To find that measure, the measure of a story, is hard, hard, hard. But if you can find it, then the story will often tell you something you didn't know. Even if it is your story. I didn't really know or understand what happened to me until I wrote it down.

Q: What makes you fall in love with a non-fiction book?

RK: I have no idea. The subjects change, the writers change. What do they have in common? Not much. But I can't read, no matter how urgent a story or subject, if a book is made of ugly, needy, malnourished, uninspired sentences. Sentences are what earn my trust and admiration first. If a book lacks something in syntax and diction, I doubt what I'm being told, or I doze as I did in high school English. Orwell has such neat sentences. I would read anything Michael Pollan pens. Even his grocery lists must be sturdy and super-persuasive.

Q: Describe where you write.

RK: I have an office at Capilano University. It's a small room on the fourth floor, with a pleasant, large window. I'm told there are trees outside, but I can't verify this without leaning out for a feel. The insurance dorks would have a fit. Anyways, I run two laptops on two different desks. One is for my screenplays, and the other is for book or magazine prose. I work 8 to 4, five days a week. Lunch brings me across campus to eat sandwiches with the toddlers in the daycare, my daughter Tess being among them. Yes, it is a gorgeous life.

Q: What are your favourite places to read, at home or out in the world?

RK: Planes these days. Helps me cope with flying. After that, I like the couch in our living room when little Tess is asleep. I only listen to audiobooks, so to see me reading is to see me staring blankly at a wall with headphones on. I do the same at the gym, only I don't listen to anything. I just use the headphones to make people think I'm not eavesdropping, which I am.

Q: Is there a non-fiction book that had a great influence on your writing?

RK: *Slackjaw* by Jim Knipfel. His memoir gave me permission to write mine and to write the way I do, for better or for worse. He's also blind, from the same syndrome, and shares an uncanny sensibility about most things that matter. Over the years we've become good friends, though he is in Brooklyn.

Q: What did you want to be growing up? Why?

RK: A welder. My father welded chain link fences on the graveyard shift in Langley, where I grew up. I thought he could do anything. There is something in my being that was shaped by the sound of steel-toed boots clomping through the door at breakfast and the sight of him eating beans and wieners while we ate Froot Loops. He had black under his nails, grease on his hands. And I recall a feeling that I was safe to sleep at night because my father was out in the dark somewhere putting things together. Writing is my version of that fatherhood.

Q: What's your guilty pleasure when you take a break from writing?

RK: My 1962 Gibson LGO. An acoustic guitar that I love and play with great mediocrity. It smells like the not-quite-old Unitarian churches in my hometown. I only noodle with Travis-picking finger-style stuff. Crunchy country and blues. Everybody in Canada should hear what Vancouver's Paul Pigat can do to an acoustic guitar. A national treasure and secret. I had the privilege of penning a few lyrics for one of his albums. *Johnny's Poorly* is our murder ballad about children who eat their parents in retribution. I was about to become a father and I was writing a book about it. Words get into my non-word fun. Nevertheless, when I need a break from words, I get out my thumb pick and irritate the dog. Audibly speaking, I mean.

Q: If you could pick any Canadian personality to defend your book, who would it be and why?

RK: Don McKellar. We met back when I was writing *Cockeyed* and he was working on the film adaptation of Jose Saramago's *Blindness*. Since then we've stayed friends and talked beyond matters of sight. I admire him much. He's not only a great actor and director, he's one of our most interesting writers. I remember taking him to the island retreat for blind people that I wrote about in *Cockeyed*. We figured he could shoot some footage for reference, to see how a large group of us might move together and organize ourselves and whatnot. A rare sight. The most interesting discovery was that we, the blind, don't move much. But there was Don, ready to capture our docile lot as we scratched and sat and sighed and did little of any cinematic thrill. Who knew. Not me. It's not like I ever noticed. I still feel bad about dragging him out there to watch us sit.

Do you agree with Ryan that Don McKellar is the ideal Canadian personality to defend his book? Enter our "perfect pairings" contest for a chance to win a complete set of the Canada Reads: True Stories Top 10!