ForeWord Reviews

LGBT

If You Knew Then What I Know Now
Ryan Van Meter
Sarabande Books
978-1-932511-94-9
(April 2011)

"I am still facing my mother, who is still facing me, and for one last second, we look at each other without anything wrong between us." Van Meter was five years old when he shared this moment with his mother. He had just asked his best friend Ben to marry him, and as the adults all hushed to hear this, cluing him in that something serious had happened, his mother told him, "You shouldn't have said that. Boys don't marry other boys."

From an early age Van Meter felt that he didn't fit in. Being himself meant wearing a dress to set the table at his grandmother's house when he was eight and being told to hurry and take it off before the men came in for dinner. It meant wanting to wash dishes and skip wherever he went when other kids and adults wanted him to go fishing and walk like them. It meant constant subtle cues that being himself was wrong.

An assistant professor of creative nonfiction at the University of San Francisco, Van Meter, whose essays have appeared in many publications, including *Best American Essays 2009*, explores in intimate and raw honesty what it was like to grow up with the constant discomfort of not fitting in and being unable to admit to himself why. Even the fact that he dated a girl for a year and a half and never kissed her was attributed to something being wrong with her, not him.

The fourteen essays in this collection will appeal to the LGBT community, but this twist on the coming-of-age story is compelling for all adults. Many of these essays would also be excellent reading for middle or high school classrooms, as they open a window into what it feels like when one's true self conflicts with what society expects of him or her. They will not only allow straight kids to gain an understanding and perhaps compassion for what gay kids go through, but will allow all kids who don't fit in to see they're not alone.

The final essay includes a bedroom scene that may be too mature for younger audiences, but overall the book is an introspective and revealing look at one man's life that brings a necessary understanding to the public in this time when the suicide rate of gay teens makes national headlines.

Christine Canfield