

# Open Your Eyes, Jackson Ryder

Rudy Castañeda López

## *Notes for book groups*

### A summary

*Open Your Eyes, Jackson Ryder* is a *Kundstleromen*, or a coming-of-age-in-art, story set in 1963 California. It chronicles the struggles of a fifteen-year-old boy to come to terms with the death of his mother, his uprooting from the city he knows so well, the changed circumstances of his relationship to his distraught father and his denial of the one thing that gives him peace, art. All of this is thrown into relief against a background of impending powerful social change, the assassination of a president, the emergence of the civil rights movement and the flowering of a unique regional artistic expression.

### The author

Mexican-American artist, Rudy Castañeda López, grew up in Southern California in semi-rural Brea (the model for San Sebastiano) and the town of Whittier, a half hour drive from Los Angeles. After earning a BFA in Drawing and Painting he travelled extensively in North America, Europe, North Africa and Australia. In 1986 with pregnant Kiwi wife, Jan, and \$250 he immigrated to New Zealand and worked in tertiary and secondary art education for the next two decades.

He started writing in 1996, at the age of 41, and published his first novel, *The Song of Laughing Bird* (National Pacific Press) for daughter, India, in 2005. In the same year he achieved a Masters of Fine Arts degree from Whitecliffe School of Art and Design in Auckland. In 2013 he completed a Graduate Diploma in Creative Writing at Whitireia. The first draft of *Open Your Eyes, Jackson Ryder* was his final project for the course. He was also given the Honour Award in the New Zealand Writing School Short Story Competition that year. In 2014 he started writing full-time.

He lives on the banks of the Pauatahanui Inlet, north of Wellington, with Jan, his son Ben, mother-in-law Patricia, and three cats.

# Q & A with Rudy Castañeda López

## **Where did you get the idea for *Open Your Eyes, Jackson Ryder*?**

This book grew out of a long-held frustration I've had that artists in literature are often portrayed in an overly romantic way. I blame society's notion of Vincent van Gogh's life for this. It has been the template for almost every artist in literature for the last 120 years. Yet in my experience as a painter, and this is born out in art history, he is actually more of an anomaly than the norm. Think Henri Matisse, or Willam de Kooning, Georgia O'Keefe or our own Julian Dashper, to name a few. These are essentially normal, nice people working hard doing a job.

I also wanted to explore the experience of loss, what it did to the relationship between father and son, to dissect their shared, but very different, suffering and the way it impacted on all of their subsequent relationships. To me this resonated with the larger societal changes that were about to happen on a global scale.

## **What research did you do for the book?**

Because I grew up in Southern California at the time that the action in the book takes place, I had a good background for the setting. However, I was eight years old in 1963 and except for watching *The Outer Limits* on TV, had none of the teenage experiences that Jackson had, until years later in a very changed California. I had visited New York three times and travelled across the USA by car three times, but again these were much later. So my primary research was to find out what those settings were like at the time and how a teenager would have experienced them. Google Earth was an invaluable resource.

Although I was an art student in the 1970s it has only been recently that the significance of the 1960s has been recognized and celebrated by the art world. I had to research everything I could on the art scene in California at the time. The documentary *The Cool School* and the book *Pacific Standard Time* (Tate Publishing) were invaluable resources. I also had to do extensive research on World War II in order to do justice to the wartime experiences of Hymie, Charlie and Buzz, and to Uncle Leo's recollections of the holocaust.

*Calo*, the rhyming Spanish slang of the Southwest, was familiar to me mostly from references my mother and uncles made when I was growing up. I needed to extend that knowledge considerably. *Yiddish*, on the other hand, surprised me in that I discovered that many words have entered the American lexicon through the entertainment industry. I deliberately did little research on the twenty-one famous art works mentioned in the book. I preferred to analyse them myself and to present fresh interpretations of these iconic works.

## **What changed as you wrote the novel?**

The scope of my original concept was to span the entire life of the protagonist, mostly through flashbacks, but the idea was too broad. Almost half the first draft was an extensive

look at Jackson's life in New York, including his first love, who was reduced to a footnote in the final work. When I started the Whitireia Writing Programme I introduced a contemporary story around a young man, Maria's son, who was interviewing the mature, successful Jackson for the museum in San Sebastiano. After several readers questioned if the contemporary story was needed I took a long, painful look at the text and slashed with impunity. The narrative ended up being a coming-of-age story but perhaps in the future you will hear from a more mature Jackson Ryder.

## Questions for discussion

1. Twenty-one well known masterpieces of art make appearances in the pages of *Open Your Eyes*, Jackson Ryder as well as art works created by characters in the book.

Descriptions cover three categories:

- What can only be seen in the work
- What can be learned of the context of the work
- How you respond to the work emotionally.

The first two deal with analysis, the later with appreciation. Using these categories, find an image of one art piece from the book and look at it. Do you have a different interpretation to that in the book?

2. How did the artworks give an insight into Jackson's internal world?
3. In the title, *Open Your Eyes* refers to a process of both gathering knowledge and understanding the significance of that knowledge. On a basic level it is the act of maturation everyone must go through, some more painfully than others. What self-knowledge did Jackson gain?
4. The author was fascinated by the so-called *Generation Gap* of the 1960s, and the inability of those who lived through World War II and the youth of the Vietnam War era to understand each other. Was this a unique phenomenon or an exaggeration of the friction between every consecutive generation? Did you have a similar experience as a teenager? As a parent?
5. Everybody experiences prejudice at some time or another, as either the recipient of or the perpetrator of intolerance. What is your experience of racial, gender or religious prejudice? Did this book open your eyes?
6. Both Charlie Salmon and Kate Hickey could be seen as morally ambiguous characters. Do you feel they were taking advantage of Hymie and Jackson's vulnerability?
7. This story deals with a specific historical time in the United States of America. Does it have any social significance for New Zealand today?

8. Both Spanish *Calo* and *Yiddish* languages feature heavily in the text. What is the significance of including them? Would the book have been the same without them?



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