

Justin Haythe's REBEL YELL

The 1950s-set marital drama *Revolutionary Road* holds a mirror to the ongoing struggle against suburban inertia.

RICHARD YATES' *REVOLUTIONARY ROAD*, published in 1961 and long hailed as one of the great American novels, is a close portrait of the marriage of Frank and April Wheeler, clever and spirited young New Yorkers who all too quickly find themselves living out a routine suburban existence. Passion and romance are rekindled by way of a bold plan to move the family to Paris, where April will support them while Frank is given time to "find himself." When the plan is derailed, they're forced to confront who they are and whether their love can survive. The devastating third act makes this story a tragedy, but the writing is so generous in its truth that it leaves the reader inexplicably feeling stronger. The movie adaptation had the good luck to attract a band of collaborators with intimate ties between them: director Sam Mendes (*American Beauty*); his wife, actress Kate Winslet; and Leonardo DiCaprio, Winslet's longtime close friend (and *Titanic* co-star). Long before they came on, the task of writing the screenplay fell to Justin Haythe, a British-born, New York-dwelling dramatist who was hired in 2004 by the BBC, which produced the movie in association with DreamWorks and Paramount Vantage. Haythe had previously written the screenplay for *The Clearing*, a marital thriller starring Robert Redford and Helen Mirren. He talked to *Creative Screenwriting* about his approach.

Q New screenwriters are often asked to tell what their story is about in a couple of sentences, which can be terrifying if the story is complex. Can you do the honors for *Revolutionary Road*?

A In the most simplistic terms it's a story about a marriage, but more specifically, it very brilliantly articulates that moment when you realize that you've arrived

at what your life is — it's no longer about your potential, and you have to ask yourself if you're going to be satisfied. It's that moment that raises the question, "Are you going to give up struggling for what you hoped your life would be?"

Q I'm just now reading the book, and your adaptation seems remarkably true. Was that your goal?

Spoiler alert:

Key aspects of the plot, including the ending, are revealed in this discussion.

We recommend you see the movie before reading this article.



Justin Haythe

A Well, it's a different medium, and you don't ever hope to compete with the book. But our goal for the adaptation was that it would move people in a similar way as the book does, but they would not be able to point out where we departed from the book and where we did not.

Q One place that's different is the opening sequence; it really impressed me with its economy. It takes April and Frank (Winslet and DiCaprio) from their first meeting at a party to falling in love to being married to being caught up in a miserable fight at the side of the road, all in a few beats, before the main titles roll. Did you start the script that way from the beginning? Or did that come about later?

A No, that opening came about very late in the process and had to do with the editing. But I can say that from the conception, from very early on in the design of this, the idea was that this fight was one of the first pieces of information you would get about these two people, and after that the point of the movie would be to figure out what they're fighting about. They're yelling, "You're in a trap? No, I'm in a trap!" Which one of them is actually the one caught in a trap? And, of course, the fight doesn't answer that question, but from a craft point of view, it pushes you into the next aspect of the

movie. You're curious to find out. And the rest of the movie answers it.

Q Can you talk about how you approached dramatic structure and how your solution fit in with traditional three-act structure?

A Sam Mendes, coming from the theater as he does, really held me to account on the question of what the shape of this would look like. I decided the shape was like a gun being fired into the air, where the bullet ascends with great speed and then slowly, it loses momentum, hangs there and then plummets to earth with even greater velocity. The bullet being shot is their plan to leave everything and move to Paris, which makes them feel passionate and alive again. Then when the plan unravels, it's the bullet falling to earth. Three-act structure is basically about having a beginning, a middle and an end. So in those terms, the beginning is them deciding to save themselves, the middle is them believing it's possible and the end is them deciding it's not. As far as craft, the complicated part is how to make it both in-

evitable and a surprise that they decide not to go. You have to leave enough clues along the way, and then at a precise moment, you turn the story.

Q There are a couple of key turning points. One is when Frank suddenly gets noticed at work and a promotion is dangled, and he finds himself liking the idea of living out a career path that his father was denied. The other one is when April finds out she's pregnant, and she knows she's not going to win this battle about leaving it all behind anymore, even though she's going to try.

A Yes, and I think Kate Winslet is never more brilliant than in that scene when she tells him she's pregnant. She knows already exactly how complicated it's going to be for them. As you say, those really are the two turning points that set up the rest of it.

Q Then there's Jack Givings (Michael Shannon), the mental patient who is brought by his parents (Kathy Bates and Richard Easton) to visit them, with such devastating results. He brings such a

bracing element to the story — can you talk about how his character functions?

A The crazy person who is in fact the truth-teller is a dramatic concept that's as old as the hills, so it's a testament to Yates that it doesn't come across as cliché. But John Givings also functions in a different way — he allows April to see Frank at his best. In that first visit, Frank extracts John from the situation with his parents when it goes bad and treats him with great respect and sympathy. In many ways, this is a story about seeing in the person you married a desirable reflection of yourself. So during the golden period when they're going to go to Paris, the reflection they're seeing in each other is good, and Frank's treatment of John is one of the really solid moments of his generosity. It makes us like him because that's the way we'd want to handle somebody. But the second time they're with John, when the Givings family shows up for a visit right in the middle of them fighting, Frank's behavior is so fundamentally different. After they've told him they're not going to Paris after all, and it's because of

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the baby, John Givings utters his line, "I'm glad I'm not going to be that baby." That's when we see a very different side of Frank. The guy who could be generous is gone.

Q How literally did you interpret their plan to find happiness in Paris? After the movie, a colleague of mine said, "I've got news for you — there are a lot of unhappy people in Paris." But I saw it as more of a metaphor for the need to do something bold and unconventional.

A Paris, especially then, was a location where you would go to be an artist; it was a destination for 20th century artistic achievement. In the book, Yates doesn't demand that we believe in the possibilities of Paris, but in the film, it's more important that people believe in the potential for them of their escape. Because of the medium, it becomes more literal.

Q How did you approach point of view? In reading the book, I'm surprised at how much is told from Frank's point of view, whereas the movie seems more balanced.



Sam Mendes with Kate Winslet on the set of *Revolutionary Road*

A From the beginning it was a very conscious effort for me to bring in April's point of view more. The story has a built-in surprise, which is that when you first see them fighting by the side of the road, one could think, "Who is this irrational woman screaming at her poor suffering husband?"

But the surprise is that she is the one fighting for her survival and her soul, whereas he is very happy living a life that avoids his potential. She is the one who says, "I will take great risks to reach that other life." So the inherent surprise is how your sympathy shifts over the course of the story.

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Q How important do you consider the period setting of the 1950s to this story?

A My first question was whether they would want to update it. But there is a key piece of plot that means it has to be in this period.

Q You mean ... the circumstances surrounding abortion at the time ... and also, her more limited options in life, in general.

A Yes. Apart from that, it's my feeling that the 1950s were a mythic period for us. This was the generation of our parents or grandparents, a generation that created our world, and setting it then meant

that the story was elevated beyond domestic drama into something larger, something more entwined with our psyches and sense of origin. In the story, there is very little attention drawn to the fact that Frank Wheeler has just come back from fighting a war that was morally uncomplicated. These men did something heroic and then came home. It was a moment when America was full of potential; we were the undisputed good guys. For us who grew up with that generation framed in that way, this book feels almost illicit. To suggest that they were as banal and petty as the rest of us, and as jealous and polluted ... what keeps this book alive is that everybody now knows people who have an excuse for not leading the life we think we want. So the idea that this "greatest generation" was doing the

same thing ... makes it a frightening story on some level.

Q I think it's safe for us to talk about the tragic ending, since the movie will come out before this article does. My colleague said he saw it as a suicide. I saw it as more of a desperate grasp at freedom that went wrong, and a metaphor for the idea that she couldn't survive any longer in that situation.

A I have heard many people describe it as a suicide. It was always very important to me that it was not a suicide. The surprise of the story is that April Wheeler is the one who is truly struggling to survive. So giving herself an abortion past the date when it was considered safe ... she's aware that she could harm herself, but it's a risk she has to take. It's a stepping away from the relationship with Frank. It's either that or spiritual death. And spiritual death would be to blame Frank for the rest of her life. So this way, she's being completely honest toward the end, when she says that he should value what he does with his life and that she doesn't hate him.

Q I know you began work on this long before it was cast, but the performances are so great and bring so much to it. Did it surprise you to see what the actors brought to the roles?

A I always thought April should be played by Kate Winslet because people feel such empathy for her. Another kind of actress might have left people feeling unsympathetic to April, but I think it's a testament to Kate that she becomes such an incredibly sympathetic character. So it was always my fantasy that it would be played by someone like her.

Q What are your thoughts about the title? It made me think the story would be about something historic, and I was surprised that it refers only to the suburban lane that their house is on.

A I have my ideas about what it means, having read a lot of Yates. I think he was reaching for something on a larger scale, and saying this is where the American Revolution ended up, in a little house at the end of a cul de sac in the suburbs. It does that thing of elevating the story to a more mythic stature. I think he was looking back at American history, and that's what he was after. **CS**

