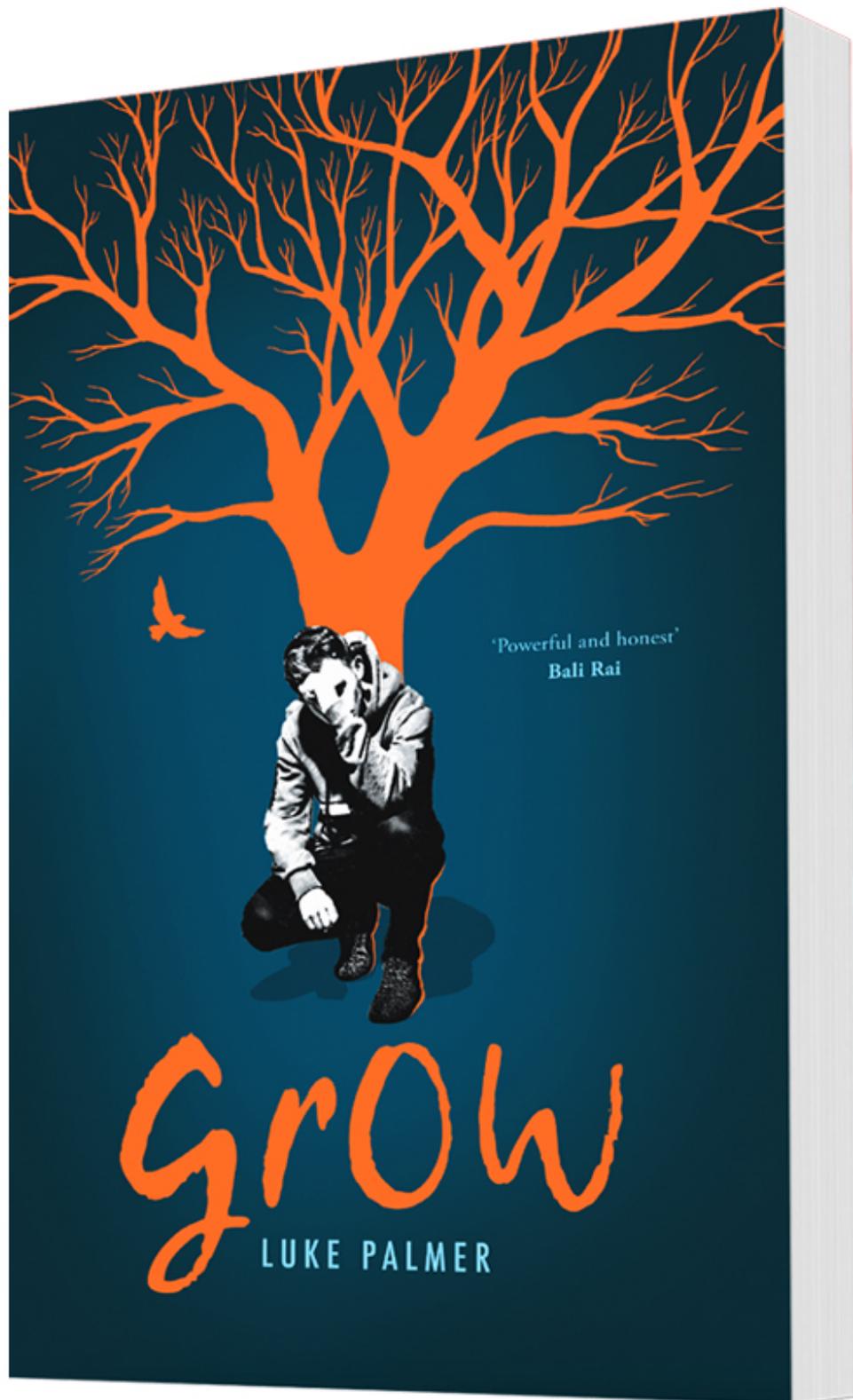


Grow - GCSE Extracts



This extract comes from the beginning of the novel. The narrator, Josh, is fifteen.

Mum burns the toast, again. The blare of the fire alarm cuts through my dream and has me on my feet in seconds, waving a pillow at the flashing plastic disc on the landing outside my room. It takes a few more painful moments to clear the sensor.

‘Sorry love. Would you like some?’ Mum’s head appears around the banister. There are big red circles under her eyes. The fire alarm’s light carries on flashing for a while after the sound stops and it feels like there’s a place in my ears where it’s still echoing.

‘Please,’ I croak, suddenly aware of myself standing in a pair of grotty boxer shorts. I’ve passed the age when it’s OK for your mum to see you in your pants.

I have a quick shower and put my uniform on, lug my backpack downstairs and sit at the table. Mum smiles and pushes a plate towards me, and a mug of tea. Despite having burned the last round – hers – the toast is cold. The tea’s not much warmer. I wonder how long she’s been up, waiting for me.

She leans back against the counter, her dressing gown coming apart a bit at her neck. I stare at my plate, pick up crumbs that have spilled over the edge with the end of my finger. Neither of us speak. A few times she looks like she might be about to say something, ask me about what I’ll be doing today, how my friends are getting on, whether I’ve done all my homework. But she doesn’t.

It didn’t used to be like this. Mornings used to be full of noise and energy and lost keys and the cats needing feeding and making sure I had my lunch and have I got my bus card and where did I leave that folder and when’ll you be home this evening.

But not anymore.

After a few minutes Mum turns away, starts opening and closing cupboards and making scribbled notes on a pad we keep stuck to the front of the fridge. It’s Thursday, the day of the big shop, which means she’ll be late home.



I finish eating and go back upstairs to clean my teeth. The fire alarm still blinks at me on the landing. I keep the tap running, rinsing my mouth a few times to get the gritty, burnt crumbs out. They get stuck and turn into doughy sludge.

On my way out of the house, Mum stops me in the hallway and puts her hand on my cheek – just holds it there and looks at me. She’s been doing this a lot recently. I think it’s because my eyes are the same level as hers now. I smile. She does too. And then I walk through the door.

After reading this extract, a student said:

“It’s clear that Josh’s mother isn’t presented as a happy character. I don’t think Josh knows how he can help.”

To what extent do you agree?



This extract is from the middle of the book. On the morning after a party, Josh finds himself in an unfamiliar place.

I wake up. Or at least my right eye wakes up. My left seems glued down, pushed hard into clammy, wet mud.

Grimacing, I gather my hands from wherever they have fallen at the ends of my cold arms, put them under my chest and push myself clear of the ground.

I'm freezing. The cold starts at my shoulder blades, nibbling away, then takes great chunks of my leg and finally swallows my feet.

I roll over. And last night comes back in one violent tumble.

My trainers are ruined, caked in yellow-brown clay. There's a rip, about a foot long, down one leg of my trousers. The top of the tear is red with blood. I must have caught myself on a nail when I squeezed under the fence. I probe it with a gentle finger. It's swollen and ugly, but the bleeding has stopped.

My shirt is in strips, blood-stained, covered in mud and stinking like the first time I got drunk with Jamie. I check my cheek, just beneath the eye that won't open. That too has stopped bleeding, but that may be because of the mud that has crusted over it.

I stretch my limbs to check that everything's still there. Nothing feels broken. Just sore. And cold.

My phone says 5:48. The light feels strange: ash grey and milky, but clean. There's a smell that is the same: clean. And there's a song playing in my head.

It's not in my head. The rise and fall of notes are coming from nearby. I turn slowly towards it. On the top of the wooden fence that I crawled under last night there is a blackbird. It's looking at me.

'Morning,' I croak.



The blackbird turns its head, flies off. I watch it as it comes to rest on a stone wall about five metres in front of me. Patches of moss, cascades of green leaves and purple flowers cover most of the wall's significant height. I realise there are walls on three sides of me and, with the wooden hoarding at my back, I'd say I was lying in a pretty even-sided square.

The blackbird trills on, and above its head a scurry of wings brings two more birds into view. I don't know what these birds are, but when they move they look like pale blue streaks. One of them arches its flight to land in the branches of a small tree in the corner of the square. When it lands, I see its chest is yellow against the bush's purple spears of flowers.

I force myself upright, every joint in my body complaining.

I realise that it's not mud I've been lying on, but grass – bushy tufts of dew-wet grass. I rip chunks of it off in my fists and rub them gently against the sides of my face. They come away streaked with brown, yellow and red.

I take my shoes off and beat them on the ground, scour their edges against the grass, trying to get rid of the worst of their clay jackets. This is working. I look for anything else I can use.

The moss on the wall comes away in great, sodden handfuls. Up close, it looks like it's made from intricate ropes of tiny, furry stars. Before I question what I'm doing, I jam a fistful against the pain in my leg. At first, the cold water that flows from it is like another nail entering my flesh, but that soon subsides and the sharp pain of the cut lessens and is replaced by a warm throb. I do the same to my cheek and almost sigh in pleasure as a spigot of water runs into the corner of my mouth. My tongue, like my cheek, begins to numb and warm. I start to feel clean.

Well, cleaner.

After reading this extract, a student said:

“Josh starts off being very uncomfortable in this new environment. But, after a while, I think he realises that the natural world can help him.”

To what extent do you agree?

This extract comes towards the end of the novel. Josh and Dana are working in the garden. Dana stops digging and tells Josh about her childhood.

Dana props her spade against the wall and sits on the grass, hugging her knees. 'When she was growing up, Mum had lots of run-ins with Social Services. None of them nice, apparently. And she'd do anything to keep them off her back now. Off my back.'

She's addressing the walls as much as me. I get the sense that if I sat next to her she'd lose the ability to speak.

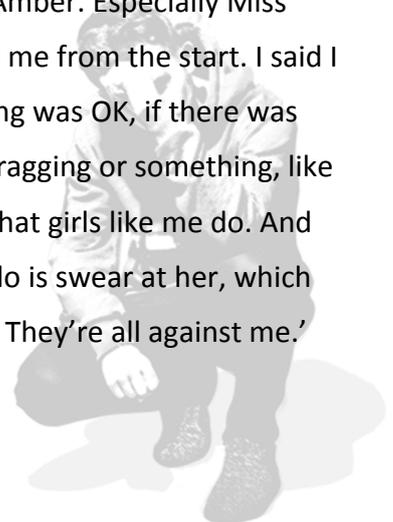
'Like I said before, Carl was very kind to us when we were kids. Little kids, I mean. Hard to believe it now I guess, but he always made sure Mum had what she needed, for me, so the school wouldn't know what was going on with Dad. The Police neither. After Dad left I acted up quite a bit. I'd run off to town on my own. Got picked up for shoplifting a few times. This was all in primary school. They were useless, just ruffled my hair and told me not to do it again. And Carl was always there, would straighten things out, turn on the charm when the Police brought me home. I think they thought he was my brother. Or step-dad. And he's still doing it – covering our tracks.'

'Covering his own tracks, too.'

'Yeah. So Mum never reports it if I don't come home for a few nights, and she phones in every day to say I'm ill when Carl tells her to. It's like she's working for him. And everyone at school judges me as some kind of slut. All they saw was the jewellery and clothes and stuff that he was giving me, back before... That's why I don't really have friends anymore.'

'What about Miss Amber?'

Dana looks for a second like she's ready to spill blood. 'Even Miss Amber. Especially Miss Amber. I kind of told her about him once, even though she's hated me from the start. I said I had an older boyfriend. She said she'd heard and asked if everything was OK, if there was anything I wanted to tell her. I said no. Maybe she thought I was bragging or something, like my friends did. Maybe just thought it was inevitable. That that's what girls like me do. And now every time I try to talk to her I just get so angry, and all I can do is swear at her, which just makes things worse. So I can't tell her. I can't tell any of them. They're all against me.'



‘What about Mr Walters? He’s alright, isn’t he?’ I don’t know why I say this. I regret it instantly.

‘No. Him neither.’ Dana seems to shiver.

‘The police?’

‘What are they going to do about it? They never did anything when Dad was still around. Or after he left. Maybe they’d care now, about Carl and what he’s doing, but why would they

bother with someone like me, who...’

I stop turning soil, lean on the fork.

Dana can tell that I’ve stopped, picks at the grass between her heels, doesn’t turn. ‘But *you*. For some reason I feel comfortable with you. Talking to you. And *you* can still get out of this, no matter what he’s said. I know he’s pushed the right buttons with you. He did with me, in the beginning, started talking to me about my dad leaving and how angry I must be and—’

‘It’s not the same though, is it?’ I’m sorry for my flash of anger as soon as it’s released. I take it out on the earth, picking up the fork again and ramming it into the ground. My stitched hand starts to sting.

Dana whirls round to look at me now. ‘For fuck’s sake, Josh. You don’t have some kind of trump card on absent fathers, you know. It’s really shit that your dad died, and how he died is awful. I get it. We all do. But it doesn’t mean that the rest of us without dads can’t feel anything too. You had a funeral for your dad. There’s probably a place you can go where he’s buried or whatever, to remember him. I’ve got none of that. Just a hole cut out of my life that I’m not allowed to speak about. Just an empty space. No one to bury. No one to mourn.’



After reading this extract, a student said:

“Dana’s seems to have a complicated relationship with Carl; he made her childhood better than it could have been, but he is by no means a good influence in her life.”

To what extent do you agree?

This extract comes from the novel's climax. Josh and Dana are running from Carl. The chase takes them through the building site of a new housing estate and ends in the garden.

In through the gaping front door of one of the new houses, into the darkness of its shell-like rooms, and out through the back into more mud we run. I force myself to get ahead of Dana and start to lead her towards a rack of scaffolding that looks familiar. I don't need to look back to know that Carl is gaining on us, each shout and insult louder than his last. As we squeeze down what looks like an impossible gap between two houses, a gap that I'm certain has narrowed since last time I was here, clogged up with bits of brick and roof tile underfoot, we emerge into the space I was hoping to find, the wooden hoarding rising tall in front of us.

'It's a dead end,' Dana gasps, trying to catch a breath.

'No it's not. Wait.'

I grab at the wooden boards and try to prize them open, but it's not shifting. The gap I crawled through a few months ago has been nailed shut. There's a short length of iron rod poking out of a small pile of rubble. I grab it and start working away at the corner of the hoarding. Dana gets the idea, and she takes the rod while I get my hands behind the wood again and start to heave against the nails. With a sharp pop, the wood is free, and there's the hole again, just big enough to get through.

Carl shouts are getting even closer. He's inside the gap between the houses.

Dana goes first as I hold the wood back. I throw the iron rod through after her and wedge myself under the panel. But the angles are all wrong. Every time I move forward I pull the wooden boards closed on myself, and Dana can't get enough weight behind it from her side to keep it open. My shoulders and most of my torso are through, but my waist is stuck. I roll onto my back, pounding away at the wooden board as it pins me down, stuck against the waistband of my jeans.

Squirming against the slick mud, I manage to get one leg out. I put all of my strength into it, pushing against the wood which moans but won't release me. Then I feel strong hands on my other leg, pulling me back. Carl's voice seething, incoherent, like a slavering dog.

Panic rising in me, I push again as hard as I can and with a splintering groan the wood suddenly splits and the corner of the board snaps off. My leg, behind the board, carries on and connects with a part of Carl, knocking him backwards. He lets go.

I scramble to my feet inside the walls of the garden, ready to follow Dana towards the door she's already gone through. My hand is on the lock when the iron rod smashes against the wall next to me, ricocheting back against my face. I fall to the ground, a searing pain across my forehead and down one cheek. Carl's boot connects with my stomach, then he bends to pick up the iron rod again. I have a sudden sensation of floating. And then the pain comes.

Scrambling along the wall, I raise my arm against the iron rod as Carl thrashes down with it. His first blow I manage to block, my forearm against his wrist, but the second strike catches me on the elbow and the world explodes into showers of sparks and white flashes.

'Stop!'

It's Dana's voice. She didn't go through the door after all. She's standing against the wooden hoarding. Carl must have gone straight past her, chasing me.

Slowly, Carl rounds on her, the iron rod grasped in his fist.

'You.' His voice is animal, wild.

'Leave him alone.' Dana edges along the wall towards the big, red bush. The bush with the well behind it. I pull myself to my feet.

After reading this extract, a student said:

"The high tension creates a very dramatic and exciting scene. It's clear that Dana is the one who will save Josh, rather than the other way around."

To what extent do you agree?

