

# Growing Pains by Ian Whates: Review

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## Review: Growing Pains by Ian Whates

A publisher and writer for some time, Ian Whates is something of an anomaly to a new writer, transcending the small press and moving amongst the larger imprints. He is involved in the Science Fiction genre on many levels, connecting with writers, editors, publishers and more across the United Kingdom and further.

As a writer, his work bears comparison to the best in the genre and his publishing background is clearly demonstrated in the quality of the copy. *Growing Pains* as a book is a beautiful thin hardback volume – the sort any reader would like to place on a bookshelf.

However, to admire only the shell is to ignore the creature inside. This collection of short stories gives a clear sense of the writer's skill. Each tells an unrelated story of science fiction in a multitude of possible futures. The common theme lies in the approach. Ian begins with the familiar – characters walking dogs, driving into car parks and waking up early on a Saturday morning and then moves us into the different, future or alien context. It is this process that invokes the media friendly term 'transrealism', applied to Philip K. Dick and Margaret Atwood. Granted, the short story may not be the form to explore these environments in detail, but the way in which we establish the real and transfer to the unreal is the common strength of the works.

Ian's ability to construct a scene and characters we can identify with is clearly evident in each of the stories. The first three – the titular *Growing Pains*, *The Assistant* and *Walking the Dog* all use first person and begin with the familiar. Each has their strength and provides an unusual perspective on the circumstances of each story. *Walking the Dog* is probably my preference of these with its twist and message delivered in the third act. This also introduces the theme of remembered pain and reflection, which we return to in other stories.

The first person viewpoint serves to set apart the fourth story, *Morphs*, written in third and less familiar in its introduction. This is a complex tale of transformation between human and 'morph' – a far more dangerous entity than its Aardman namesake. Certainly *Morphs* could be a starting point rather than an ending. The better works in the collection build to a clear message, whereas the weaker ones seem less formed. There is never a question of rushing, Ian is too accomplished a writer, but occasionally you are left feeling like the story could be developed further.

The fifth story, *Peeling an Onion* is a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts and covers a lot of ground in a short set of pages. The conclusion is perhaps a tiny bit obvious, but after it comes *A Question of Timing*. This is a clear highlight, offering perhaps the most humanity and least science fiction content of all. Imaginary friend tales are common, but rarely do they draw such a clear character and invoke such real identification. In this, Ian reserves his transformational talents for the coming of age of his main subject as he deals with pain and loss. The locations are drawn like a real memoir and the work shines in its place at the centre of the book.

*Coffee Break* is next, evoking images of modern middle-eastern conflict and the impersonalised distance soldiers adopt when defining their enemy. I felt this theme could have been explored more, particularly if Bud's detachment were cracked in some way beyond his coffee crutch, revealing more of the humanity beneath his professional façade. Because of this, the ending feels a little well-

trodden and the story lacks the powerful message it might have had if it were taken in a different direction.

*The Outsider* is perhaps intentionally the most difficult story to connect with owing to its defamiliarised premise. Written in mostly told narration and expositing the life of Kenneth John from beginning to end, there is a distance between us and the subject, which is bridged tentatively by told emotion. Nevertheless, the whole sum of human experience narrated demonstrates the holistic attraction an observer might have to our linear journey. The message here – of the need for pain in our lives so we can understand pleasure, or bad things to measure against good things, certainly paints a portrait of humanity for our observer.

*Hobbies* is perhaps the most complete story. The ending, a cleverly worked surprise that doesn't feel like contrived justice for our protagonist. The use of distance in the exposition – the far past mirrors the observational habits of the main character, the writing becoming more immediate as events catch up and overtake him.

*Shop Talk* delivers a powerful message of future prejudice. The switch to a younger female lead from the viewpoints in previous stories is a refreshing change and Ian demonstrates his ability to manage a character with different priorities. In this situation we see clearly how the old can learn from the open minded attitude of youth. The use of familiar archetypes, such a new shop in town also pokes a little fun at a particular English village attitude. The shop itself as a character and plot novum performs admirably on a number of levels and the story is a stark warning against insular individuals and societies trapped by the rules they make for themselves.

The final story, *Piano Song* is haunting and its images linger long after the reading. A familiar form of long narrative and exposition with one character exploring the space echoes *A Question of Timing* and *The Outsider*. Again we're immersed in a story of loss and pain, of echoing memories and a very personal magic. In this we don't need an explanation of how the unexplained occurs. The surreal path of memory, mixing told story with exploration of the house and using the familiar sound of the piano as a link flows nicely into the reflective conclusion and brings us to the end of the book with a vivid picture of how we have left, closing the door just as we close the cover.