

"[An] understated, beautifully crafted and ultimately heartbreaking recollection of boyhood in pre-World War II America."

—*The Wall Street Journal*

SAMUEL HYNES

**Featured
commentator
in Ken Burns's
*The War***

THE GROWING SEASONS

AN AMERICAN BOYHOOD
BEFORE THE WAR

SAMUEL HYNES

AUTHOR OF *FLIGHTS OF PASSAGE*

The Growing Seasons: An American Boyhood Before the War, Samuel Hynes, Penguin, 2004, 0142003964, 9780142003961, 291 pages. For Americans who grew up in the 1930s, the phrase "before the war" calls up a distant time as remote from the way we live now as some foreign country. Looking back with a clear-eyed, unsentimental gaze, Samuel Hynes describes his midwestern boyhood during the lean times of the Great Depression: his father's wandering search for work; a long, hot summer on a farm; rough-and-tumble games in city alleys; the temptations of sex, stealing, and drinking; the wonder of falling in love for the first time. With eloquence and humor Hynes recaptures the dreams, adventures, sins, and triumphs of his American boyhood in the years of hardship and innocence before the war..

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The Time of My Life An Autobiography From the Greatest Generation, Tom Erwin, Jun 3, 2005, Biography & Autobiography, . .

Dark of the Eye , Douglas Clegg, Aug 1, 1994, , 336 pages. Emerging from a tragic accident with supernatural powers, eleven-year-old Hope Stewart becomes prey to her scientist father's exploitation, a government agent intent on murder

High Spirits , David Huddle, 1989, Fiction, 259 pages. Eleven short stories that unfold the illusions and truths of love, by a writer of enormous talent and style."The High Spirits explores a special territory-- something of a

Glory Day , Paul Darcy Boles, 1979, Fiction, 321 pages. .

Assignment in hell , Winston W. De Vergee, 1991, Biography & Autobiography, 119 pages. .

The Family Overhead , Joseph William Meagher, Feb 5, 2004, Fiction, . When Con and Margaret Mary Skilly, an elderly couple who have always longed for children, begin finding abandoned children left and right, they never question their good luck

A heaven in the eye , Clyde Rice, Aug 1, 1984, Literary Criticism, 350 pages. The eighty-one-year-old author, in his first book, recalls his early life in Oregon and San Francisco, his varied occupations, and the joys of western America in the twenties

The Same River Twice A Memoir, Chris Offutt, Mar 25, 2003, Biography & Autobiography, 192 pages. Chris Offuttauthor of the critically acclaimed story collectionsKentucky Straight and Out of the Woods,the novelThe Good Brother,and the memoir No Heroes, lives in Iowa City, Iowa..

The Body Spoken , Janice Deaner, Apr 1, 2000, Family & Relationships, 352 pages. In the latest novel by the author of Where Blue Begins, two strangers meet on a train to L.A., both fleeing from wrecked lives, and without exchanging names, a deep intimacy

Minke Whales , A. Rus Hoelzel, S. Jonathan Stern, 2000, Nature, 48 pages. Discusses the biology and behavior of the minke whale and the relationship between these creatures and humans..

New Stories from the South , Z. Z. Packer, Kathy Pories, 2008, Fiction, 428 pages. Celebrated writer Packer takes the editorial helm of this signature series and selects 20 rock-solid stories that reflect the geography, people, and way of life in the South..

MythBusters The Explosive Truth Behind 30 of the Most Perplexing Urban Legends of All Time, Keith Zimmerman, Oct 25, 2005, Fiction, 224 pages. Special effects experts and hosts of Discovery Channel's "MythBusters" use modern-day science to show what's real and what's fiction, providing the explosive truth behind the

The GI Generation A Memoir, Frank Furlong Mathias, 2000, Biography & Autobiography, 267 pages. Raised during the Great Depression, Mathias became a member of a fighting force the likes

of which the world had never known, a legion now called "The Greatest Generation." The

Flights of Passage Recollections of a World War II Aviator, Samuel Hynes, Samuel Lynn Hynes, 2005, Bomber pilots, 270 pages. This title provides a gripping, literary recollection of a pilot's experiences during World War II..

The Obituary Writer: A Novel , Ann Hood, Mar 4, 2013, Fiction, 304 pages. An obituary writer searching for her missing lover at the turn of the 20th century is linked to a woman considering leaving her loveless marriage in 1963 in this literary

For Americans who grew up in the 1930s, the phrase "before the war" calls up a distant time as remote from the way we live now as some foreign country. Those years of the Great Depression were lean ones for most Americans; jobs were scarce and nobody had any money. But all was not struggle and hardship; it was also a time of innocence, kindness, and generosity. It is this special time that Samuel Hynes, a distinguished scholar and wartime marine pilot, captures in this lyrical memoir of his midwestern boyhood.

Born in 1924, Sam Hynes grew up in cities and towns and on farms around the country, following his father to wherever there was work, and eventually to Minneapolis. Though Hynes's family lived through hard times, he remembers his early years not as a time of pinched deprivation but as a golden stretch of opportunities and discoveries. Looking back with a clear-eyed, unsentimental gaze, Hynes describes the rough-and-tumble games in back alleys and a long hot summer on a farm, the temptations of sex, stealing, and drinking, and the wonder of falling in love for the first time. Here, too, are deeply etched portraits of Hynes's widowed father and of the feisty widow he brought home to be stepmother to his sons. Hynes's new memoir recaptures what came before the war he fought in: his dreams, his adventures, his sins and triumphs. Moving, written with great clarity and humor, *The Growing Seasons* is the story of a truly American boyhood.

Hynes's literary style is best defined by Mr. Mulligan, one of his former writing teachers, who said good writing is "plain as a pine board, clear as well water." This honest, scrupulously organized study of Hynes's Depression-era boyhood has the simple effectiveness of a family photograph. Son of a widower and "sort-of" son of an undemonstrative stepmother, Hynes (*Flights of Passage*) learned farming and describes chores and his experiences in the outdoors matter-of-factly. He captures the smell of a skunk as "a pungent cloud that soaked me like a sudden shower of rain." Violent details of a teamster's strike don't quite spring to life, but his admiration for gangsters of the era conveys a youngster's awe. The book is particularly touching when Hynes lays out his father's steel-strong work ethic and belief in meeting his obligations while standing on his own feet. There's a piercing sweetness in the portrait of Hynes's first sexual experience, when his guilty girlfriend is told to say hundreds of Hail Marys and never see him again. His assessments of "how it feels to be really drunk" and first seeing a girl "in the perfection of her nakedness" are starkly realistic. Like a stunningly precise diary, Hynes dwells on nothing, nor does he artificially heighten events, not even stories about two local murders. What Hynes achieves with journalistic eloquence is showing a way of life and presenting an affectionate portrait of people who rarely verbalize their feelings but show love in subtle, unexpected ways.

In this moving memoir, Princeton professor Hynes (lauded for his accounts of his World War II experiences) traces his boyhood from birth until he entered the navy. Born into a staunch midwestern, Scotch-Irish Presbyterian family in 1924, Hynes saw his world abruptly change when his mother died. The Depression hit soon after, and his father found himself scrambling around the country, desperately searching out work with two small boys in tow. Hynes' father soon married an industrious Catholic widow with three children of her own, a relationship that was as much a business arrangement as a romantic proposition. Throughout it all, Hynes sifts through the small details that make up a childhood: the summer spent earning his keep on a Minnesota farm, the intricate games he played with his siblings and neighbors, and the remarkable stories spun by his father and stepmother. Placing his boyhood perspective into a historical context, Hynes revisits the major events of the time. His crisp writing evokes nostalgic memories of a time long past while

successfully avoiding sentimentality. Brendan Dowling

Samuel Hynes takes us to Depression-era Minneapolis, where he covers all the bases of coming of age, but the real star of the book is Sam's father, who struggles through hard times, moving from city to city in search of stable employment, finally finding it as an oil salesman in Minneapolis. He loses that job, too, only to open a City Service gas station, always seeming to bounce back. The man is a rock.

What's memorable about the man is his values. When his first wife dies, he remarries, not so much for love, but to find a mother for his two sons. At Thanksgiving, he asks for the neck from the turkey, claiming he prefers it to a leg or a breast. When his son dents the running board on his new car, he's grateful his boy is all right. He seems to understand that boys have to try things out, to take a risk here and there, even if it's buying a phony driver's license and carousing with his pals at roadside beer joints. There's a scene where Sam's father is on his death bed where finally he asks for a little understanding. Just before he dies, he says, "I gave up a lot."

Sam is also an endearing character. His first sexual experience is as clumsy as most everybody's is. He's not even sure he got the job done. The book ends with Sam leaving for Navy flight school a couple of years into WWII. By that time you've made friends with Sam and you won't want the book to end. But take heart, Hynes has written several other memoirs about his war experience: *FLIGHTS OF PASSAGE* being the most memorable.

This is a prequel to the author's great war memoir, *Flights of Passage*, which I read with much appreciation 23 May 2001. If you have not read that book, by all means read this one first, then read it. This book is an account of a not extraordinary boyhood, but it is told in a poignant, if a bit mocking, way. When I finished it, I found myself much impressed by the way he told the story. It maybe helped that Hynes is only a few years older than I am, and that his account of a single summer doing farm work in Minnesota was filled with things I remember from my youth on an Iowa farm. It was another world and a time now irretrievably past, and I think this is an elegantly told growing up story I enjoyed as much as I did Russell Baker's memorable classic (*Growing Up*, read 11 Apr 1986) and Jimmy Carter's *An Hour Before Daylight* (read 11 Mar 2001).

The now storied "Greatest Generation" did not come full-blown into glory. It evolved from childhood, and Samuel Hynes' gentle, understated and illuminating memoir, "The Growing Seasons," assists in our understanding of how the generation that fought and won World War II came to be. Fiercely independent, perpetually inquisitive and unabashedly self-conscious, Samuel Hynes comes of age in America's heartland during the Great Depression. His story, crafted with gentle humor and exquisite detail, gains transcendence and slowly emerges as a representation of millions of youngsters grappling with the age-old obligation of developing an identity, but doing so in an era of frayed innocence and material dispossession.

Loss and impermanence permeate Hynes' childhood. His father stoically accepts the death of his wife, unemployment as a result of a contracting economy and his own inability to serve the nation he so deeply loves. This unspoken patriotism and sense of place nurture the young Hynes, who never overcomes the gaping wound of losing his mother to a premature death. Motherloss uproots the Hynes' family; the father swallows prejudice and remarries a Catholic and Samuel begins the process of healing and carrying on with life.

While his father settles into his second family, Hynes spends a summer on a farm. The city boy discovers new cadences to life, a different pattern to work. Most importantly, Samuel gains a sense of his own past. "For one season I had been one, like my father...and all those other country people in our family." With solemn pride, Hynes announces, "I had been my ancestors." With this knowledge of self, Hynes is better able to comprehend the modernizing influences besetting his altered family in Minneapolis during the 1930s. [Read more ›](#)

One of the keys to this charming book is how many BAD things Sam and his friends do, that prove to be so interesting to read about! His style is understated, self-effacing. Flat, almost, but in a good

way, all the cards on the table. I spent four years in Iowa and at the time someone told me that the adjective for Midwesterners wasn't "innocent" or anything like that, but "uncomplicated." You're used to seeing everything around you, all the way to the horizon. So maybe you lack a layer of artifice.

I'll illustrate. His mother dies when Sam is a young boy, and his father (a stern but wonderfully forgiving fellow) remarries. Sam never figures out what to call his stepmother, so he avoids the issue completely. Permanently! This is remarkable. My wife had the same problem vis-à-vis my parents. It was kind of comical and kind of embarrassing on all fronts, but she figured it out a few days into our first extended visit with them. Sam never manages, yet seems to think nothing of it. Apart from remarking on the fact, he just goes on with things. Some readers may find this lack of navel-gazing a flaw, but I kind of liked it. It's more neutral, one might say scientific, and draws you in to the story. You can interpret things for yourself. He may answer that question of mine in his other books, or he may not, but with his winning style I know it will be fine reading right through it and around it.

Another example comes near the end, pages 241-242, springtime of Sam's senior year in high school, World War Two looming, when he ponders the nature of women, and convertible automobiles, and describes how a guy a year or two older reveals to him and his friends an important secret about women, and sex. [Read more](#) ›

I picked this book up because my Dad was born in 1927. He died in 1995 and I never learned much about his everyday life or the the people he knew. This is a midwestern book and Dad grew up in Michigan so I see a lot of cultural similarities. Compared to my own boyhood years (I'm 55 this year), life and times hadn't changed too much, except that I had a lot more stuff than he probably did.

I was hooked from line one of this book. Hynes' simple and direct style of writing quickly whisks you back 70-plus years and tells you -shows you - how it was. And it wasn't easy for Sam Hynes either, orphaned at an early age and moving from place to place, being farmed out and coping with a step-mother. But in spite of all this, you also get a sense of the fun of being a boy in the midwest during the depression. Kids don't always know when they're poor; they're too busy learning and experienci...more I was hooked from line one of this book. Hynes' simple and direct style of writing quickly whisks you back 70-plus years and tells you -shows you - how it was. And it wasn't easy for Sam Hynes either, orphaned at an early age and moving from place to place, being farmed out and coping with a step-mother. But in spite of all this, you also get a sense of the fun of being a boy in the midwest during the depression. Kids don't always know when they're poor; they're too busy learning and experiencing things and trying to get the most out of every day. The sequel to *The Growing Seasons* is equally good: *Flights of Passage*. I wish Sam would continue his personal story and tell us what happened after he came home from the war. I do know from talking with him that he was back in the Marines during Korea. There's gotta be another great story in there somewhere. If you're from the midwest and love good storytelling, read this book. Hell, you don't have to be midwestern. It's just darn good writing. (less)

This is the book I wish my grandfather had written. I picked it up after noting some biographical similarities the author shared with him: born nearly the same year (thus the depression loomed over their childhoods), childhood in Minneapolis (St Paul in my grandfather's case), mother died young, and finally off to fly in WWII. There is little plot; just vignettes of his childhood from his earliest memories to the moment he is off to war. Some are big moments, such as a car accident in high schoo...more This is the book I wish my grandfather had written. I picked it up after noting some biographical similarities the author shared with him: born nearly the same year (thus the depression loomed over their childhoods), childhood in Minneapolis (St Paul in my grandfather's case), mother died young, and finally off to fly in WWII. There is little plot; just vignettes of his childhood from his earliest memories to the moment he is off to war. Some are big moments, such as a car accident in high school, but most are small, such as getting caught stealing from the toy store. This focus on the small is a strength of this book, and it shows you how hard it is to do. My grandfather was a great storyteller, and shared with me some poignant moments of growing up, but relating some things take real reflection, research and possibly courage - and, in the end, are just as valuable to the listener: what did you think of your stepmother? your siblings? what was your house like and what did you have for dinner? what did you do for fun, in the summer and in the winter? what happened in

the news that affected your life? what made you proud as a child? scared? what were the (de-)merits of your friends? how did it go with the girls? how did your father influence you? why did you take that first job? what did you do that was stupid?

Hynes is careful to tell the stories of these questions in his own mischievous-but-reflective voice, rather than a psychotherapeutic voice. He seems a bit awed that this haphazard childhood produced the seed of the life that could later reflect on it (he became a literary critic at Princeton) - but it is an awe of tone rather than word, as he is careful never to step out of chronology, rarely mentioning his life after Minneapolis and never his career. I came to share that awe as a parent in 2010 - the freedom he had, even as a young child, is never to return for children. By taking it away, we lessen the risks of childhood, and, as Hynes subtly reminds us, the joys as well.

As a resident of south Minneapolis, I also enjoyed the geography of his story. You can still drive by the house that is the centerpiece for much of the story, and see other places and corners he mentions. Of course many are gone - Nicollet ball park, the trolleys, Central High School - but that only enhances the value of his published memories about them. (less)

If you live in Minnesota, grew up in Minnesota (Iowa, Wisconsin, North Dakota, South Dakota), if you are old enough to get senior discounts, "The Growing Seasons," might be made required reading. If you live somewhere else, "The Growing Seasons," is recommended reading. Samuel Hynes crafts tickling nostalgia, he recreates history from an enviable memory. He writes sparingly, beautifully. Just a wonderful volume.

It was a very comforting book, describing life in a time much less complex than our own. I could compare it to eating meatloaf and mashed potatoes. It became less comfortable when WWII arrived with Pearl Harbor forcing the US into the war, and also meant that some of the idyllic memories of the author were shattered by deaths of boyhood friends. SHynes has a nice writing style, very straightforward, easy to read.

The tone of Hynes's recapture of things past is one of appreciative wonder, tinged with a spirit of celebration and ultimate fulfillment. One suspects that he has religiously kept notebooks and saved the occasional Depression-era snapshot from early childhood. There is certainly no whimpering or whining in these pages, no grudges to nurse, no scores to settle. Times were hard, to be sure, and his father, Samuel Hynes Sr., had a hard time finding and keeping a job, though overall he was a marvelously stoical and responsible influence on his son. "â€" Andrew Sarris

The Yale professor of medicine Sherwin Nuland begins *Lost in America: A Journey With My Father* by evoking the depression that in his forties so debilitated him that only one doctor protested against his being lobotomized. This was, he thinks, the culmination of his unresolved relationship with his father, who "walks with me through every day of my life, in that unsteady, faltering gait that so embarrassed me when I was a boy." Meyer Nudelman cowed his family with his rage, but a mysterious, crippling illness also made him insecure and dependent. Only later, in medical school, did Nuland guess that his father had suffered from syphilis.

It is hard to imagine men with more to hide from their sons than those who participated in the Third Reich. Sigfrid Gauch's 1979 memoir of his Nazi father has been translated into English by William Radice, under the title *Traces Of My Father*. Gauch describes his "schizophrenic" situation, in which he had to learn "to love my father as a person but to be horrified by his personality."