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In the hopeful 1950s, Frank and April Wheeler appear to be a model couple: bright, beautiful, talented, with two young children and a starter home in the suburbs. Perhaps they married too young and started a family too early. Maybe Frank's job is dull. And April never saw herself as a housewife. Yet they have always lived on the assumption that greatness is only just around the corner. But now that certainty is about to crumble. With heartbreaking compassion and remorseless clarity, Richard Yates shows how Frank and April mortgage their spiritual birthright, betraying not only each other, but their best selves.

Revolutionary Road Details

Date	:	Published February 1st 2001 by Methuen (first published 1961)
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Author	:	Richard Yates
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From Reader Review Revolutionary Road for online ebook

Will Byrnes says

I read this in anticipation of seeing the film. It is a grim tale. The primary characters are April and Frank. They both hold a rather lofty opinion of themselves, but fail to actually do anything with their gifts, real or imagined. They find themselves stuck in a classic suburban nightmare of disenchantment with their circumstances and resentment of each other. The affection they do feel for each other comes and goes, mostly goes, as they wallow in their narcissism. She imagines a wondrous life for them in Paris. He comes to realize that maybe he is, really, ordinary, and not the extraordinary person he has convinced himself and many around him that he is.

There are themes here about character being revealed in how we cope with stress, with self awareness. Ultimately April opts out, unable to cope. Frank attempts to adjust to his opportunities in the world when it becomes clear to him that his loftier, esoteric leanings were a form of self-delusion.

All the characters here are pained. Perhaps the most overtly pained person is the institutionalized, violent son of a real estate agent. His role here is as truth teller.

This book was written in the early 60's about the 50's. It has surprising relevance today, particularly if one sees it as a character study. The mores of those times have hopefully passed. Abortion, while still frowned upon, is not illegal or as deadly as it was then. The characters here are also skewed a bit, with more detail being given to Frank, for example, than to April. We see inside his head quite a bit more and understand him better. It does not make us like him any better.

I found many of April's outbursts inexplicable, blaming herself, outwardly at least, for this and that. I could not see how she would reach such conclusion. Yes, I know people do this, have even swum those waters myself. But, while I may be missing something here. I found it a bit tough to swallow.

Revolutionary Road is definitely an interesting piece of work, with a keen eye for self-delusion, and a larger-picture scan of an era. Good stuff if you do not mind being a bit bummed out. It may encourage you to give a thought to how you might be kidding *your*self. And that makes it a worthwhile read.

Most of this review was written in 2009, but it was not posted then. I updated and posted it in December 2015

Cecily says

Yates is adept at picking apart the well-intentioned duplicity within couples, which both causes and prevents further hurt, misunderstanding and deception, and the chasm between thoughts/dreams and actions.

The competitive dynamics of suburbia are similarly exposed. Keeping up appearances is important, which is why, at the start of the novel, April is so upset at the debacle of the am dram.

Plot

This is the painfully insightful story of a youngish couple, with two small children, living in New England in the 1950s. Both have lingering hurt and dysfunction from their childhoods, which exacerbates the slow and painful disintegration of their relationship. April has the idea of a fresh start in Paris, where she will support Frank till he works out what he wants to do with his life. This exciting possibility and shared aim changes the dynamic of their lives.

Caution (but only a slight one)

Don't read this if you're in a long term relationship that is in difficulties, especially if you are stuck in a dull job as well: it may be too pertinent. That caveat aside, it's not a depressing book: as with all his books (which all have strong autobiographical elements) there is cold beauty in the pain of struggles with work, relationships, drink, and money.

Original Clichés

There are a few potential literary clichés used well and originally, so that each gives insight in a fresh way: (view spoiler).

Passages about Frank's work, and especially his cavalier approach to sorting his In Tray (pages 85 and 124) made a great metaphor for his approach to life, laden with overtones of Kafka - a tough target, hit with panache - much like the whole book.

Yates Revival

I read this just before the film came out because I wanted to see the film. Good call. I loved the book and enjoyed the film.

Apparently the resurgence of Yates' popularity predates that and was prompted by this excellent article about him and his works:
The Lost World of Richard Yates, by Stewart O'Nan, in The Boston Review, here.

David says

Revolutionary Road is a masterpiece of a genre that's largely considered played out—the novel of suburban malaise. It's a social novel about The Way We Live Now, only in this case Now is over 40 years ago and Yates' take on the plight of the poor souls marooned in corporate/suburban America has long since been digested and superseded. It still persists to some degree—in films like American Beauty, novels such as Tom Perotta's Little Children, and the brilliant TV show Weeds. But, American Beauty aside, contemporary takes on suburbia tend to be much less tragic and portentous.

Frank and April Wheeler, Yates 20-30-something protagonists are, in their own misguided way, dissidents struggling against certain stereotypically oppressive aspects of American life in the 50's: conformity; the tedium and banality of life in the suburbs and the mid-century corporate workplace (they live in Connecticut, Frank works in New York); in April's case, against a life of homemaking and childrearing. The problem is they don't seem to have very good intellectual resources for waging the struggle. The practical, material

resources are probably there—they are well educated (at least Frank is), intelligent, they make a good impression, while not rich they are far from destitute. But they are hampered by all kinds of romantic illusions, illusions that keep them from coming up with a plausible escape plan, or making the most of the hand they are dealt. They are tormented by the idea that they are not living up to their best selves (and this is true) but they have utterly self-deluding notions about what their best selves are or how to bring them into being. They are so afraid of being corrupted by their environment that they hold themselves aloof from the life around them. Their aversion is largely aesthetic, but the pop psychological and sociological theories they use to explain to themselves why they are alienated are inadequate to the task. They want to lead lives of significance, but the best they can do is to concoct a vague and implausible scheme of moving to France, where the plan is for April to work as a secretary while Frank sits around the apartment trying to figure out what to do with himself. I mean, if they want to do something worthwhile with their lives, Frank could become a teacher, or, at the other end of the scale, go to work for the kind of high-powered advertising firm portrayed in Mad Men (he graduated Columbia and has a way with words). April could have, at the very least, volunteered to work at the NAACP.

Yates is an extremely accomplished prose stylist. He’s a master of the vivid, transparent prose style that is the gold standard for writers of realistic fiction. He nails the details of life among the white middle class in the mid-to-late 50’s, while at the same time painting it as a more complicated and conflicted time than popular stereotypes would have you believe. He has an extraordinary ability to make you feel like you are deep inside the consciousness of his characters while at the same time watching them from a great distance. And the central dilemma his characters face—how to live a worthwhile life in a world that often conspires against it—is not one that will go out of fashion any time soon.

Zack says

What a wise book. Many rate it as depressing, and yes, it tells a very tragic story. But at the same time, it's also a tremendously funny book. It's just that its humor stings because it's based in the most human of weaknesses: Self-rationalization.

Frank and April Wheeler are the prototypical post-WWII suburban couple -- happy on the outside, endlessly frustrated on the inside. But author Richard Yates isn't interested in just dissecting the suburbs. Frank and April are painfully aware of their shallow surroundings, but they've always tried to convince themselves that they're better than this life.

Their frustration -- mainfested in arguments that are painfully realistic and bitter -- comes from a sense that they should be doing more, that they should accomplish something with themselves. But, as the failed local theater production that opens the story points out, they're also haunted by the fact that perhaps not only were they not meant to be great, but they were never on the road to greatness in the first place.

Scene after scene crackles with familiarity. There's the conversation with another couple that leads to awkward silence until the neighbors' troubles provide a desperately-needed topic of discussion. There's the description of how Frank came to get his job, a dead-on commentary on college graduates looking for financial stablity with little output. And there's April's heartbreaking lament about the validation she hoped to find for herself in the real world, and what she's found instead.

It's not that the Wheelers are unjustified in their decisions -- their backstories flesh out Frank's need not to be his blue-collar father, and April's desperate desire for a loving family. But their attitudes toward facing the world are hopelessly compromised by their insecurity. Neither is truly happy with themself, and April's harebrained idea about moving to Paris is just an excuse to avoid the real issue: It's not the suburbs that's draining the life from their marriage, it's them. In the end, April realizes they were never really in love with each other, just the idealized images they created for each other.

REVOLUTIONARY ROAD has enjoyed a cult reputation for decades, but has often had a hard time gaining widespread acceptance. I think the reason for this is because it's filled with truth -- the kind that makes people nod in recognition and wince in embarassment. It achieves one of the highest goals of fiction: It makes you question yourself and the world you live in. It's not without hope -- even after the climactic tragedy, life goes on. It's just up to you to try and understand the book's lessons, and figure out if there's anything you've learned.

Glenn Russell says

Revolutionary Road - Set in 1955, portrait of American suffocating, grinding conformity. Author Richard Yates on his novel: "I think I meant it more as an indictment of American life in the 1950s. 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." Republished as part of the 1980s Vintage Contemporaries series, *Revolutionary Road* is, for my money, the Great American 1950s Novel. Richard Yates at his finest, a true classic. In the spirit of freshness, I will shift the focus from the story of main characters Frank and April Wheeler to various ways the novel depicts 1950s American society and culture:

THE ALMIGHTY AUTOMOBILE – “Once their cars seemed able to relax in an environment all their own, a long bright valley of colored plastic and plate glass and stainless steel.” Yates’ description here after those 1950s cars are off winding, bumpy, narrow streets and onto the spanking new wide highway. Back in 1955 there still existed a contrast between narrow dirt roads and car-friendly highways and freeways. Richard Yates foresaw how the automobile would quickly come to rule and how American men and women could then relax behind the wheel and feel at home on the many smooth, newly constructed car-dominated roads.

WORRYWARTS – Frank spends all his work day anticipating April in her evening dramatic premier: “A mental projection of scenes to unfold tonight but nowhere in these plans did he foresee the weight and shock of reality.” Frank is a college graduate but hasn’t learned a fundamental, critical truth: constantly projecting your life into the future is a sure-fire formula for disappointment. And all during April’s actual performance Frank incessantly bites his nails and gnaws on his fist until it’s a raw, red pulp. Such anxiety and insecurity – Frank typifies the 1950s emotionally distraught worrywart. As Richard Yates notes above, a society of such worrywarts will cling to safety and security at any price.

LOGORRHEA – “Could you please stop talking.” So asks April of Frank ridding home after her theatrical disaster. She doesn’t realize she is asking the impossible since this is America 1955 where silence has become the dreaded enemy; an entire society of know-it-alls drowning in their own chatter. Talk as a prime tool to establish how absolutely right you are. And if anyone else doesn’t see it your way or dares to

disagree, God help them, they must be quickly set straight. Yak, yak, yak, jabber, jabber, jabber, fueled by those two prime 1950s pick-me-ups: chain smoking and martinis.

BABBITT LIVES – Frank and April's suburban realtor, a two-faced, despicable, intrusive gatekeeper of the growing suburbs, Mrs. Givings, runs around doing her best to make sure new residents equate personal value with real estate value. Frank's inability to stand up to this loutish, boorish woman speaks volumes to his insecurity and pitiful lack of character.

A WOMAN'S PLACE – Nowhere is Frank's hypocrisy and ugly ego on display more than in his dealings with his wife, April. Frank condescendingly snickers at the middle-class mentality and lifestyle where "Daddy is always the great man and Mommy always listens to Daddy and sticks by his side" but Frank quickly boils over into a rage at those times when April doesn't do exactly that, listen to him and sticks by his side. Turns out, April is quite capable of speaking her own mind, especially in matters of importance such as dealing with her pregnancy and the decision to have a child. This novel captures how the 1950s scream out for much needed women's liberation.

TELEVISION RULES – Frank and April's choice to have a TV in their new suburban house: "Why not? Don't we really owe it to the kids? Besides, it's silly to go on being snobbish about television." The author's penetrating insight into 1950s mentality: educated men and women want to scoff at television, thinking their tastes much too cultivated and refined to constantly stare passively at the boob tube, but that's exactly what they do for hours and hours. "Owe it to the kids" – sheer balderdash.

THE WORLD OF MEN AND GIRLS – Every single scene in Frank's midtown Manhattan office is a revealer of the strict stratification in the grey flannel 50s - men doing the serious work on this side; girls performing secretarial and filing on that side. And it goes without saying every single person in the office is white. Frank's father's name was Earl, a serious handicap in a world of Jims, Teds, Toms, Mikes and Joes, since in workplace USA men are called by their shortened first names. Ah, to make such a big deal over names! Just goes to show how suffocating and strict the conformity. Sidebar: I always have found it amusing that as soon as the post-1950s business world discovered women will work harder than men, generally do a better job than men and work for a lot less pay then men, all of a sudden, surprise, surprise, huge shift in the American workforce.

TRUE REBELLION AND PSYCHIATRY – Serious energy is infused into Yates' story when April and especially Frank are given a dose of what it really means to rebel against standardized, conventional society: John Givings, fresh from a mental hospital, pays a number of visits to their home. In the black-and-white 1950s world, if someone had to be dragged off to a mental hospital aka nut house, loony bin, funny farm, that person was instantly labeled totally insane or completely crazy, placed on the same level as a leper in a leper colony. And God help the poor soul who is told they should see a psychiatrist. In the 1950s, telling people they need mental help was a key method of intimidation and control, as Frank well knows when he tells April she needs to see a shrink.

THE LURE OF MONEY AND SUCCESS – Oh, Frank, how you spin 180 degrees when a company executive sits you down, gives you some honest-to-goodness appreciation and judges that you, Frank Wheeler, have what it takes to join him in a new business venture and use your ingenuity to move up in the company and make some serious money. With such a glowing prospect, following April's plan of moving to Paris so you can sit around and "fine yourself" begins to smell like a big pile of dog you-know-what.

THE KIDS – Frank and April have two children: six-year-old Jennifer and four-year-old Michael, running back and forth in the backyard, playing with the neighborhood boys and girls but most of the time sitting in front of the TV watching cartoons. And where will Jennifer and Michael be as teenagers in 1969? At Woodstock, wearing their hair long, smoking grass, listening to Joan Baez and Richie Havens and Santana. Bye, bye 1950s. Good riddance!

Fabian says

Imagine my surprise when I came across Stephen King's "Best Books of 2009" List (one not condescending enough to include solely those published this year), & saw that 2nd place belonged to Revolutionary Road. Glad I am not alone in feeling a deep sad empathy for this book. The story is EXTREMELY well told. The story, about young "revolutionaries" who end up doing exactly the opposite of what they've set out to do, is quite simple but rich. It has different POVs, which deviates from the outstanding film, & the ending is more shattering & bitter than the one presented on the silver screen.

Academy-Award winning director Sam Mendes made a wise decision in giving April Wheeler a brighter limelight to contend with Frank's, the husband & sole protagonist of the novel. In the film, there is a constant wrestling match which is underlined by the fact that THESE ARE JACK AND ROSE from Titanic and we must instantly feel for them. Mendes is a genius, too, in the casting of his (ex)wife Kate Winslet, who is arguably the best actress of our generation. So while Mendes has the ability to play sly film director, almost-auteur, Richard Yates has much more to contend with. His meditation on the cost of real freedom is basically flawless. He plays with dialogue in the same awesome way that a dedicated playwright like Edward Albee did. He describes in simple ways just how awful the everyday can truly be for a bright, dedicated yet frail American in the 1950's. Makes a stark contrast with today's impediments on a marriage! After so many years it seems that sometimes people make jails for themselves with as little ease as they dream big dreams...

Eric says

I let out a whoop of laughter on about page 180, when I finally figured Frank Wheeler out. You see, Frank spent most of his youth a scattered, bashful schmuck. Then after WWII, as a Columbia student and Village-dweller, he started getting laid all the time, thanks to a theatrically brooding pseudo-intellectual schtick. Nevermind that Frank is essentially a glib blowhard, talented in no artistic way (he's one of those tiresome people who whine about Conformity as if America invented it, threaten expatriation, etc.), but the sexual success of his hip, disaffected persona was the only success or strength he had ever really known, so it became the core around which he wrapped his entire being and identity. That's fine, we all need illusions, and if they get you laid, even better--but the hitch is that April, his wife and the last of his conquests, and the woman with whom he now lives in the suburbs, actually half-believes him, thinks that he's a noble soul who needs the rarefied air of foreign capitals in order to flower. This is hilarious because Frank is nothing if not the standard guy, L'homme moyen sensuel: his dissatisfaction with his life, which he pretentiously blames on the conformity and boredom of 1950s America, is actually pretty well mollified once he gets a promotion at work and starts screwing a secretary; the idea of moving to Paris the better to become a 'nicotine-stained, Jean-Paul Sartre kinda guy' vanishes once he starts having more sex; he affects a snooty disdain for his job, but he's actually quite good at it, and, in heartbreaking scene toward the end, when it's all too, too late, demonstrates that he kind of likes it.

But getting back to my whoop of laughter. That laughter didn't diminish my esteem for the novel--regardless of his characters, Yates is a godlike stylist--but for a while there I felt it played more as a macabre farce than as a Tragic Laying Bare Of The Hollowness Of The American Dream. Then the tragic gravity of the characters came rushing back in chapter 7 of part 3, when the narration switches to April's point of view, and Yates starts hitting you where the last pages of 'The Great Gatsby' hit you. I ended up with more compassion for Frank, I saw that his pose of superiority rises, at least partly, out of a desperate fear of ending up like his wilted, used-up working stiff of a father. Frank and April were drifting, lonely people who initially thought that one another looked like the kind of person (the 'golden' boy, the 'really first rate girl') who could whirl their lives into effortlessness and perfection and a final salvation from lifelong feelings of dread and inadequacy...just as everyone else in the book thinks that the Wheelers LOOK LIKE that golden couple with the world at its feet, and all problems solved. Stendahl said 'beauty is the promise of happiness.' That's it, merely 'the promise.' Yates is so eloquent on how easy (and how dangerous) it is to theatricalize our lives. He knows all the little gestures and poses with which we briefly and delusionally elevate flawed creatures into romantic figures.

Maxwell says

This is definitely an "it's not you, it's me" book. The writing was lovely. I thought he captured the setting, tone, etc. extremely well. And I can imagine for its time, this book was pretty groundbreaking, and I can see why it's had a resurgence of popularity in the last decade or so. But honestly the storyline and theme of disillusionment in America, for me, is overdone. I've read a lot of books and plays (and this one definitely felt like something akin to an Albee or Miller play) that touch on this topic. But I can't fault the book just for doing something others have done. I've read a lot of books that are thematically similar but they all stand out for different reasons. My main issue with this book is that it didn't have any characters I could root for; not ones I could love or hate. They just sort of existed. We spent so much time in Frank's head, and I would've really rather spent more with April. She was a far more interesting character to me. When the author did jump around into other characters' minds, I was intrigued. But then we'd return to boring, old Frank who was basically a bitter middle class man that felt lost in life and trapped by his circumstances. Ho hum. That's sort of how I feel about this. I'd give Yates another chance because, like I said, great writing. But this one didn't do much for me.

Michelle says

I've been putting off reviewing this book. I didn't enjoy reading it, and it wasn't because the characters were unlikeable, which they were. There are authors who can write great books about people the reader hates. This wasn't one of them.

I get the whole 1950s values/suburbia/trap that Frank and April found themselves in. I just didn't care. He was a whiny, immature, alcoholic. She was a bored suburban housewife whose only sense of identity was tied into how successful Frank may/may not be in life.

I think I mostly felt sorry for their children.

I'm tempted to tie this book in with a discussion of Roe v. Wade, but, once again, I just don't care.

Ellen says

[image error]

Navidad Thelamour says

Rightfully a classic and will forever be one of my favorites. Damn, that's good writing!

The Navi Review | Twitter | Bookstagram

Ben says

For the longest time I just wanted a family, kids, a decent job, and a happy life in suburbia. That was all I wanted. That's it. It seemed so simple, predictable, and reliable. It was my *ideal image*.

It seems that society has done a good job of putting that thought in everyone's head. The best thing for a young man is for him to go to college, get married, get a reliable job with a steady company, have babies (2 or 3, of course), make friends with neighbors, have birthday parties for the kids, do little cocktail parties with the adults. Then he needs to tell his kids to do the same thing. And the cycle continues.

That's "just what you do."

I know that mindset isn't as prevalent now as it was when this was written in the 50s. And I haven't a doubt that the aforementioned lifestyle was/is the best life for many people. No doubt at all.

I think the problem lies in rushing into that lifestyle, before really knowing what you're getting into, without really knowing your spouse, without even knowing who *you* are, and what you really want, and what would really be best for you. People get trapped and don't even know they're trapped; caught inside their anger, not even knowing what they're angry at. Trapped inside the jail that is their home, forced into a miserable life of their own choosing, not knowing why or how it got that way, and even more miserable about it for that very reason.

And it's scary for me, because a few bad roles of the die and I could have ended up like Frank-fucking-Wheeler.

And it's funny. That whole lifestyle. Especially the tedious details and what often becomes our self-obsessive thoughts. You know why it's funny? Because it's both ridiculous *and* real. So all the laughter this novel caused me was because shit, man: it's real. It's very real that most of us are this ridiculous; it's very real that we go through the motions each day unaware, petty, and self-absorbed; it's very real that the most "normal" among us are among the most insane. It's very real that a lot of people are living the *ideal* lifestyle and are fucking miserable.

And no matter our life situation, we're always hoping for more. That keeps a lot of us going. And we're all

pretty fucking shallow too, aren't we? Yes. People die all the time, and we get over it. Yes. We. Do. And often quickly, I might add.

The word "timeless" probably gets thrown around too much. But this novel doesn't just seem timeless. And it doesn't just seem relevant today. It seems fucking instructive. Be careful what you wish for, and pay attention to who you are, and don't suck others dry, and don't suck yourself dry, and search for truth no matter how painful.

And we continue to be self-absorbed and ridiculous. We make our decisions based on what we think will bring us the most happiness, like life is a game of chess. And it is. And it goes on.

And I still want my reliable job and my white picket fence. And a pretty wife. And babies. 2 or 3 of them.

But you see, I'm crazy.

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karen says

watching this movie last night made me want to read the book immediately after. and it's not a terrible movie, it's just a little... hammy, and the tone is uneven - whether these people are meant to be seen as victims of the stultifying, euthanizing effects of suburbia, or if they are at root unlikable people who deserve to be taken down a peg for their arrogance and their conviction that their involvement in this thing we call "suburbia" is just playacting, not to be taken seriously. the book doesn't waver, not to me. i always read it as a story of awful people poisoning each other and blaming their wasted lives on each other instead of taking responsibility for their own shortcomings, which, being a generally unsympathetic person, i can applaud. and his writing - absolutely wonderful.

the real character in this novel of course, is suburbia. soul-sucking, dream-gutting suburbia that neutralizes all its inhabitants and blandifies the pointy, interesting bits. this isn't the lynchian or *music for torching* view of the suburbs/small-town charm, where the beneficence of suburbia is compromised by its seedy undertones. suburbia, here, is the aggressor, slowly draining its characters of any charms and releasing them back into their after-dinner drinks and their morning commute to the office. and woe if you think you are somehow special or "above it all", particularly if, like the wheelers, your aspirations outweigh your capabilities and your "specialness" is only ego. i grew up in a version of suburbia, and while it wasn't in the same time period, and it wasn't as bad as all this, the writing struck a chord in me and it's good that i am away. suburbia is a bitch, but at least they'll always have paris...

oh, wait.

BlackOxford says

Really Tough Love

Yates has a reputation as a chronicler of the smug years of post-WWII America. Perhaps. But as an artist, he is much more than a period sociologist. Yates's understanding of the *folie a deux* which we call marriage is profound. The reasons two people find each other attractive are buried in experiences of which neither is

conscious much less rationally able to think about.

To call such attraction love is euphemistic. It may be, at best, an attempt to redeem or complete oneself that might eventually develop into love but only if the underlying reasons are resolved sufficiently and replaced. Subsequent decisions to bring children into such an indeterminate situation are likely based on equally fatuous thinking. It seems amazing therefore that the survival rates of marriage are as high as they are and that more of us are not functionally psychotic.

Yates raises the perennial if not eternal question of the nature and implications of commitment. I recall the distinction made when I was in the services between making a contribution and making a commitment: in one's breakfast of bacon and eggs, the chicken has made a contribution; the pig is decisively committed. Does this anecdote express the reality or essential ethics of commitment? Are the reasons for making commitments, misguided or not, relevant to a continuation of a commitment? Do changed circumstances, including improved awareness of motives, abrogate the demands of previous commitments? Can 'Til death us do part' be anything more than irrational optimism and encouragement?

Personal sovereignty is analogous to national sovereignty. The implication would seem to be that treaties, contracts, agreements are never unconditional, never intended as eternal. There may be consequences of non-compliance with any of these, but acceptance of consequences is part of sovereignty - the share out of community property, loss of mutual friends, increased psychological and social tensions; and of course the fate of the next generation. The calculus of contract-termination my be complex but doesn't seem to imply any absolute moral constraints. On the other hand, can what we believe to be considered judgment be anything more than hapless struggle?

The alternative to withdrawal of commitment is what seems to fascinate Yates. We try to 'work things out.' In order to deny, or at least delay, the possibility of broken commitment, we tell each other stories. Stories about the past and how we arrived at the present could prove therapeutic by uncovering unconscious reasons and reasoning. But we tell stories about the future instead, about alternatives lives - in exotic locations, doing interesting work, with stimulating friends and colleagues. The stories promote hope but little else.

We hope these 'ideals' can compensate for any originating defects. But it's likely that Yates is correct: these ideals simply reinforce the power of the neuroses already in play. A new script perhaps but the same denouement. There is no way to anticipate the psychological baggage we take on with our partner. The piper will be paid. Pain is inevitable. The issue is who pays and when. Unambiguously happy endings are not within the range of the possible.

Peter Boyle says

"That's how we both got committed to this enormous delusion—because that's what it is, an enormous, obscene delusion—this idea that people have to resign from real life and 'settle down' when they have families. It's the great sentimental lie of the suburbs..."

This incisive, crushing portrait of a crumbling marriage stirred up a lot of emotions in me - heartbreak for the characters' plights, awe at the brilliance of the writing. But most of all it made me feel happy (and relieved!) to be single.

On the surface, the Wheelers are a perfect suburban family and the embodiment of the American Dream.

Frank commutes from their beautiful home to a well-paid job in New York city while April looks after their two adorable children. But instead of being content, they feel trapped. They see themselves as better than their ordinary neighbours and the dull Connecticut surroundings. April devises a plan which will see the family move to Europe, so that Frank, a deep thinker, can find himself and they can leave this unfulfilling life behind. But fate and their own weaknesses conspire against them, and this dream soon turns into a horrible nightmare.

They are not a particularly likable duo, the Wheelers. Frank has an insufferably high opinion of himself and enjoys grandstanding with his latest philosophical musings. April meanwhile, is spoilt and self-important. And the thing is they don't even like each other - blazing rows are the norm and both of them are unfaithful over the course of the story. And yet Yates does a outstanding job of making us care for this complicated couple. He taps into those universal feelings of being misunderstood and underappreciated, as April tearfully admits:

> *"I still had this idea that there was a whole world of marvelous golden people somewhere, as far ahead of me as the seniors at Rye when I was in the sixth grade; people who knew everything instinctively, who made their lives work out the way they wanted without even trying, who never had to make the best of a bad job because it never occured to them to do anything less than perfectly the first time. Sort of heroic super-people, all of them beautiful and witty and calm and kind, and I always imagined that when I did find them I'd suddenly know that I belonged among them, that I was one of them, that I'd been meant to be one of them all along, and everything in the meantime had been a mistake; and they'd know it too. I'd be like the ugly duckling among the swans."*

There is an unsettling atmosphere from page one of the story when April's play turns out to be a disaster, and Frank's ham-fisted attempts to comfort her kick off a huge argument. We just know this will not end well for the Wheelers and our fears are confirmed when tragedy eventually strikes. Their harrowing predicament serves as a cautionary tale for anyone involved in a loveless, caustic relationship. It is a bleak and haunting book, full of rich insight and rightly hailed as a modern classic.
