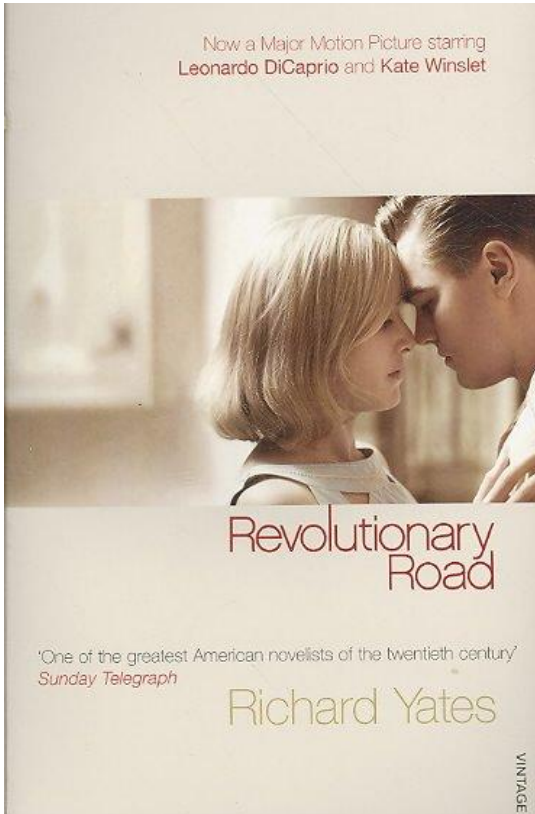


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1370395>

About the Book



Set in 1955, *Revolutionary Road* tells the story of Frank and April Wheeler, a young couple living in the Connecticut suburbs with their two young children, Jennifer and Michael.

The book opens with April Wheeler's reignited thespian ambitions being dashed as she performs in the local theatre group's play. The play is a disaster and her hopes of escaping her tiresome life as a housewife disappear.

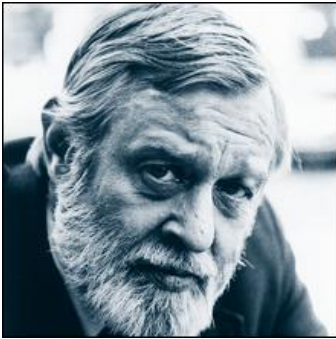
Frank is also frustrated with his life. He only took his mundane office job with The Knox Company, New York, to support April when she accidentally fell pregnant with their first child, Jennifer. All day he moves paper from one pile to another, and tries to not think about his missed chances in life. To cope with his failings he drinks too much and finds himself engaging in an affair with a co-worker, Maureen Grube.

When he arrives home on the night of his birthday, April has news. She has decided on a course of action to start an exciting new life: they will move to Paris where April will support the family while Frank thinks about how to fulfill his true potential – whatever that may be.

As they save and prepare for the journey, they spend time with their neighbours Shep and Milly Campbell and agree to befriend their real estate broker's son who has had a mental breakdown.

As their departure date grows nearer so does the tension between the couple. So when April discovers she is pregnant and their plans are put on hold, the novel comes to a dramatic climax as April takes decisive, dangerous and, ultimately, tragic action that will effect all their lives.

About the Author



Born on 3rd February 1926 in Yonkers, New York, Richard Yates came from an unstable home, his parents divorced when he was three. During the Depression he, his sister and his mother, Ruth, moved continually from apartment to apartment.

Yates first became interested in journalism and writing while attending Avon Old Farms School in Avon, Connecticut. He graduated in 1944 and joined the army. He saw combat in France and Germany in the late 1940s; during his military service he caught pneumonia and damaged his lungs.

He never attended university instead he concentrated on his writing. In 1951, using a disability pension the Army had given him for his TB, he moved to Europe for several years with his first wife where he wrote stories. On returning to the United States in 1953, he worked as an advertising copywriter; he also began drinking heavily and suffered the first of several breakdowns. In 1959 he and his wife divorced, his wife winning custody of their two daughters.

His career as a novelist began in 1961 with the publication of *Revolutionary Road* which was critically acclaimed and was nominated for the National Book Award. He published a further six novels and two collections of short stories, however he was never commercially successful and lived in rented apartments and basic conditions for most of his life.

He subsequently taught writing at Columbia University, the New School for Social Research, Boston University (where his papers are archived), at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop, and at the University of Southern California Master of Professional Writing Program. In 1962, he wrote the screenplay for a film adaptation of William Styron's *Lie Down In Darkness* and for a brief period in the late 60s he served as a speech writer for senator Robert Kennedy.

He had remarried in 1968, but in 1974 he divorced again, his second wife retaining custody of their daughter.

Yates died of complications from minor surgery in the Veterans Administration Hospital in Birmingham, Alabama on 7th November 1992. It is assumed his lifelong alcoholism and chain smoking contributed to his premature death.

Reviews

The New York Times

More than two decades after its original publication, it remains a remarkable and deeply troubling book—a book that creates an indelible portrait of lost promises and mortgaged hopes in the suburbs of America.... Writing in controlled, economical prose, Mr. Yates delineates the shape of these disintegrating lives without lapsing into sentimentality or melodrama. His ear for dialogue enables him to infuse the banal chitchat of suburbia with a subtext of Pinteresque proportions, and he proves equally skilled at reproducing the pretentious, status-conscious talk of people brought up on Freud and Marx. If, at times, we are tempted to see Frank as something of a deluded, ineffectual snob, we are also inclined to sympathize with him—so graceful is Mr. Yates's use of irony. His portrait of these thwarted, needlessly doomed lives is at once brutal and compassionate.

Library Journal

"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.

Publishers' Weekly

Yates's debut 1961 novel revealed a growing and present malaise about middle-class existence as seen through the eyes of protagonists Frank and April. Believing themselves a cut above the rest of their neighbors and friends, the two set their sights upon a scheme to move to France and live a nontraditional life. However, much like the illusion of the white picket fence home, their dreams are not enough to stave off the reality of their unhappy life. Mark Bramhall sways back and forth between successful and annoying narration. Some character voices are caricatures, grating on the listeners' ears without much justification from the text. For others, the chosen voice helps to emphasize the sense (or source) of alienation that Frank and April feel about the people in their lives. However, Bramhall's tone does wonders for eliciting the ironic throughout Yates's prose.

Kirkus Reviews *Starred Review*

It's hard to think that there's too much wrong with April and Frank Wheeler over and above what has been tagged the disenchantment syndrome of the average young married couple in the suburbs. An attractive pair (April is beautiful), with two children, a home in Connecticut, and friends nearby a little less limited than the rest of their neighbors, - still -- a lot has rubbed off since they first played house together in a Village apartment. But while Frank has been able to accept a dullish job with a big business in New York, April's Bovaryish boredom, her reproaches, her flare-ups and nights spent on the sofa, would indicate that she is more than just a chafed spirit. For April's discontent is a real emotional destitution, and this, to Yates' great credit, is only

imperceptibly apparent. There is her irresponsible, unrealistic plan to get away from the "hopeless emptiness of everything" by going to Europe where they can find "a world of intellect and sensibility". Frank goes along with it, although he is offered a "challenging" new job- until April is pregnant again and threatens to abort herself. There is talk- of getting help, of starting again- as they were, but the moment of truth, April's hopeless alienation, comes only after the irreparable fact..... Yates, a new novelist (an O'Henry award earlier and an appearance in the Scribner annual) has an unerring eye and ear and ear so that his first novel, while maybe not important, is certainly aware and alive.

Literary Criticism

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 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 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 analysands, 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.

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.

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?"

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.

Source: Siegel, Lee. "Revolutionary Road." *Harper's Magazine* July 2001: 82. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the novel's title, *Revolutionary Road*? In what ways might it be read as an ironic commentary on mid-twentieth century American values?
2. Why does Yates begin the novel with the story of the play? In what ways does it set up some of the themes—disillusionment, self-deception, play-acting, etc.—that are developed throughout the novel?
3. Frank rails about the middle-class complacency of his neighbors in the Revolutionary Hill Estates. "It's as if everybody'd made this tacit agreement to live in a state of total self-deception. The hell with reality! Let's have a whole bunch of cute little winding roads and cute little houses painted white and pink and baby blue; let's all be good consumers and have a lot of Togetherness and bring our children up in a bath of sentimentality . . . and if old reality ever does pop out and say Boo we'll all get busy and pretend it never happened" [pp. 68-69]. Is Frank's critique of suburbia accurate? In what ways does Frank himself live in a state of self-deception? Why can he see so clearly the self-deception of others but not his own?
4. What ironies are involved in Frank going to work for the same firm his father worked for? What is Frank's attitude toward his job and the fact that he's walking in his father's footsteps?
5. Describing a Negro couple holding hands at the mental hospital where John Givings has been confined, the narrator writes that "it wasn't easy to identify the man as a patient until you noticed that his other hand was holding the chromium leg of the table in a yellow-knuckled grip of desperation, as if it were the rail of a heaving ship" [p. 296]. What do such precise and vivid physical descriptions—

often highly metaphorical—add to the texture of the novel? Where else does Yates use such descriptions to reveal a character's emotional state?

6. *Revolutionary Road* frequently—and seamlessly—moves between past and present, as characters drift in and out of reveries. (April's childhood memory [pp. 321-326] is a good example). What narrative purpose do these reveries serve? How do they deepen the reader's understanding of the inner lives of the main characters?
7. What roles do Frank's affair with Maureen and April's sexual encounter with Shep play in the outcome of the novel? Are they equivalent? What different motivations draw Frank and April to commit adultery?
8. Twice Frank talks April out of an abortion, and both times he later regrets having done so, admitting that he didn't want the children any more than she did. What motivates him to argue so passionately against April aborting her pregnancies? What methods does he use to persuade her? Is John Givings right in suggesting that it's the only way he can prove his manhood?
9. What role does John Givings play in the novel? Why is he such an important character, even though he appears in only two scenes? How does he move the action along?
10. How do Frank and April feel about Shep and Milly Campbell? What do they reveal about themselves in their attitudes toward their closest friends?
11. Before she gives herself a miscarriage, April leaves a note telling Frank not to blame himself if anything should happen to her. But is he to blame for April's death? Why, and to what extent, might he be responsible?
12. The narrator writes, after April's death, that “The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy” [p. 339]. In what ways is the novel tragic? What tragic flaws might be ascribed to both Frank and April? Why are the Revolutionary Hill Estates ill-suited to tragedy?
13. What is Yates suggesting by the fact that the only character in the novel who sees and speaks the truth has been confined to an insane asylum? Does John Givings's, outsider status give him the freedom to speak the truth, or has his natural tendency toward telling the truth, however unpleasant it might be, landed him in a mental hospital?
14. Near the end of the novel, the narrator says of Nancy Brace, as she listens to Milly's retelling of April's death: “She liked her stories neat, with points, and

she clearly felt there were too many loose ends in this one” [p. 345]. What is the problem with wanting stories to be “neat”? In what ways does *Revolutionary Road* circumvent this kind of overly tidy or moralistic reading? Does the novel itself present too many “loose ends”?

15. The novel ends with Mrs. Givings chattering on to her husband about how “irresponsible” and “unwholesome” the Wheelers were. What is the significance, for the novel as a whole, of the final sentences: “But from there on Howard Givings heard only a welcome, thunderous sea of silence. He had turned off his hearing aid”? [p. 355]. What symbolic value might be assigned to the plant that Mrs. Givings mentions at the end of the novel?
16. *Revolutionary Road* was first published in 1961. In what ways does it reflect the social and psychological realities of that period? In what ways does it anticipate and illuminate our own time?

Multimedia

***An Emotional Journey Down Revolutionary Road* (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11913039>

A discussion of the novel on NPR.

***Revolutionary Road* (Movie)**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1336344>

(Call number: DVD Drama Revolutionary)

Frank and April Wheeler live a life that appears to be perfect. They live in the Connecticut suburbs with two young children. Frank commutes to New York City where he works in an office job that he hates. One he places little effort at, but he has yet to figure out what his passion in life is. April is a housewife who forgoes her dream of being an actress. They are not happy. One day, April suggests that they move to Paris as a means to rejuvenate their life. Initially skeptical, Frank ultimately agrees to April's plan. When circumstances change around the Wheelers, April decides she will do whatever she has to to get herself out of her unhappy existence.

Further Reading

***Bourgeois utopias: the rise and fall of suburbia* by Robert Fishman**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1024583>

(Call number: 307.74 Fi)

A noted urban historian traces the story of the suburb from its origins in nineteenth-century London to its twentieth-century demise in decentralized cities like Los Angeles.

Suburban nation: the rise of sprawl and the decline of the American Dream by Andres Duany

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1167016>

(Call number: 307.76 Du)

A manifesto by America's most controversial and celebrated town planners, proposing an alternative model for community design. There is a growing movement in North America to put an end to suburban sprawl and to replace the automobile-based settlement patterns of the past fifty years with a return to more traditional planning principles. This movement stems not only from the realization that sprawl is ecologically and economically unsustainable but also from a growing awareness of sprawl's many victims: children, utterly dependent on parental transportation if they wish to escape the cul-de-sac; the elderly, warehoused in institutions once they lose their driver's licenses; the middle class, stuck in traffic for two or more hours each day. Founders of the Congress for the New Urbanism, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk are at the forefront of this movement, and in *Suburban Nation* they assess sprawl's costs to society, be they ecological, economic, aesthetic, or social.

The Easter Parade by Richard Yates

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1327379>

(Call number: Fiction Yates)

In *The Easter Parade*, first published in 1976, we meet sisters Sarah and Emily Grimes when they are still the children of divorced parents. We observe the sisters over four decades, watching them grow into two very different women. Sarah is stable and stalwart, settling into an unhappy marriage. Emily is precocious and independent, struggling with one unsatisfactory love affair after another. Richard Yates's classic novel is about how both women struggle to overcome their tarnished family's past, and how both finally reach for some semblance of renewal.

Author website

<http://www.richardyates.org/>

Information about the author and his work.

Read-Alikes

An Amateur Marriage by Anne Tyler

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1213306>

(Call number: Fiction Tyler)

Marrying quickly during World War II after falling in love at first sight, a mismatched couple discovers that their different personalities and approaches to life are taking a toll on their relationship and their family.

Couples by John Updike

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1068189>

(Call number: Fiction Updike)

Explores the consequences of marital infidelity in a small New England community.

Love and Other Impossible Pursuits by Ayelet Waldman

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1254476>

(Call number: Fiction Waldman)

Harvard Law graduate Emilia Greenleaf's perfect life with her beloved husband Jack is turned upside down by her new preschool-age stepson, William, a situation that is further complicated when she loses her own newborn daughter.

Sudden Rain by Maritta Wolff

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1237546>

(Call number: Fiction Wolff)

Follows the lives of five disaffected middle-class Los Angeles families in the early 1970s, from a long-time married couple that finds their traditional roles unsatisfying, to an unhappily married woman who stumbles into a fatal accident.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog



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