



## Reader's Guide

### *Author Asks*

from **Ryan Van Meter**

author of ***If You Then What I Know Now***

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 present, 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 Know 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?

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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?

## ***Writing Exercises***

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Embarrassing moments can make wonderful essays, especially if you find a way to dramatize them so vividly and richly that the reader experiences your mortification right beside you. But exploring the moment for all of its complexity can make the moment in the essay about more than just embarrassment. Why were you embarrassed? What forces, external and internal, were at work? What was the aftermath?

Write about a first or a last. The first time something happened, as in, first kiss, first lie, first time you had the wind knocked out of you, first time you saw a certain important person, or witnessed some up-until-then strange occurrence. Or, the last time something happened, as in, last kiss with so-and-so, last night in a place you've never returned to, last day of school in sixth grade, last time you heard that song. Bring the firstness or lastness of the experience to life in a compelling narrative that also somehow lets us in on the event's significance without explicitly stating the importance.

## ***Suggested Reading***

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1. *The Boys of my Youth* by Jo Ann Beard
2. *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* by Joan Didion
3. *Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn
4. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
5. *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* by Paul Monette
6. *Naked* by David Sedaris
7. *Crush* by Richard Siken
8. *Safekeeping: Some True Stories from a Life* by Abigail Thomas
9. *Essays of E.B. White* by E.B. White
10. *This Boy's Life* by Tobias Wolfe