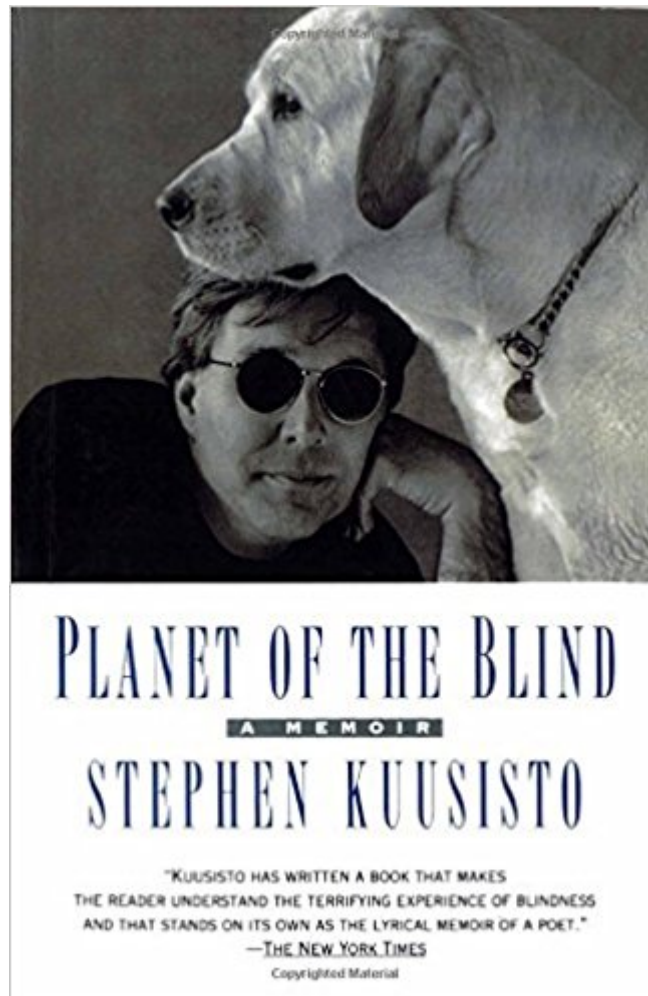


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Planet Of The Blind: A Memoir



Synopsis

"The world is a surreal pageant," writes Stephen Kuusisto. "Ahead of me the shapes and colors suggest the sails of Tristan's ship or an elephant's ear floating in air, though in reality it is a middle-aged man in a London Fog rain coat which billows behind him in the April wind." So begins Kuusisto's memoir, *Planet of the Blind*, a journey through the kaleidoscope geography of the partially-sighted, where everyday encounters become revelations, struggles, or simple triumphs. Not fully blind, not fully sighted, the author lives in what he describes as "the customs-house of the blind", a midway point between vision and blindness that makes possible his unique perception of the world. In this singular memoir, Kuusisto charts the years of a childhood spent behind bottle-lens glasses trying to pass as a normal boy, the depression that brought him from obesity to anorexia, the struggle through high school, college, first love, and sex. Ridiculed by his classmates, his parents in denial, here is the story of a man caught in a perilous world with no one to trust--until a devastating accident forces him to accept his own disability and place his confidence in the one relationship that can reconnect him to the world--the relationship with his guide dog, a golden Labrador retriever named Corky. With Corky at his side, Kuusisto is again awakened to his abilities, his voice as a writer and his own particular place in the world around him. Written with all the emotional precision of poetry, Kuusisto's evocative memoir explores the painful irony of a visually sensitive individual--in love with reading, painting, and the everyday images of the natural world--faced with his gradual descent into blindness. Folded into his own experience is the rich folklore the phenomenon of blindness has inspired throughout history and legend.

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Customer Reviews

"In the country of the blind," the old adage asserts, "the one-eyed man is king." But in Stephen Kuusisto's superb new memoir, *The Planet of the Blind*, the world of a one-eyed man is a kingdom of confusion and quixotic struggle. Born with only residual vision, one eye capable of 20/200 vision and the other unseeing, Kuusisto was led by the insistence of his mother and the ignorance of the society around him to an elaborate and harrowing attempt to appear sighted. At times the effort was life-threatening, as with the bicycle he rode from the ages of 10 to 30 ("Were my years of cycling an actuarial gift?" he wonders), and at other times profoundly humiliating, as when his stumblings and collisions are assumed to be signs of habitual drunkenness. Indeed, the almost inconceivable effort of maintaining his sighted masquerade leads to all sorts of self-destructive behavior, from obesity to anorexia, from booze and cigarettes to drugs and perilous clambers up fire escapes. Most biography is a recounting of struggle that leads to success and achievement, but Kuusisto's story is of a lifelong struggle that leads to acceptance. For this gifted poet, the barely glimpsed visual world is an irresistible temptation, despite pain, embarrassment, and failure. When he finally submits to the white cane and a guide dog, suddenly he can envision a "Planet of the Blind," a place where those without sight live in peace with their own lives, where "everyone is free to touch faces, paintings, gardens," a place where beauty is behind the eye of the beholder. --John Longenbaugh

--This text refers to the Audio Cassette edition.

YAA "I stare at the world through smeared and broken windowpanes," poet and educator Kuusisto writes in the opening pages of this powerful, literary memoir. Weighing less than five pounds at birth, he was incubated with oxygen, as many premies were in the 1950s. His life was saved, but his retinas were severely scarred, leaving him legally blind. With his parents in denial, Kuusisto stumbled through his childhood in regular classrooms, derided by classmates for telescopic glasses and a right eye that continually hopped in its socket. He grew into an angry teen who struggled first with obesity and then with anorexia. Even into adulthood, he was unable to trust or reach out for help until an accident destroyed his residual vision and he finally admitted his need for assistance. In his late 30s he is able to accept his disability and trust a guide dog. Kuusisto's story is about the regeneration of the spirit. "I've taken the slow road to blindness," he writes toward the end of the book, "resisting it like a suspicious skater who fears the river." The author finds solace in both contemporary poetry and classical literature and his journey toward the "planet of the blind" is one

many young adults should find enlightening for its exploration of the physical and psychological struggles of those with disabilities. A Pat Bangs, Fairfax County Public Library, Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audio Cassette edition.

I loved the prose of this author. It was fascinating to enter into his world, which so beautifully rendered. I learned an immense amount about visual impairments and "legal blindness," which I had up until this time mostly thought of as an on/off switch. Not as a gradation of vision. How difficult for the narrator to try to pass as sighted for so long. As with any good memoir I feel I can enter the world more sensitive and understanding of the people around me.

In *Planet of the Blind*, Kuusisto seduces his readers to step behind his flawed eyes and witness a world where nearly everything visual must be imagined, or, acquired through painstaking use of a single eye that is legally, but not completely, blind. His single "seeing" eye may be his Achilles heel throughout his childhood and youth. It is not until he is in his thirties that he acknowledges to himself and the world that he cannot see. *Planet of the Blind* could as easily be *Planet of the Imperfect*. Brilliantly written, both touching and often funny, this is a memoir about coming of age and coming to terms with oneself, imperfections and all, curable or otherwise.

Read this and you will never again take vision for granted. Kuusisto brings the messages of the other senses to life and his biography is a testament to determination and joie de vivre.

wonderful author. recommended by a coworker.

Being a Visually Impaired person myself, I think that this book gives the "sighted people" a true taste of the experiences that most, if not all, Visually Impaired people go through. I can only hope that anyone who has read this book, who has not encountered a visually impaired person or experienced a visual impairment personally, will gain a deeper insight and empathy for those of us who live it every day.

Excellent memoir and reflection on the experience of blindness (and sightedness).

Read *Planet of the Blind* for the beautiful writing even if you are not interested in the fascinating story. Both the writing and the story would seem incredible if the author were not so forthright. I love

this book.

Enlightning

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