

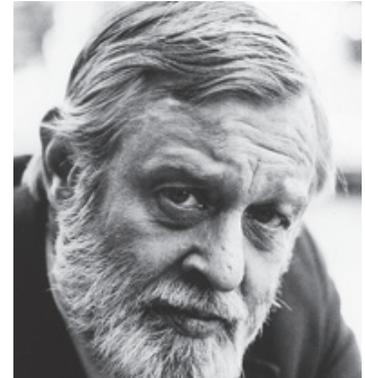
## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: *Revolutionary Road*

### Author: Richard Yates

Born February 3, 1926, in Yonkers, NY; died of emphysema and complications from minor surgery, November 7, 1992, in Birmingham, AL; son of Vincent M. (a sales executive) and Ruth (Maurer) Yates; married Sheila Bryant, 1948 (divorced, 1959); married Martha Speer, 1968 (divorced, 1974); children: Sharon, Monica, Gina. Military/Wartime Service: U.S. Army, 1944-46.

Name: Richard Yates  
Born: 1926



### Career:

United Press Association, New York City, financial reporter, 1946- 48; Remington Rand, Inc., New York City, publicity writer, 1948-50; freelance public relations writer, 1953-60; New School for Social Research, New York City, teacher of creative writing, 1959-62; Columbia University, New York City, teacher of creative writing, 1960-62; United Artists, Hollywood, screenwriter, 1962; U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Washington, DC, speech writer, 1963; University of Iowa, Iowa City, lecturer, 1964-65, assistant professor of English, 1966-92; Columbia Pictures, Hollywood, screenwriter, 1965-66; Wichita State University, writer in residence, 1971-72; taught at Harvard Extension, Columbia University, and Boston University.

### Awards:

Atlantic Firsts award, 1953; National Book Award nomination for *Revolutionary Road*; Guggenheim fellowship, 1962, 1981; American Academy Grant, 1963; National Institute of Arts and Letters grant, 1963 and 1975; Creative Arts Award, Brandeis University, 1964; National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1966, and award, 1984; Rockefeller grant, 1967; Rosenthal Foundation award, 1976; National Magazine Award for Fiction, 1978, for "*Oh, Joseph, I'm So Tired.*"

### Writings:

#### Novels:

*Revolutionary Road*, Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1961.  
*A Special Providence*, Knopf, 1969.  
*Disturbing the Peace*, Delacorte, 1975.  
*The Easter Parade*, Delacorte, 1976.  
*A Good School*, Delacorte, 1978.  
*Young Hearts Crying*, Delacorte, 1984.  
*Cold Spring Harbor*, Delacorte, 1986.

#### Short Stories:

*Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (collection), Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1962.  
*Liars in Love* (collection), Delacorte, 1981.  
*The Collected Stories of Richard Yates*, introduction by Richard Russo, Holt, 2001.  
Also contributor of short stories to *Prize Stories 1967: The O. Henry Awards*, edited by William Abrahams, Doubleday, 1967, and to periodicals, including *North American Review*, *Esquire*, and *Saturday Evening Post*.



## Author: Richard Yates (2)

### Other:

(Editor) *Stories for the Sixties*, Bantam, 1963.

William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness: A Screenplay, Ploughshares*, 1985.

Also author of screenplay *The Bridge at Remagen* with William Roberts and Roger Hirson, 1969.

*Revolutionary Road* has been optioned for film.

### Sidelights:

"If it's true that wisdom comes through suffering, then Richard Yates' characters are the wisest of men and women," *Chicago Tribune Book Review's* James Kaufmann noted. In stories of thwarted dreams and lives spent yearning for something better, Yates employed a writing style that was both honest and illuminating. James Atlas of *Atlantic* commented, "Yates accomplishes what [F. Scott] Fitzgerald did at his best: an evocation of life's unbearable poignance, the way it has of nurturing hope and denying it, often in the same instant." "Yates's treatment of ordinary life..." Joyce Carol Oates stated in *Nation*, "stresses the dullness, the lack of pattern, the lack of personal imaginative fulfillment...A sad, gray, deathly world—dreams without substance—aging without maturity; this is Yates's world, and it is a disturbing one." "Yates's work is characterized," Jerome Klinkowitz wrote in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "by a profound sadness...Yates presents a picture of unrelieved sadness, redeemed only by his excellent literary style."

This bleak portrayal was first seen in *Revolutionary Road*, Yates's first and best known novel. The book tells the story of Frank Wheeler, a suburban salesman whose marriage is falling apart. "But its true subject," claimed F.J. Warnke of *Yale Review*, "is neither the horrors of suburbia nor the futility of modern marriage. The novel is really about the inadequacy of human beings to fulfill their own aspirations and its target is not America but existence." *Hudson Review's* William H. Pritchard saw Yates as "a master at dramatizing how things go wrong in American marriages, how with the best of intentions people, particularly men, destroy what they've built." Gene Lyons of the *New York Times Book Review* viewed *Revolutionary Road* as a "brilliantly chilling and understated first novel about self-pity, pseudo-intellectual despair, and early death." Atlas described it as "one of the few novels I know that could be called flawless."

Fred Chappell found the book's honesty in dealing with its characters to be a crucial factor in its success. He wrote in *Rediscoveries* that *Revolutionary Road* "is so relentlessly honest and so embarrassingly personal that any critic who tries to take the customary view-from-above, the 'superior' stance..., has got to feel hypocritical and obtuse. You see yourself here. When you have an argument with your wife, or with someone who is a bit less articulate than you, or with someone over whom you imagine yourself to have a slight edge socially or economically, you begin to hear Frank Wheeler standing inside your voice, expostulating with false earnestness." Similarly, Theodore Solotaroff argued in *The Red Hot Vacuum* that "what makes *Revolutionary Road* as good as it is mainly Yates's ability to tell the truth—both about the little, summary moments of work and marriage today and—though less clearly—about the larger social issues which the behavior and fate of the Wheelers express. Passage after passage has the ring of authenticity...Yates has the superior novelist's instinct for the nuances by which people give themselves away."

In subsequent novels, Yates continued to earn critical respect for his writing. John Thompson of *Harper's* admired the clear prose with which Yates presented his stories. "Nothing intervenes between the author's knowledge and the reader's understanding," he said of *A Special Providence*, "but simple English that transmits that knowledge." Speaking of *The Easter Parade*, Paul Gray wrote in *Time* that "Yates can make reading about hum-drum pathos—the slow smashup of befuddled lives—invigorating and even gripping. He knows how to pace his material for maximum interest—when to summarize, when to show a scene in full... In his descriptive prose every word works quietly to inspire the illusion that things are happening by themselves."

Another theme that can be traced through each of Yates's novels is that of "madness or suicide and the profession which purports to treat them," *Contemporary Novelists* contributor Carol Simpson Stern commented, pointing to April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, Emily Grimes and her sister Sarah in *The Easter Parade*,



## Author: Richard Yates (3)

John Wilder in *Disturbing the Peace*, and Bob Prentice in *A Special Providence* as examples of characters whose lives are invaded by mental illness, abuse, and death. “The protagonist of *Young Hearts Crying*,” Stern noted, “divides his life after his divorce into two periods: pre-Bellevue and post-Bellevue. He is the victim of several psychotic breakdowns; his daughter, a hippie in the early 1960s, also suffers from drugs and psychosis. Both figures scoff at Freud and psychology. In *Cold Spring Harbor* both the protagonist’s mother and his mother-in-law are studies in alcoholism and mental instability.”

In *Young Hearts Crying* the author exhibits a “deep understanding of ambition and the tangled web of relationships and makes no attempt to deny the jagged edges of his character’s lives,” and in so doing endows his characters with a credibility uncommon in modern writing, Peter Ross wrote in the *Detroit News*. *Washington Post Book World’s* Jonathan Yardley, however, criticized the story as familiar but less skillful than Yates’s other novels. “*Young Hearts Crying* means to be a sensitive and affectionate account of the lives of its characters, but ends up being mostly bitter—for them and toward them,” he remarked. Anatole Broyard also found fault with the book in the *New York Times Book Review*: “*Young Hearts Crying* fails for the most fundamental of reasons: because [the protagonist] Michael Davenport is not an interesting or appealing man. He is so self-pitying that there is no room for our pity. He has few ideas, and he explains them too much—to himself and to us... as his second wife, Sarah, says, he lets his rhetoric run away with him—and it runs away with the book as well.” Yet *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor Brian Stonehill declared, “Yates, it seems to me, is writing at the top of his form.” Noting the author’s description of the book’s characters as people who “can make difficult things look easy,” Stonehill speculates that the reader should apply that idea to the book itself: “Yates does indeed make it seem effortless—to tell the story of the ordinary daily lives of ordinary but intriguing characters in an interesting way. He succeeds in making the quotidian quotable.” *Time* reviewer Jay Cocks concluded, “*Young Hearts Crying* slips seamlessly into the group of Yates novels that includes *Revolutionary Road*, *Disturbing the Peace* and *The Easter Parade*. All chart the kind of loss, loneliness and irony that are lastingly contemporary. He is just the writer that Michael Davenport always wanted to be.”

Yates’s final work, *Cold Spring Harbor*, is “an accomplished and somber novel of human hopes and disappointments” centered on another set of sorrowful lives, Frank Howard Mosher noted in *Washington Post Book World*. Mosher found that although the subject matter is dreary, *Cold Spring Harbor* “is so consistently well-written, just, unsentimental and sympathetic that the intertwined lives of the Shepards and Drakes are every bit as fascinating as they are grim.” Elaine Kendall, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, found *Cold Spring Harbor* a “meticulously crafted novel,” and noted, “Against all odds, Yates has managed to show that chronic misery can be as much an art form as acute agony.” Mosher concluded, “Anyone who’s ever had a dream go awry, for whatever reason, should be grateful to Richard Yates for this well-crafted and convincing novel.”

Several critics have pointed out that in all his work Yates wrote traditional stories in a conventional manner, avoiding the pyrotechnics of the avant-garde. Gray found Yates to be “a traditionalist in the strictest sense: he is a writer who feels duty-bound to tell familiar stories in conventional ways.” “It is this skill in mining the commonplace, forever turning up marks of character and mainsprings of plot, that distinguishes Yates,” Jonathan Penner of *New Republic* observed. “Few other writers dare trust themselves for so long with everyday life.”

An important consequence of this traditional approach is Yates’s constant use of ordinary characters in his stories. “The people in Yates,” Penner held, “are frail rather than strong and good...They are persistently unremarkable.” Klinkowitz saw Yates’s achievement in his ability “to take characters so average that they tend to be flat and uninteresting and—by his management of imagery and style—capture the truth of their lives, all in a manner which makes the writing itself interesting and optimistic to read, at the same time that the materials described are not.”

In a career that began with a book lauded by playwright Tennessee Williams and continued through seven novels of angst-ridden lives which garnered praise from such distinguished figures as publisher Seymour Lawrence and novelists William Styron, John Updike, and Kurt Vonnegut, Yates received less popular renown



## Author: Richard Yates (4)

than he deserved. *Times* staffer Elizabeth Venant quoted critic and novelist Carolyn See, who wrote in 1981, "He's not going to get the recognition he truly deserves because to read Yates is as painful as getting all your teeth filled down to the gum with no anesthetic."

At the time of his death, Yates was working on a book entitled "Uncertain Times," based on his experiences as a speech writer for Attorney General Robert Kennedy in 1963. A *New York Times* obituary noted that Lawrence, Yates's longtime publisher, was unsure whether the manuscript would be published.

### Further Readings:

#### Books:

- Castronovo*, David and Steven Goldleaf, Richard Yates, Twayne (New York, NY), 1996.  
*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Gale, Volume 7, 1977, pp. 553-556, Volume 8, 1978, pp. 555-556, Volume 23, 1983, pp. 479-484.  
*Contemporary Novelists*, St. James Press, 1991, pp. 972-974.  
*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 2: *American Novelists since World War II*, Gale, 1978, pp. 549-551.  
*Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook: 1981*, Gale, 1982, pp. 133-136.  
Madden, David, editor, *Rediscoveries*, Crown, 1971.  
Solotaroff, Theodore, *The Red Hot Vacuum*, Atheneum, 1970.

#### Periodicals:

- Atlantic*, April, 1961; October, 1975; November, 1981.  
*Chicago Tribune Book World*, September 7, 1986.  
*Christian Century*, May 3, 1961.  
*Commonweal*, September 24, 1976.  
*Detroit News*, December 9, 1984.  
*Harper's*, November, 1969.  
*Hudson Review*, spring, 1976.  
*Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1986; July 9, 1989.  
*Los Angeles Times Book Review*, November 18, 1984, p. 2.  
*Nation*, November 10, 1969.  
*National Observer*, January 12, 1970.  
*New Republic*, May 22, 1961; November 4, 1978.  
*Newsweek*, September 15, 1975; September 25, 1978; September 1, 1986, p. 82.  
*New York Times*, September 7, 1976; December 8, 1978; October 15, 1981; April 25, 1983; October 15, 1984; September 27, 1986.  
*New York Times Book Review*, March 5, 1961; October 5, 1975; September 19, 1976; October 28, 1984, p. 3; October 5, 1986, p. 14.  
*Ploughshares*, December, 1972.

#### Obituaries / Periodicals:

- New York Times*, November 9, 1992, p. B9.\*  
*Source Citation: "Richard Yates."* Contemporary Authors Online. Detroit: Gale, 2007.  
*Saturday Review*, March 25, 1961.  
*Time*, August 30, 1976; August 21, 1978; October 15, 1984, pp. 104, 106.  
*Times* (London), July 16, 1987.  
*Times Literary Supplement*, August 14, 1987, p. 873.  
*Yale Review*, summer, 1961.  
*Washington Post Book World*, April 3, 1983; October 7, 1984, p. 3; September 28, 1986, p. 6.



## Reading Group Guide (1)

## Spotlight on: *Revolutionary Road*

### Reviews:

*Library Journal*: September 15, 2000

"So much nonsense has been written on suburban life and mores that it comes as a considerable shock to read a book by someone who seems to have his own ideas on the subject and who pursues them relentlessly to the bitter end," said *LJ's* reviewer (LJ 2/1/61) of this novel of unhappy life in the burbs. It is reminiscent of the popular film *American Beauty* in its depiction of white-collar life as fraught with discontent. Others have picked up on this theme since, but Yates remains a solid read. Author: Michael Rogers

*Harper's Magazine*: July 2001

*The Culture of Retrieval* is inescapable today. There are the ubiquitous memoirists retrieving their early lives, and the songs barely a decade old being remixed, and the children of famous writers and directors and entertainers taking up their parents' occupations (and drawing on their parents' professional connections). We have had *Jane Eyre* the musical, recently on Broadway, a stage revival of *The Producers*, also on Broadway, and a revival of *Hair* (can you imagine?) off-Broadway. There's *The Golden Bowl* on film, a rewrite (if it successfully makes its way through litigation) of *Gone with the Wind*, and at least three small publishers bravely dedicated to reprinting forgotten works by forgotten authors. Americans disrespect the past? Yes and no. We adore the past so intensely that we refuse to let it die, but in fact our indiscriminate homage to it can be a form of disrespect. We are caught in a cycle more inane than vicious. Weakly stimulated by the present, we compulsively return to the past, which has the effect of eclipsing the present, which makes us return to the past.

The inescapability of the past was a thematic obsession of the novelist and short-story writer Richard Yates, and so the publication of his collected short stories—along with the republication of *Revolutionary Road* and *The Easter Parade*—fits nicely into all this relentless retrospection. It was Yates, in fact, who introduced into American fiction the theme of inertia as catalyst. Portraying characters arrested by their personal histories, mired in memory and thus destined for the most irrationally self-defeating action, he shifted fiction from the Hemingway track back to the Frank Norris track, from realism back to naturalism. That is to say, he brought American fiction from the drama of free will back to the crisis of determining circumstances. In Yates's fiction, childhood and adult memories of what parents wrought exert the same power over the characters' destinies that economic forces did in Norris's *McTeague* or Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*.

Strangely, you won't ever hear Yates mentioned in connection with the American naturalists. He has most often been compared with Hemingway, the great American realist. And he is an acknowledged influence on the style and sensibility of an entire line of writers—from Raymond Carver through Ann Beattie, Andre Dubus, Tobias Wolff, Richard Russo, Richard Ford, and Jayne Anne Phillips—who consider themselves to have been fathered by Hemingway and, as it were, brought up by Yates. These writers have long and eloquently regretted the latter's lapsed reputation and the unavailability (until now) of his work, pointing to his plain, unobtrusive prose and to his bleak take on life (traits that can be traced, in their view, to Hemingway's lapidary sentences and to his Lost Generation pessimism). The present decision—on the part of three separate publishers—to bring Yates back into print can probably be traced to the noble efforts of these writers on his behalf. In 1999, in *Boston Review*, the Yates champion Stewart O'Nan predicted that:

Eventually the books will make it back in print, just as Faulkner's and Fitzgerald's did, and Yates will take his place in the American canon. How this will come about it's impossible to say. Writers and editors are keenly aware of his situation, so perhaps his Malcolm Cowley is just moving up through the ranks at Norton or Doubleday.

Happily, Yates's books are indeed passing back into print. Inevitably, the response will be less a reconsideration

## Reading Group Guide (2)

## Spotlight on: *Revolutionary Road*

### Reviews: (continued)

than an uncritical celebration, since everybody loves a comeback, and since it is hard to resist an opportunity to redeem a writer whose work was often neglected during his lifetime. But if Yates was a writer of enormous talent, he had no less enormous limitations. By sentimentally ignoring those limitations, we miss the chance to see which of them occur as the necessary outgrowth of his gifts and which occur when his gifts falter.

First, there is Yates's style. His prose is so easy and natural and transparent that it suggests a profound humility before life's inscrutable sadness. Almost ego-less, it recalls Kafka's remark that writing is a form of prayer. And Yates's language bestows upon his men and women, tortured and silenced by life as they are, what might be called a clemency of accurate observation. At times he writes less like an artist than like a witness. His cool humble chronicling of his characters' slow doom (and his characters are almost uniformly doomed) can read like a redemptive freedom in an afterlife of art, as in the following passage from *The Easter Parade*, a novel that follows the long, unhappy lives of two sisters, Emily and Sarah Grimes:

It took only a couple of days for Howard to move his belongings out of the apartment. He was very apologetic about everything. Only once, when he flicked the heavy silken rope of his neckties out of the closet, was there any kind of scene, and that turned into such a dreadful, squalid scene—it ended with her falling on her knees to embrace his legs and begging him, begging him to stay—that Emily did the best she could to put it out of her mind.

The casually cruel flicking of the heavy silken ties is wonderful: Howard is leaving Emily for a younger woman, one who better satisfies his vanity. The repetition of "begging him," representing an abandonment of stylistic neutrality, is the only slightly false aesthetic note in the passage. Here, Yates's art—the art of the unaverted eye—briefly stumbles on his compassion. This is one of those fascinating moments when literary style becomes a moral, even a philosophical dilemma, no less than the question of whether a photojournalist should intervene on behalf of an innocent subject.

Such a style can be emotionally consoling in the way that it calmly reflects back to us an image of familiar pain, relieving our suffering with the sense that we do not suffer alone, but it is not always spiritually satisfying. Yates's style is very closely tied to the feelings it evokes. Hemingway's, by contrast, evokes an emotion of which he simultaneously makes intellectual sense. His style is no less unobtrusive to the eye, but it is a poeticized plainness, which rubs his characters against the reader's mind until the shape of each individual approaches the originality of a new idea. The reason we remember Hemingway's characters is that we've never seen them before; the reason we are moved so powerfully by Yates's characters, who then pass from our minds so quickly, is that we know them so well. Of course, Hemingway was a stoic, and stoicism is an idea that rules the emotions. Yates was a pessimist, and pessimism is a feeling that fends off thought.

In "The B.A.R. Man," now reprinted in *The Collected Stories*, Yates imagines with exquisite pacing and nuance the slow deterioration of an embittered and frustrated ex-soldier, John Fallon. But Fallon's eventual detonation flows from his predictable personality, and it conforms to the feeling that this near stereotype arouses in us. Fallon's fate is, typically, pronounced a certainty from the very first sentence: "Until he got his name on the police blotter, and in the papers, nobody had ever thought much of John Fallon."

*The Collected Stories* contains seven heretofore unpublished pieces, along with two that appeared in *Ploughshares* in the seventies, but the bulk, and heart, of the book consists of Yates's two story collections, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (arguably his best-known work) and *Liars in Love*. The short form, with its special intensity, throws Yates's virtues and his deficiencies into stark relief. His truly magical storytelling whisks the



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## Spotlight on: *Revolutionary Road*

### Reviews: (continued)

attention from sentence to sentence, and not a word is wasted. Yet the stories often depend for their unfettered momentum on characterization that verges on stereotype. (Ralph and Gracie in “The Best of Everything” at times seem to be walking and talking on the set of *The Honeymooners*: “Whaddya—crazy?”)

Yates’s admirable sympathy for the plight of “ordinary people”—secretaries, cabdrivers, office clerks—is often dampened by a narrow emphasis on their ordinariness. The defensively arrogant young writer who narrates “Builders,” from *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, might take himself to task for regarding Bernie—the cabdriver who has entangled him in his literary fantasies—as a vulgar, obnoxious, intellectually limited “Philistine,” imprisoned “in the pathetic delusions of a taxicab driver.” But at the end of the story, Bernie is still a pathetic Philistine while the narrator has become a minor hero simply by virtue of his realization that he has been a minor shit. There is something mildly vindictive about Yates’s vindications of ordinary people, a streak of schadenfreude running through his horror at their ordeal. Even Yates’s famous unflinching depiction of life’s cruelty has its flawed underside. His honesty can be less like an artist’s truthfulness than like a psychiatrist’s candor. Each tale in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* is like a deeply affecting icon expressing a variation on a brute existential fact of life. Yet it is as if the loneliness had been gouged raw and bleeding from the body of life, and then processed into art by Yates’s systematic pessimism. We are left with the powerful reiteration of an experience rather than its transformation. We are left, like analysts, alone with the harsh illumination of isolated facts.

Call Yates’s outlook, and that of his epigones, neo-naturalism. For him, it was the family, rather than the mine, or the factory, or the stockyards, that pulled destiny’s strings. Pascal said that people could avoid all the trouble in their lives if they simply stayed in their own rooms. In Yates’s world, people can’t leave their childhood rooms, no matter how widely they travel the world as adults. This is not their trouble; rather, their trouble is a *fait accompli*, which it is their fictional duty to live out.

The short story “A Glutton for Punishment” is representative in this regard. It tells the tale of a man who as a boy so loved to feign death when playing cops and robbers with other children that he courts and welcomes failure all his life. The internal process driving Yates’s characters is frequently so simple that it recalls that old desk gadget with the row of metal balls hanging on strings; by lifting the ball on one end and sending it swinging into the other, the ball at the far end is propelled into the air without moving the ones in between. Indeed, Yates’s fictional circumstances are just like those motionless, intermediary balls. They have no weight, no meaning in themselves, except to serve as the kinetic conduit between cause and effect, between past and present, or future, events. Between the first sentence and the last.

*The Easter Parade* carries this forced march to an extreme. The novel’s first sentence is, “Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life, and looking back it always seemed that the trouble began with their parents’ divorce.” One reads the novel waiting for this judgment—seemingly so cynical as to be naive—to be surprised by some kind of irony or extenuation, but what one encounters instead is a straightforward fictional syllogism that inexorably bears out its premise. Two girls are born to a transient alcoholic mother who is unable to maintain a relationship after the end of her marriage. Sarah Grimes marries an abusive husband and dies an alcoholic; Emily Grimes moves from apartment to apartment, and from job to job, unable to maintain an emotional relationship. *The Easter Parade* boasts what must be the only first sentence in the history of the novel that is also a sentencing. Such a stranglehold of the personal past is a romanticism in retreat, and Yates stands out among postwar American writers for the breadth of his disappointed romanticism and the distance of his retreat. Bellow, Ellison, Updike, Salinger, Cheever, Malamud, Mailer, Roth, et al., all searched everyday life for a different form of heroism, for a quotidian stoicism, for grace under new kinds of pressure. Yates gave up on everyday life.



## Reading Group Guide (4)

## Spotlight on: *Revolutionary Road*

### Reviews: (continued)

When did disappointment become a dominant theme in literature? We cannot say that Dante is disappointed with his life as he wanders through that dark wood. It would be absurd to call Don Quixote disappointed by his futile search for Dulcinea, or Faust disappointed in his quest for absolute happiness and power. Defining events happen in those fictional worlds, and disappointment becomes a describable issue in a world where nothing defining happens. Disappointment attracted literature's attention when the modern world became ordered beyond the individual's comprehension, and when inner life—middle-class, bourgeois life—began to compensate for the lack of outer efficacy. As a response without recourse, an aborted action converted into a mood, disappointment has no outlet, only a terminus. That's why the first and greatest novel of disappointment, *Madame Bovary*, ends with the heroine's suicide.

Since disappointment is a purely mental state, it is one of the more unexpected developments in literature that disappointment should also be one of the great themes of realist fiction. Unmoored as it is from the external world, the mood of disappointment required a new technique. Flaubert invented one. First, he set *Madame Bovary* in the suburbs (back then, they called them "the provinces"), thus providing a reality more easily correlated to a static interior mood than the city could be. Then, in *Madame Bovary's* celebrated Agricultural Fair scene, he introduced the essentially theatrical device of the ironic contrast into the novel. By juxtaposing the high-flown romantic sentiments that Rodolphe, the adulterous Emma's lover, declares to her, against a local provincial official's pompous speech, and putting alongside this the smell of cow manure, Flaubert incorporated outer reality into the mood of disappointment. He invented a dynamic environment in which to portray the arrest of personal motion.

Yates called *Madame Bovary* one of his two favorite novels (*The Great Gatsby* was the other), and *Revolutionary Road* is a distinct echo of it. Published in 1961, at the height of the postwar exodus from the cities, *Revolutionary Road* was part of a flood of fictions chronicling life in the suburbs that were quickly expanding around New York City. Like Flaubert's work, most of these novels and short stories identified the suburbs with the extinction of human vitality. I can't think of any novel, though, that presents life in the suburbs with as black a monotone as *Revolutionary Road*, the story of Frank and April, a young couple whose dreams founder on their illusions. Of course, novelists instinctively disdain the suburbs for the simple reason that the novel was born in the modern city and the suburbs offer a far more limited field of operations. If it's true, as Irving Howe once wrote, that the troubles of life are the convenience of literature, then the convenience of the suburbs puts a definite crimp in subject matter.

Then, too, in postwar America, the suburbs held out the very same promesse de bonheur that romantic novels once dangled before Emma Bovary. If art's job is to puncture deceit with illusion, any writer who takes on the suburbs as an end in itself rather than as a fictional means to incalculable ends will turn out one hostile Ironic Contrast after another. In fact, writers like Updike and Cheever used the suburbs the way Hemingway used the battlefield: not simply as a place but as a place of unfolding. Even Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*, corrosive satire that it is, allows its characters to do what they would—or what they could—with their environment. Yates portrays the suburbs as an enveloping condition:

The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy. Even at night, as if on purpose, the development held no looming shadows and no gaunt silhouettes. It was invincibly cheerful, a toyland of white and pastel houses whose bright, uncurtained windows winked blandly through a dappling of green and yellow leaves. Proud floodlights were trained on some of the lawns, on some of the neat front doors and on the hips of some of the berthed, ice-cream colored automobiles. A man running down these streets in desperate grief was indecently out of place.

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## Spotlight on: *Revolutionary Road*

### Reviews: (continued)

In other words, if their histories don't get Yates's characters, their environment will. Frank, like his father, dies spiritually in a soulless job; April, like her father, dies by her own hand; and all this happens in their house on *Revolutionary Road*, where America's revolutionary promise withers and dies in the coarse, materialistic suburbs. Such an unyielding machinery of pessimism eventually shades into caricature, in much the way that Yates's characters themselves often shade into stereotype. Sometimes it seems that all it would take to bring a liberating light into Yates's world is the sudden appearance of a therapist, or a landscape architect.

Yates is a virtuoso craftsman, and his mature style is enviable. We are fortunate to have him back in print. But the quality of his moral outlook will determine his place in American letters. The best place to begin puzzling out the ethic of Yates's aesthetic is *The Easter Parade*, in which Yates suppresses the bloated poeticizing of *Revolutionary Road*, allowing his themes to arise effortlessly from the final pages of the novel.

After a life of unrelieved disappointment, Emily Grimes arrives at the New England home of her nephew, Peter. A newly ordained minister who has recently married and fathered a daughter, Peter is the only person in the Grimes family who seems to have come through. He has escaped his own abusive father and alcoholic mother and made a separate life for himself in a small college town. Sensing that his "Aunt Emmy" has reached the end of her rope, he invites her to stay with his family for an indefinite period of time.

The great naturalist heroines, Zola's Therese Raquin, Stephen Crane's Maggie, Dreiser's Carrie, went down swinging. Desire leads Therese to murder, and the passionate decay of desire into hatred leads her to suicide; Maggie desperately turns to crime and prostitution to survive; Carrie is borne up by the destruction of the men who seduce her. Even ill-fated Emma Bovary, whom "Aunt Emmy" is meant to put us in mind of, took a willful solace in her illusions—then, too, she summons her own destruction by plunging headlong into her chosen escape. Emily Grimes, on the other hand, has to be the most passive heroine in the history of literature. She does not, in the course of the entire novel, express a single desire of her own, except, pathetically, the desire not to be hurt or disappointed.

Emily is a saint in a world without a God, and so her saintliness has no dignity and her suffering holds no meaning. One wonders whether Yates is pulling the rug out from under the religious impulse itself. The novel, after all, takes its title from the idea of resurrection. Yates, however, offers us a parody of resurrection: a beautiful, hopeful photograph of Emily's sister, Sarah, and her future husband, Tony, taken on Easter Day at the time of their courtship, reappears toward the end of the novel, after the revelation of Tony's wife-beating and Sarah's inherited masochism and alcoholism. It's as if Yates had replaced the idea of resurrection with the concept of the return of the repressed.

The fate of Emily seems, on the surface, more ambiguous. On the brink of a nervous collapse, she tries to turn back from Peter's house and hospitality at the last minute. Peter comes down his driveway after her, and Emily hears "a jingle of pocketed coins or keys." An instant later, when Peter suddenly realizes the extent of her distress, he asks her if she's tired and then stands "looking at her in a detached, speculative way now, more like an alert young psychiatrist than a priest."

"Yes, I'm tired," she said. "And do you know a funny thing? I'm almost fifty years old and I've never understood anything in my whole life."

"All right," he said quietly. "All right, Aunt Emmy. Now. Would you like to come in and meet the family?"



## Reading Group Guide (6)

Spotlight on:  
*Revolutionary Road*

### Reviews: (continued)

Considering that the Grimes sisters' "trouble began with their parents' divorce," Peter's invitation to enter yet another family romance could be read—indeed, almost demands to be read—as the bitterest of ironies. But since he seems happily married, with his family intact, perhaps Emily does stand, if unsteadily, at the threshold of redemption. Yet is it the redemption of religious grace or the promise of "alert" psychoanalytic "understanding" that offers no love or sympathy? Are those the jingling keys to heaven's gate (as Peter's name suggests), or are they the coins of selfishness and greed? It hardly seems to matter. The expectation of grace in a world without God and mere psychiatric understanding in a world without grace are like two sides of an obscene joke. That is Yates's zero-degree ethos.

Such unsparing sobriety makes up the solidity of Yates's achievement. Yates knew how to rivet the reader's attention on the quiet desperation of unacknowledged lives. His unpardonable failure (and perhaps his secret satisfaction) was never to give his implausibly ordinary men and women the freedom to respond.

Lee Siegel is a contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine*. His last review, "Seize the Day Job," appeared in the March issue.



## Reading Group Guide (7)

## Spotlight on: *Revolutionary Road*

### Interview from Random House

An Interview with Richard Yates by DeWitt Henry & Geoffrey Clark, Winter 1972  
From [www.pshares.org/issues/article.cfm?prmArticleID=128](http://www.pshares.org/issues/article.cfm?prmArticleID=128)

### **In *Revolutionary Road*, was the ending thought out before you began?**

Yes. I thought of that girl dying in that way, and then the whole problem was to construct a book that would justify that ending. And it wasn't easy.

### **When you first planned the book, did you have John Givings in there?**

No, I didn't. He occurred to me as a character about midway through the writing of the book. I felt I needed somebody in there to point up or spell out the story at crucial moments, and I did know a young man very much like that at the time, a long-term patient in a mental hospital who had an uncannily keen and very articulate insight into other people's weaknesses, so I worked a fictionalized version of him into the book.

### **You really lambasted the suburbs.**

I didn't mean to. The book was widely read as an anti-suburban novel, and that disappointed me. The Wheelers may have thought the suburbs were to blame for all their problems, but I meant it to be implicit in the text that that was their delusion, their problem, not mine.

### **Doesn't the title suggest an attack on The System?**

I think I meant it more as an indictment of American life in the nineteen-fifties. Because during the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity all over this country, by no means only in the suburbs - a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price, as exemplified politically in the Eisenhower administration and the Joe McCarthy witch-hunts. Anyway, a great many Americans were deeply disturbed by all that - felt it to be an outright betrayal of our best and bravest revolutionary spirit - and that was the spirit I tried to embody in the character of April Wheeler. I meant the title to suggest that the revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something very much like a dead end in the Fifties.

### **You weren't knocking marriage?**

Oh, of course not. That's another false interpretation too many people put on the book. And in a way Alfred Kazin was at least partially responsible for that, however inadvertently. The publishers sent the book to him in manuscript, and he wrote back a very nice letter that said in part - only in part - "This novel locates the American tragedy squarely on the field of marriage." So the publishers grabbed up that one quote out of context and plastered it all over the dust-jacket, in big red print - they thought it would "sell" - along with a cheap, vulgar illustration. And I let them do it, like an idiot, because I guess I thought they knew their business, but I've regretted it ever since. Oh, maybe it did help sell copies to people snooping around bookstores in search of an anti-marriage polemic or something, but I think it must have repelled and turned away a good many other, more intelligent readers. After all, who but a maniac or a God damn fool would sit down and write a novel attacking marriage? And who'd want to read such a novel? Don't misunderstand, I'm not blaming Kazin - I've always respected him as a critic and still do. It was my own damn fault, for letting them package the book that way. In any case, that was a most unfortunate, misleading blurb.