

# Report from the blind side

**A review of *Cockeyed: A Memoir* by Ryan Knighton**

BEVERLY BIDERMAN

At "Camp Gimp," as Ryan Knighton calls the camp for blind adults he attends one summer, a pancake syrup ritual takes place every morning. One blind camper would raise his pitcher of syrup over his plate and politely ask his blind companion to tell him when he has enough syrup. Then the two of them would gaze unseeing off into space, oblivious to the syrup pooling onto the table. After a suitable interval, one would say, "that's enough," and the other would stop pouring. They have gone through the motions of observing the social niceties of sighted people; his chair, Knighton says, has been sticky since 1984.

*Cockeyed*, Knighton's memoir, is a wickedly funny, but also very perceptive and often sad look at growing into adulthood with retinitis pigmentosa (RP), a degenerative disease of the retina. Describing his disease, Knighton tells an employer who is confused because he appears to be able to see, that he can see – sort of. "It's like looking through a little tunnel in one eye. Around that it's like wavy water, and just waves all through the other one."

Knighton, a Vancouver writer and teacher, started to go blind in his teen years. Touchingly, it was precisely when he most needed to strike out on his own and leave home that he became more dependent owing to his increasing loss of vision.

Where John Hull, perhaps the greatest blind memoirist in the English language, is poetic, Knighton is clownish, funny and even flip. He has a breezy, joking style that is endearingly honest. After he moves in with Jane, his deaf roommate and fellow undergraduate, their answering machine announces, "We're probably home right now, but Jane didn't hear the phone again, and I can't find it. Please leave a message. Or just come over and help."

Midway through his graduate degree in English, he moves to Korea to work for a miserable six months as an English teacher, pretending to see, but growing slowly toward complete blindness. When he comes back to Canada, he continues his studies at Simon Fraser University, gravitating toward poetry – especially poetry with short words – because

his RP allows him to read only three letters of a word at once.

Most of us consider blindness a serious, even frightening matter. It is, after all, the condition people around the world fear the most, after cancer. But Knighton manages to make us laugh. He disarms us by insisting that his blindness is a "perpetual state of slapstick" in which he mistakes people's laps for garbage bins, knocks over glasses of beer, pokes people in the forehead with his cane. He goes to work like a boxer, showing signs of everything he's hammered with his forehead.

But Cockeyed is not all slapstick: Knighton also shows much of the fine introspection that Georgina Kleege (whom he thanks in his acknowledgments) shows in her own memoir of blindness, *Sight Unseen*. For instance, after spending six months trying to pass as sighted in Korea, he observes, "Pretending to be sighted, or passing for sighted, demands a blind person establish a functional degree of self-loathing and fretfulness." As someone who is deaf and has tried to pass for hearing, I heartily agree.

Knighton's descriptions of what it is like to use a cane are superbly precise, and we feel with him how wonderful this long stick can be in the lives of those who cannot see. At first he hides it, wishing also to hide his blindness while he can. As his blindness worsens, he realizes how much unfolding his white cane also opens up his life and world as he taps his way through it. Remarkably, his cane also brings him to a Zen-like state of mindfulness, of being in the moment. He doesn't hurry, doesn't worry about "there," only about "here," because "what I tap is where I am."

Knighton pays magnanimous and awestruck credit to his sighted wife, Tracy, whom he calls an extension of his body. He is excruciatingly aware of the sacrifices she makes in order to live with him, and he doesn't take her elbow or eyes for granted.

Knighton writes the first part of this memoir in the casual style of a teenager, unaware of his growing blindness. He guides himself on the road at night (yes, he drives a car) by feeling the bumps of the raised lights on the middle of the road ("driving Braille," he calls it); he misses turns; he nearly runs over a co-worker with a fork lift. This section doesn't work well for me. Even as I was horrified by his accidents and near accidents, I found the slangy, "punk," ungrammatical language grating, and was relieved when Knighton's mature voice gradually took over.

I am intrigued that Knighton is afraid of biomedical technology that might help him to see, preferring his cane over something implanted in his body that could, as he says, one day follow in the footsteps of the abacus and the eight-track tape. I hope he changes his mind. There is a lot happening beyond the next tap.

*Beverly Biderman is deaf and hears with a cochlear implant. She is the author of *Wired for Sound: A Journey into Hearing*.*