

Reading Guides

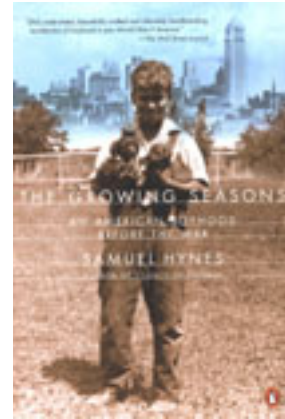
THE GROWING SEASONS

by Samuel Hynes

ISBN 0-14-200396-4

U.S. \$24.95

Genre: Non Fiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Letters



INTRODUCTION

Long before microwave ovens and TV dinners, before tract homes and sprawling subdivisions, before America became a drive-through society wedded to the information superhighway, life went on—though many today can't imagine how. It is during this seemingly quiet time that we meet a young Sam Hynes and, through his eyes, glimpse a bygone way of life that—as the specter of World War II begins to infiltrate a nation through newspaper headlines, radio broadcasts, and telegrams—was already receding into history.

As Hynes pieces together his "scrapbook memories"—photographs, smells, old letters, fleeting glimpses of the past—an extraordinary living, breathing testament to how things used to be unfolds before our eyes. We see Sam spend a summer on a farm, exploring the mysteries of sex and death vis-à-vis the rituals of farm life. Then, a snapshot reveals a newly formed family standing on a Minneapolis street corner—a family led by his proud and private father, whose ethics and morals are rooted in self-sacrificing Christianity, and by a stepmother who can never replace the mother Sam lost.

We see the daily goings-on in a typical less-than-affluent American home as Sam grows up in a modest house provided by his father who never had one of his own. There is frugality and a sense of belonging while happy memories of Christmases and Easters intermingle with less cheerful memories—a father running through the streets to escape a striking mob, a schoolmate's father gunned down in his driveway.

Along with the danger of mobsters, his father's struggling, and the perils of childhood itself, Sam

begins to see a new danger: a war is heating up. For a while, life goes on as usual. But as we see the wide-eyed excitement of young boys expectantly awaiting for their first glimpse of a naked woman in the movies, light dancing across their faces as they sit in a darkened theater, a shadow falls over America. All the neighborhood boys begin leaving for war and a way of life fades into history.

But through it all, we see a truly American boy. One who, as he stands on the tallest building in Minneapolis and looks out over the country of his youth, prepares to go to war and make his mark on the world—just as he did when scrawling his name on a sidewalk years before.

ABOUT SAMUEL HYNES

Samuel Hynes is Woodrow Wilson Professor of Literature Emeritus at Princeton University and the author of several major works of literary criticism, including **The Auden Generation**, **Edwardian Occasions**, and **The Edwardian Turn of Mind**. Hynes's wartime experiences as a Marine Corps pilot were the basis for his highly praised memoir, **Flights of Passage**. **The Soldiers' Tale**, his book about soldiers' narratives of the two world wars and Vietnam, won a Robert F. Kennedy Award. A fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, he lives in Princeton, New Jersey.

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAMUEL HYNES

One of the more moving sections of *The Growing Seasons* occurs when you accompany your father to the home where he and your mother were married. Though your father had no strong ties to a particular place, he wanted to visit where he spent part of his childhood. How often do you return to Minneapolis? Are the houses where you grew up still standing?

Between the time of my graduation from the University of Minnesota in 1947 and the publication of *The Growing Seasons*, I rarely visited Minneapolis—no more than half a dozen times. Yet I continue to think of myself (with a certain pride) as a Midwesterner, and Minneapolis remains my home town—more familiar and more comfortable to me than any other place I've lived.

News of the war moved very slowly compared to today's standards. You left Minneapolis for Seattle with very few signs of the war around you. Upon your return, Minneapolis was

preparing for its own form of battle. Would you have been more or less eager to enlist in the Marines if you'd had the whole story up front?

If you mean, would I have enlisted if I foresaw what my war would be like, yes, I'm sure I would have. I had what some people call "a good war"—that is, an interesting one among young men I liked. I loved flying, and still do. If you mean, if I understood the huge human cost of the war—the 60,000,000 dead (mostly civilians)—I might, perhaps, have paused. But in spite of the dying it still seems to me to have been a just and necessary war.

In recalling various teachers by whom you were taught, you prefer certain styles and, of course, certain teachers. How did those teachers affect your own teaching?

I don't think my teaching was affected by any of my high school teachers—certainly none of them was a model for me. But at the University of Minnesota I was taught by a great writer who was also an exemplary teacher and a good man—Robert Penn Warren. I'd like to think I learned some of his virtues.

This is a very personal and unsentimental memoir. Publishing such a book often brings people out of the woodwork to concur with or contest how events are portrayed. Has anyone approached you since publication to refute your claims? Are there any relationships you've reestablished after publishing this book?

My reconnection with friends of my youth began while I was researching the book, and went back for my fiftieth high school reunion. I found that friends whom I hadn't seen for forty or fifty years were still my friends, and the old conversations were simply taken up again. It was a moving experience. So was seeing all those old faces, with the young faces looking out of them. That's when I knew I'd have to write the book.

Your first memoir, *Flights of Passage* takes up where *The Growing Seasons* leaves off. How did writing the two books differ? Which was more difficult emotionally? Logistically?

Flights was an easier book to write because the war provided an historical armature that gave the book shape, and because it provided me with stories that were more dramatic, and more significant, than an ordinary young man's life could provide. *Growing Seasons* was more difficult, partly, I think, because I'd written *Flights*, and knew more about the problems of memoir-writing, which is more like writing a novel than it is like writing the literary history I'd written before. Emotionally, both books stirred up memories, and both forced me to know myself differently, and more fully, I think. As for logistics, *Flights* presented no problems: I had my

logbooks, which record my flying day-by-day, with armaments, targets, all that. **The Growing Seasons** required a good deal of research into Minneapolis police files, newspapers, and other people's memories—which then had to be written as a boy's experiences.

How did this memoir come about? When writing it, did you start with memories and fill in the facts? Or were facts—from newspaper stories to old yearbooks—the framework of the narrative?

See above. I began filling notebooks with stories and phrases about my young days even before I published *Flights*, so I suppose I had the intention to write *Growing Seasons* for some ten or twelve years before I actually began to block it out and write it. The framework of the narrative grew as I wrote, but began as roughly chronological stages of my growing. I intended that both the space of the book and the vocabulary should expand as I grew; but I don't know if any readers have noticed that

With few exceptions, most of your friends growing up were boys. Today, the gender lines within friend groups are often blurred. Do you think the accident involving Rosemary Murphy might have been prevented if boys and girls had interacted more as friends? Do you think the accident affected the way you viewed and treated women as time moved on?

I learned from Rosemary Murphy's accident what pain and suffering look like. And perhaps the lesson that dangerous stunts may have consequences (though I'm afraid I never really learned patience, or prudence, or caution—as the reader of *Flights* will see.) The lesson of how a man should treat a woman is one I've spent my whole life learning, and am still not all the way to the complete answer.

What are you working on now?

I've just begun writing a book about the young Americans who flew on the Western Front in the First World War. It's not a military history, more an interweaving of personal narratives of many of those pilots, some of them famous, more of them unknown and unimportant in the war story, but interesting, touching, sad in their own (often short) lives. I want to capture how they lived, how they flew, how they dealt with fear, how they killed, how they died. Paris and London, wine and women will be there, too. I'm interesting in the ways in which their lives were like my own in the next war, and the ways they were different. But it's early days, and the book will take on its own identity as we proceed together.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Hynes mentions the tendency of adults to keep secrets and shelter children from what they might not understand. Have you kept secrets from children that, in hindsight, should have been explained to them? Is there anything your parents kept from you growing up that you wish had been discussed?
2. Life in Minneapolis and across America went on as usual—but also subtly, crucially different—in the months leading up to World War II. Do you see any similarities with the current state of affairs in America? Is our determination to go on as usual a result of denial?
3. Hynes is masterful at evoking smells, which many argue are inextricably linked to memory, and using them to tell a story. Are there any smells that remind you of an event or time in your life? Are there any smells that, though most people find them pleasant, are ruined for you by their attachment to a particular event?
4. Hynes and his friends had to go out of their way to see sexual imagery. How has mass media changed how American youth discover sex? What are the advantages and disadvantages?
5. Looking back through his family, Hynes sees a pattern of marrying out of necessity. With today's debates over the nature and importance of the institution, how does marriage as a business transaction affect the argument? Should such marriages be considered less valid than those rooted in true love?
6. Hynes's first experiences with death, other than that of his mother, were on a farm. Do you think witnessing the killing of animals on a farm for food, clothing, and population control is healthy for a child? Do you think the modern American way of handling death is more healthy?
7. Americans of Asian descent were rounded up and interred during World War II—Hynes sees the buses being boarded in Seattle. Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and even Lutherans were pigeonholed and separated. Is the nation, in your opinion, now more inclusive? Or have different cultures, nationalities, and religions had to assimilate to the point of being generic in order to gain acceptance?

8. At what point in the book, if any, do you think Hynes truly becomes an adult? Is it a result of having his first sexual experience or is adulthood more elusive and difficult to pin down?