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Writing off the life

John Kenny

A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates

By Blake Bailey

Methuen, 671pp. £25

Apartments, gloom and grime of; disliked by self; down and out; bleak worldview of; breakdowns; as child, frailty and unathleticism of; divorce from Martha; divorce from Sheila; drinking and alcoholism of; hospitalisations; mental illness and instability of; suicide attempt; rejection slips; difficulty getting the work out; fading reputation of; out of print books.

Blake Bailey's index of Richard Yates' life (1926-1992) scans like a dark parody, a baneful list of morality tales about the romantic agony of a creative genius who let mind and limb wither while he gave unsteady autobiographical life to seven novels and two story collections. Our continued fascination with the exceptionality of the artist, our usual prurient demand for full disclosure of the birth and death, the working habits and personal foibles, the relationships and isolations that have somehow been aligned to form a writing life – all are well sated by the end of what will surely for some time to come be the exhaustively authoritative work on one of the most neglected masters of modern fiction.

Bailey's compulsively straightforward narrative thread is composed of three strands of research. He attends closely to the way Yates mercilessly inscribed his own life, and that of his family and friends, in almost all of his work, and, even when this expository aspect seems too freely speculative, it is generally supported by reference to either a personal interview with a surviving player in the story, or to relevant privately held letters. Though carefully cited, all references are end-noted in the book; though there are frequent footnotes, these are largely anecdotal or plainly informational. Clearly, Bailey does not want the scholarly proprieties to divert any attention from the particularly humane and honest way he tells this long tragic tale.

Yates was born in New York to mutually alcoholic parents; after their divorce when he was two, Yates's childhood was, by his own recollection, a "hysterical odyssey" through Depression-era America, out of New York and back again, in the company of his older sister, Ruth, and a snobbish, quasi-bohemian mother who had pretensions to be a sculptor and a messy social life. Some of the patterns of Yates's life and work were set at this early stage: absent fathers (Yates senior died in 1942) and deluded mothers would make regular appearances in the fiction and he would retain a migrant disposition ("as long as I've lived, getting out of wherever I am has seemed an appealing idea").

He eventually attended a somewhat shabby New England prep school where he overcame an inherent social awkwardness by cultivating the image of an intense intellectual. He revisited this period – the photographs of which see him resembling his admired T.S. Eliot – in *A Good School* (1978).

When he left school he joined the army, despite performing poorly in physical and mental tests, and saw combat in Belgium and Germany where he worked as a "runner" with such dedication that he irretrievably damaged his lungs. This period in Europe is one dimension of Yates perhaps worth investigation beyond Bailey's coverage. European cities are symbols and sites of ultimately frustrated bohemian

escape for middle-class Americans in the work: *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Yates's first and supreme novel, holds the idea of Paris up as a talisman against the boring normalcy of American suburbia, and "Liars in Love", the title story of Yates's second collection and the one Richard Ford chose as symptomatic for *The Granta Book of the American Short Story*, is completely set in London.

A key decision in Yates's life was to not avail of the GI Bill and begin, instead, a long series of dreary jobs in offices, in publicity, and, finally and variously, in teaching creative writing, to fund his primary concern of becoming a respected author. Drudgery exacerbated a congenital cynicism and for the rest of his life he was distractedly suspicious and resentful of what he perceived to be the "phoniness" of university literary people (one lover pleased Yates with the remark that he actually looked like Holden Caulfield grown up).

As Bailey attends in detail to the workaday tribulations of making a living from writing, Yates emerges, even in the very early stages, as a psychosomatic time bomb: frequent pneumonia, pleurisy, tuberculosis, epilepsy, an inguinal hernia were matched by psychosis, manic depression and delusional rants. Unrelenting alcoholism, which killed his sister at the age of 46, and a four-pack-a-day smoking habit, saw Yates washed up, after a number of cobbled teaching jobs, at Birmingham, Alabama where he was largely kept alive by an oxygen tank. He died from a suffocating night-time vomiting fit at a Veterans Administration hospital. The novel he was working on, *Uncertain Times*, was to be based on his time as a speech writer for Bobby Kennedy in the 1960s.

Bailey is admirably non-judgmental in all of this and perhaps the greatest achievement of this biography is that it is Yates's ferocious Flaubert-like devotion to the craft of prose that commands most attention. He described himself as an "eager, fearful, self-hectoring spirit", and his worthier writing students were devoted to him because his harshest criticisms were propelled by an artistic honesty that was sufficiently stubborn to be recognised as integrity.

While contemporaries like Bellow, Updike and Roth could let rip expansively in style and sermonising, Yates remained, especially in his second-best novel, *The Easter Parade* (1976), more minimalist and guarded in style, a writer who showed rather than told. Though he never seemed to quite achieve personal emotional maturity – not coincidentally, his fiction is superlative on the yearnings and cruelties of children – he was nevertheless an astringent diagnostician of an America that was to him no new-found land but an old waste of hypocrisy and thwarted social pretensions, a tired suburb of the "hopeless emptiness" of *Revolutionary Road*.

The most dissuasive aspect of Yates's fiction is its swingeing gloom ("Why does he have to write so unpleasantly that one feels there's just no good in anybody?" wrote one *Harper's* editor on a rejection slip.) This biography will help both new and familiar readers realise that this was no perverse affectation. Yates was permanently obsessed with F. Scott Fitzgerald, and his favourite sentence from 'The Crack-Up', which he apparently read over 400 times, best identifies the deep need that made him, down all his smashed years, sit through his own perfectionist gloom at his preferred L-shaped desks: "I only wanted absolute quiet to think out why I had developed a sad attitude toward sadness, a melancholy attitude toward melancholy and a tragic attitude toward tragedy – why I had become identified with the objects of my horror or compassion."

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