



As Richard Yates's portrait of suburban despair comes to the big screen, Christa D'Souza celebrates a cult masterpiece

Everyone's got their own life litmus test. In Madonna's case, it might be Frida Kahlo's famous painting *My Birth*. In mine, it is Richard Yates's cult novel *Revolutionary Road*. In the same way that Madonna once said she uses reactions to *My Birth* as a way of determining whom she will and won't like, if I met you for the first time and you told me this heart-squeezing, awe-inspiring, jewel-like study of suburban despair in late-Fifties America wasn't really your cup of tea, I'd know that you could never be my friend.

Never heard of *Revolutionary Road*? Don't worry, not many have – until now. Though critically acclaimed when it was first published in 1961, it was largely forgotten by the time Yates – a self-described “anti-feminist” and one-time speechwriter for Bobby Kennedy –

died in 1992. That is, except for a small, rather smug group of people – including myself – who, since discovering it, feel like part of a fellowship. As the writer Richard Ford remarked in the book's introduction, to invoke its name is to enact “a sort of cultural-literary secret handshake among its devotees”.

And these devotees are compelled to spread the word. Take David Hare, who hands out copies “to anyone who will take them”. Take Nick Hornby, who had one of his characters in *A Long Way Down* clutching a copy of it before attempting suicide, “not only because it would have been kinda cool... but because it might have been a good way of getting more people to read it”. Take me, who, after being recommended it by my very clever American friend Amelia three years ago, can't pass Waterstone's without buying a new one, and

then secreting it about the house like a drunk might a bottle of alcohol, just in case.

Or indeed, take Sam Mendes, who was so blown away by it, he made it into a film starring Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio, which is set, by the sounds of it, to be next year's *American Beauty*. “I know of few novels more fearless. Or bleak. Or cruel. Or funny. Or heartbreaking,” says Mendes from L.A. “It's still the most astonishing, detailed forensic study of a marriage ever written. Without it, would we have seen Updike's Rabbit novels? Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*, the TV series *Mad Men*? I don't think so.”

Set in that late-Fifties-early-Sixties era – when the age of the computer was dawning; when women smoked and drank right through pregnancy; when psychoanalysis and fake-colonial sash windows ruled; when door-to-door salesmen always politely asked if “the man of the house” was in; when, in short, everything and nothing seemed possible all at the same time – *Revolutionary Road* tells the tale of >

Frank and April Wheeler, an attractive, somewhat intellectual couple in their late twenties, who live in the pastel-coloured, painstakingly landscaped suburbs of Connecticut. In the words of Ford, they “drink too much, are bored stiff of their neighbours, are vaguely fearful of becoming clichés”, and they dream of quitting the still-yet-seething suburbs for Paris.

From the first few pages, where we learn about April’s humiliating, cheek-burning stage debut at a production put on by the local am-dram society, it is obvious this book is not about the achievement of dreams – it is about man’s inevitable failure to live up to them. It’s a subject about which Yates – who suffered from bipolar depression, alcoholism and emphysema, and never achieved the same status as those other suburban realists John Cheever, Philip Roth or “Precious John” (as Yates bitterly nicknamed the far more famous Updike) – believed himself to be an expert. Failure, the feeling of being an almost-ran, not so much seeing the glass half-empty as despising oneself slightly upon seeing it half-full – it is through this prism that Yates’s perfect, surgical prose is filtered. “The failure thing is key,” agrees writer and fellow *RR* fan Geoff Dyer. “He aspires to failure – or at least the depiction of failure – on a Fitzgerald scale. And booze is the obvious link. Yates is the great writer of befuddlement – befuddlement rendered with perfect clarity, of course.”

Thus our “hero” Frank, who in many ways is Yates himself, despises the face, “round and full of weakness”, that looks back at him in the bathroom-cabinet mirror. He despises “the loathsome gloating maw of the television set; the forlorn grubby little heap of toys that might have been steeped in ammonia, so quick was their power to attack the eyes and throat with an acrid pain of guilt and self-reproach”. At the same time, he picks at his bitten thumbnails and fantasises about a situation whereby a “Henry James sort of Venetian

countess might say as [he and April] leaned attractively on a balustrade above the Grand Canal sipping vermouth... ‘You and Mrs Wheeler are so very unlike one’s preconceived idea of American business people.’”

Just as wincingly memorable is Maureen Grube, the secretary with whom Frank has an affair, constantly patting her “unattractively wild” hair. And their sweet, dim neighbour Milly, who cannot help smelling slightly of body odour (as Yates’s own mother, Dookie, did), and her husband Shep, who finds himself, as the novel builds towards its tragic end, crying well beyond the point of sadness. “The whole point of crying was to quit before you corned it up,” as Yates, the master debunker of sentimentality, writes. “The whole point of grief itself was to

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cut it out while it was still honest, while it still meant something. Because the thing was so easily corrupted; let yourself go and you start embellishing your own sobs... and then what the hell did you have?”

And then there is April, perhaps the real casualty of the book, obediently cooking roast-beef dinners for her children and her unfaithful husband – at the same time keening, almost like a wild animal, for a different life. April, whose idea it was to go to Europe “for good” in the fall; April, whose surprise pregnancy fills Frank with joy, not because, as he convincingly tells her, he wants her to have another baby, but because it means they won’t have to go to Paris after all.

In real life, Yates was not sympathetic to the “plight” of women. As noted in Blake Bailey’s biography, *A Tragic Honesty*, Yates liked his women “cute” and non-combative,

and although he worshipped his three daughters, he could be appallingly brutal to lovers. Says Lionel Shriver, another *RR* fan: “I know somebody who knew him, and if this source is to be believed, Yates was quite an unpleasant man – dyspeptic, unhappy and sometimes abusive. Disappointing, isn’t it?”

It is – and mystifying, too, when you consider how good he was at “getting” us; how unflinching and accurate his portrayal of feminine hopelessness and despair. “Few men since Flaubert have offered such sympathy to women whose lives are hell,” Kurt Vonnegut rightly wrote of Yates. It was a comment that greatly pleased him as his hero was Flaubert. Indeed, he has Frank taunting April “as doing a pretty good imitation of Madame Bovary here” in the book’s second chapter.

Vonnegut, who hailed *Revolutionary Road* as “the *Great Gatsby* of my time”, was one of Yates’s many champions when the book was first published. Tennessee Williams, a fellow dyspeptic and depressive, called it a “masterpiece of modern American fiction”. Trilled Dorothy Parker in *Esquire*: “A treasure, a jewel, a whole trove is Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*... I think I know of no recent novel that has so impressed me, for the manners and mores of his people are, it seems to me, perfectly observed.”

But it wasn’t enough to turn Yates into the literary star he always wanted to be. *The New Yorker*, for example – a regular rejector of Yates’s work in favour of “John Fucking Updike” (Yates’s words) – witheringly described the book as “meaningless characters leading meaningless lives” – an opinion many at the time agreed with. It was just too depressing, too pointless, too relentless in its criticism for the American reader – particularly at a time when Kennedy was on the rise, the era of the computer was around the corner, and, of course, feminism was on the cusp.

One wonders what Yates himself – who suffered 10 breakdowns; who spent most of >

Sounds round-up

Peter Bjorn and John: *Seaside Rock*

(Wichita) After the runaway success of ‘Young Folks’, Stockholm’s finest indie-pop throng produce a magical homage to their nautical Nordic hometowns.



Bob Dylan: *Tell Tale Signs*

(Columbia) Now in his late sixties, Dylan remains prolific. This month, he releases the eighth album in his Bootleg series of reworked gems, live material and film soundtracks.



Grace Jones: *Hurricane*

(Wall of Sound) Following two decades out of the spotlight, this androgynous style queen is back. Expect sparkly updates on her classic disco groove.



Beyoncé

(Columbia) Soon to play Etta James in *Cadillac Records*, Mrs Jay-Z releases her third solo album (as yet unnamed), said to be influenced by her jazz-crooner role. AF



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his life in a tiny basement apartment infested with cockroaches; who spent his last years with a cigarette in one hand and clutching on to his oxygen tank with the other; who so bitterly resented his reputation as a writer's writer – would make of the commercial revival his work is enjoying now. What would he make of the obsession we seem to have, half a century on, with that whisky-infused, smoke-hazed era, when women were “broads” and men were “kids”?

What would he make, for example, of *Mad Men*, the cult TV series about Madison Avenue in the early Sixties, which has so many parallels to the book, one almost feels Yates's ghost hovering over the set? After all, isn't Betty Draper, with her neurotic trembling and her constant refrain that she was once a successful model, April Wheeler? Isn't dreamy Don Draper the man that Frank Wheeler, with his right side to the bathroom mirror, would have liked to have been?

“Well, here's my relationship with *Revolutionary Road*,” offers *Mad Men*'s creator, Matt Weiner. “I'd not even heard of the book until I went to my first meeting with the production company. It was only after it was given to me by one of the people I was pitching the pilot to that I suddenly realised I would never have had the guts to write *Mad Men* if I'd read the book first. It is just so artful, so overwhelming, so beautifully written and so incredibly honest, too. Interestingly, even though that suburban Fifties-Sixties era was not at all my experience, as a father and a husband I identified with almost every single observation. That bit, for example, where he is laying the flagstones of his driveway with a dreadful hangover and his kids keep asking to 'help'... I mean, who doesn't know what that feels like?”

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He is right. For anyone who has ever felt on the edge when one has drunk too much the night before and the kids insist on helping; for anyone who has ever embellished their own sobs; for anyone who has ever over-thought the thought or been through even a minor spiritual crisis (and if one is reasonably intelligent and well-educated, who hasn't?) – this book ought to be mandatory reading. As for whether it will make you even more depressed, well, as Weiner puts it, “If a friend I've bought a copy for – which, let me tell you, I do a lot – finds it depressing, I just don't get that. Depressing? To see emotions portrayed with such incredible honesty? That's not depressing, that's beautiful.” Or as Julian Barnes, another tireless *RR* champion, emails me, Yates “is a very moral writer without being a moraliser. But all novelists who describe life exactly as it is, as he does, are moral writers.”

Meanwhile, the film is awaited with baited breath. It's in deft hands, and we need to get the word out. (What's more, Ellen Barkin – good on her – is producing a film of Yates's 1976 novel *The Easter Parade*.) But still... Does Mendes know how much is riding on it? Does he know that all us *RR* crazies out there – those of us like my friend Amelia and I, who can recite whole chunks of it off by heart; those of us like Shriver, who is worried that they're not going to keep in “the abortion [bit], about which Hollywood has grown so terrified” – will come looking for him if it's not what we thought it would be? Then again, nothing – but nothing – can spoil the pleasure of reading this book. As Barnes bravely offers, “I'll go and see it. I'm sure *Revolutionary Road* is resilient enough a book to survive any film of it.” ■

“Revolutionary Road” is released in January