



BOOK REVIEWS

# TwoBlackEyes and the Unfinished Script

by Tyler Trafford

BY IAN L. SAMUELS    NOVEMBER 21, 2017

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Upon reaching the end of Tyler Trafford's new novel, *TwoBlackEyes and the Unfinished Script*, a reader might have one of three reactions. The first is common on coming to the end of any well-told story: a feeling of not being ready to say goodbye, of wanting more.

The second: a slight confusion or puzzlement over how the story's end crept up so suddenly, similar to how endings can creep up on people in real life. A third reaction, perhaps, is a realization that this touching and bittersweet tale—with its vivid evocation of Alberta life—could actually be based on someone's real story.

That last part is true of Trafford's novel, but the story also gives us something much more. Trafford's previous book, *Almost A Great Escape: A Found Story*, was a multi-award-winning memoir of his relationship with his mother. In his new novel, Trafford takes the core of a real story, that of the late Brandon Flock, an adventurous and creative Calgarian who left an unfinished film script, and imagines it into a fictional coming-of-age tale at once intricately structured, carefully balanced, funny and wise.

The star of *TwoBlackEyes* is Nathan Munro, a high school senior growing up in a loving but constricted and preplanned existence in affluent Elbow Park. Fragile and suffering from pulmonary ailments since childhood, Nathan struggles to find self-confidence while feeling stifled by an overprotective mother and living in the shadow of his brash, adventuresome, larger-than-life father.

Told in spare, efficient prose, the story begins with Nathan escaping into a vividly imagined personal myth about being a prehistoric bull hunter on an ancient steppe named The Land of Ground Thunder Running: "Twenty hide-covered huts circle a fire at dusk. On one side of the camp a group of hunters are binding flints to arrows, and sharpening spears and knives."

Nathan's "palaeolithic life" is both a recurring motif and a metaphor for his quest after manhood and autonomy. In the course of his personal awakening, he discovers a passion for bull-riding, working toward a dream of lasting eight seconds on a bull. His ranch-borne search for identity, and the oddball cast who join him, would make a fine story in their own right.

But what truly elevates *TwoBlackEyes* is Nathan's creative side. A passionate student of film, he's constantly analyzing life through the lens of a three-act structure, with a view toward completing his own movie script someday. This isn't just clever meta-commentary: this aspect of the story has real insight to offer about the characters and their lives, and perhaps about our lives as well. You can hardly ask more from a novel than that.

—*Ian L. Samuels is a Calgary writer.*