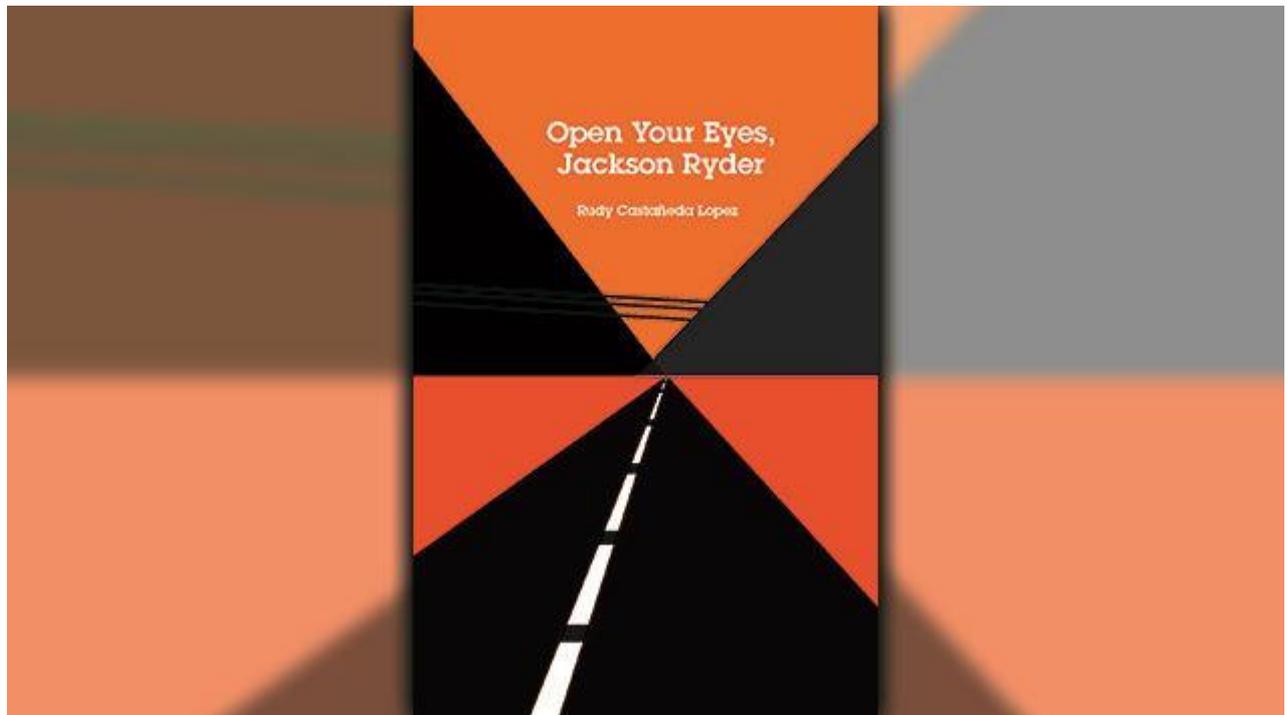


# Stephanie Jones: Book Review - Open Your Eyes, Jackson Ryder by Rudy Castañeda Lopez

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Not a *bildungsroman* in the strict sense, because we see the titular character only across a handful of months in the mid-1960s, Rudy Castañeda Lopez's *Open Your Eyes, Jackson Ryder* is nonetheless a rich coming-of-age story that evokes the intoxicating mood of southern California in a time of war and peace: just as Jackson Ryder is driving from New York City to his new home at the epicentre of the counterculture, JFK goes down and the nation reels. There are debates over what Johnson should do in Vietnam; the Beatles appear on *The Ed Sullivan Show* with no introduction; the Beach Boys emerge as the Fab Four's American rivals.

All of this is happening at the periphery of 15-year-old Jackson's life, for he is preoccupied by more than the usual anxieties of adolescence. Charlie, a friend of Jackson's father Hymie since they met in the field hospital at Monte Cassino, persuades the pair to join him on the West Coast, with Hymie to take a job at his car dealership, after Jackson's mother dies suddenly. Jackson is an only child, and her loss creates a fathomless void and a breach between father and son. Much of the novel has Jackson, a talented artist who finds himself unable to draw in the absence of his mother, trying to find his way back to his father.

Hymie Ryder is utterly adrift, seeking companionship not from his son but from an attractive widow who lives in their apartment complex. Charlie is at moments arrogant and obtuse, even priapic, but his resentment about the role he has had to play in the Ryder family's secret history might be justified. Jackson's art teacher, Lawrence Talbot, identifies and encourages

his young charge's talent, recognizing that Jackson (named, by his art-loving parents, for Pollock) sees the world in the frames and shapes of Miro, Dubuffet, Matisse.

When Jackson, distraught by the combined assaults of romantic rejection, schoolyard bullies and grief, tries to make sense of the world, he ruminates over paintings by Albert Pinkham Ryder, Robert Motherwell and Franz Kline. Lopez's masterful and empathetic depiction of Jackson's interior life is balanced by the novel's second most compelling character, the "Mexican rhyming jive"-speaking Ray Rodriguez who tucks Jackson under his wing.

Ray's aimless charm is both amusing and touching. In one breath he'll appreciate a passerby – "Hey, *muchachita*, be my candy and I'll be your cane" – and in the next, he's inviting his new friend to his sister's *quinceñera*, where Jackson gains a different sense of family.

Lines of culture and art run strong through *Open Your Eyes, Jackson Ryder*, as Lopez, who is Mexican-American and has worked in art education, applies the weight of his considerable knowledge. His writing about art has a captivating immediacy that lends roundness to the young hero and his story, which deserves the appreciation of both young adult readers and their elders.

*Open Your Eyes, Jackson Ryder* is simultaneously layered and direct, with the feeling of something painstakingly crafted. Lopez is a marvelous writer, summoning of world full of danger and promise and proving that the adult domain is no more certain or assured than that of the callow teenager.