

Orange Inheritance Reading Guide
***Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates**
Chosen by Lionel Shriver



'Here is more than fine writing; here is what, added to fine writing, makes a book come immediately, intensely and brilliantly alive...a masterpiece' Tennessee Williams

'I hand out copies to anyone who will take them...one of the most moving and exact portraits of suburbia in all of American literature' *Observer*

'The *Great Gatsby* of my time... One of the best books by a member of my generation' Kurt Vonnegut

About Revolutionary Road

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 fulfil 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.

Points for Discussion

Did you find the novel comic, and if so why?

How do the characters' perspectives of who they are differ from reality?

To what extent is this a novel about boredom?

Frank repeatedly wonders what it means to be a man. Do you believe he will ever find out?

'Frank and April regrettably harbor little affection for each other.' Do you agree?

Are April and Frank good parents?

What is John Givings' purpose in the novel?

Discuss April's suicide, her note and how it affects all the characters.

Yates' writing has been described as gentle yet brutal. What do you think is meant by this?
How did the novel affect you?





Q. In Revolutionary Road, was the ending thought out before you began?

Y. 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.

Q. When you first planned the book, did you have John Givings in there?

Y. 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.

Q. You really lambasted the suburbs.

Y. 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.

Q. Doesn't the title suggest an attack on The System?

Y. 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.

Q. You weren't knocking marriage?

Y. 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.

Q. Still, your image of marriage in the book is hardly optimistic. All the families in time past or present, with the exception of the Campbells' are broken, or they all result in abortions one way or another.

Y. Abortions, yes. Everything gets aborted in the book. That was supposed to be the theme of the book. I remember when I was first working on it and feeling my way into it, somebody at a party asked me what I was writing a novel about, and I said I thought I was writing a novel about abortion. And the guy said what do you mean by that? And I said, it's going to be built on a series of abortions, of all kinds - an aborted play, several aborted careers, any number of aborted ambitions and aborted plans and aborted dreams - all leading up to a real, physical abortion, and a death at the end. And maybe that's about as close to a real summation of the book as I've ever come.

Q. And yet the Campbells seem to weather all those abortions.

Y. Because somebody had to go on living in the story, right? Somebody had to come through with a kind of qualified hope at the end, and I meant it to be Shep Campbell. I meant his to be the one small voice of affirmation after the tragedy. But I guess "tragedy" is too lofty a word to use in talking about my own book - certainly it's a much-debased word, and a word I've always tended to throw around all too easily. "Calamity" might be more appropriate, or "downfall."

Also by Richard Yates

