

KARL WOOD¹

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Kazimierz Wielki University
in Bydgoszcz, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0002-4042-1307

A window into short- -story construction: Richard Yates' "Builders" and questions of the autobiographical content of his work

Abstract. Richard Yates, most remembered for his *Revolutionary Road* (1961), was also the author of two fine and exceptionally well-crafted collections of short stories, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1963) and *Liars in Love* (1981). Yates was a writer of exceptional perception and unflinching clarity, yet some have criticized his work as drawing too heavily on autobiographical content. This article seeks to examine Yates' 1963 story "Builders" to gain insight into this extraordinary author's understanding of the writing process, his use of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical content, and to suggest new approaches for work on this still under-appreciated twentieth century author.

Keywords: Richard Yates, autofiction, self-narrative, short stories

Richard Yates, an author whose name often evokes a vague sense of familiarity, is most often remembered for his 1961 first novel *Revolutionary Road*, accompanied by a sense that this was an important and fine author, yet one who remains on many bucket lists of works to be read, someday, when time permits. This is an improvement over the situation at the turn of the century, when Richard Ford commented that Yates was a kind of "cultural-literary secret handshake" (2000: 16), with his work largely out of print, leading Stewart O'Nan (1999) to remark that "to write so well and be forgotten is a terrifying legacy." Over the past twenty years or so, however, prompted by the advocacy of several of his students, there has been a small renaissance in the appreciation of Yates. His work is again available in print, and a somewhat modest number of studies and academic

¹ Address for correspondence: Department of Anglophone Literatures, Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, ul. Grabowa 2, 85-601 Bydgoszcz, Poland. E-mail: karlwood@ukw.edu.pl

articles devoted to his work have appeared. Richard Yates as an author is certainly no longer forgotten, at least not entirely. Yet some of the older critiques of Yates as a rather traditional or old-fashioned writer, a realist writing at the dawn of postmodernism have lingered, and his subject matter – generally the less than idyllic lives of white mainstream Americans behind the façade of happiness and fulfilment at mid-century – is not one that is likely to arouse much contemporary literary interest, however unflinchingly insightful (detractors may say gloomy) or masterful Yates’ writing may be.

There is, however, much about Yates’ work that still merits attention today. One such element, which had often been regarded as a flaw in his writing, especially his later work, is that he drew extensively on his own experience in writing fiction. The contemporary rise in interest in the forms of autofiction and life writing, which have called into question the dictum that a work of art must be somehow removed from the writer’s own life, suggests a critical reexamination of Yates. Indeed, for Yates, the use of autobiographical source material was not a mistake or flaw in his work, but rather an intentional means to create not autobiography or memoir but works of art rooted in lived experience.

One can look to many of Yates’ works and find traces of this technique, but none perhaps is better suited than his 1963 short story “Builders”, written for and first published in the collection *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. The story, likely a story about himself, illuminates Yates’ reflections on learning the art of writing, both as an artist and on the compromises required for publication, something Yates struggled with over the years. When set in the context of Yates’ remarks in interviews and as an instructor, including at the Iowa workshop, an image emerges of an author whose embrace of the autobiographical while seeking to form it into art partially anticipates the forms of autofiction or self-narrative.

“Builders” itself is a well-formed story about an aspiring young writer, Robert Prentice, and his commercial and creative relationship with the well-drawn character of an aspirational New York cabdriver, Bernie Silver. The main narrative of the story begins when Prentice, in need of income to supplement his meager earnings as a financial copy desk writer at United Press, answers a classified ad offering an “unusual free-lance opportunity for talented writer. Must have imagination” (Yates 2001: 143). After meeting Silver, who had “one of the most guileless and self-confident faces [he] had ever seen” (Yates 2001: 143) and hearing his proposition that he ghostwrite inspirational stories for the New York hack driver based on his experiences, Prentice agreed to write one story a week for pay. Silver would then collect these to submit to a magazine like *Reader’s Digest*, with the earnest belief in the fame and fortune that would surely follow. While Silver was full of naïve hope and faith in his vision, Prentice was entirely mercenary, lured by a perhaps willful misunderstanding of how generously he would be paid. In seeking to get the commission, he fought to hide his artistic contempt for his new patron, but

“wasn’t going to let twenty-five bucks get away from me without some kind of struggle” (Yates 2001:148).

This attitude of contempt – we can presume Yates is reflecting his younger self here – is made quite clear in the scene in which the central metaphor and title of the story “Builders” is introduced. Silver tried to make sure that this new candidate for ghost-writer properly understood his ‘take’ on how stories should be written, while Prentice listened on, feigning agreement with his “rapt, toadying gaze” (Yates 2001:149). Silver explained in a confident, self-satisfied tone how stories are built:

“Like building a house?” And he was so pleased with his own creation of this image that he didn’t even wait to take in the careful, congratulatory nod I awarded him for it. “I mean a house has got to have a roof, but you’re going to be in trouble if you build your roof first, right? Before you build your roof you got to build your walls. Before you build your walls, you got to lay your foundation—and I mean all the way down the line. Before you lay your foundation, you got to bulldoze and dig yourself the right kind of hole in the ground. Am I right?” (...)

“So all right, supposing you build yourself a house like that. Then what? What’s the first question you got to ask yourself about it when it’s done?” (...)

“Where are the windows?” he demanded, spreading his hands. “That’s the question. Where does the light come in? Because do you see what I mean about the light coming in, Bob? I mean the—the *philosophy* of your story, the *truth* of it; the—”

“The illumination of it, sort of,” I said, and he quit groping for his third noun with a profound and happy snap of the fingers.

How this central metaphor of story construction relates to the creative process of writing has been discussed by several scholars of Yates in recent years, most convincingly by Kate Charlton-Jones in her monograph *Dismembering the American Dream* (2012). She argues how Yates addresses Henry James’ ‘house of fiction’ metaphor, at once satirizing it and using it as a tool to show how, when poorly understood, such advice leads to worthless formulaic work – such as the stories Prentice will write for Bernie), while also showing how Prentice over the course of the story himself learns how to properly understand the metaphor and find his own authorial voice (Charlton-Jones 2012: 103-104).

Indeed, one can certainly read “Builders” as a kind of artistic coming of age story of the author-in-text character, Bob Prentice (the rhyme with apprentice cannot be coincidental). He begins the story as an aspiring, but failing writer, unable to produce work of his own that lived up to his own internal sense of what would be quality writing. This is accompanied by no small degree of presumptuousness about his own artistic ability (a recurring theme for many of Yates’ characters endowed with meager talent), a self-inflated sense of potential masking an insecure novice writer who has yet to produce

any high-quality work of his own. This is easily read in the contemptuous and yet self-aware tone which Prentice shares with the reader how he responded to Bernie's honest but jejune sentimental vision of the good fiction he would like to see.

Writing such stories for Bernie, however, did not come easily, as Prentice found himself 'wasting time' reading matchbooks and the like, with many false starts, just as if he were trying to produce his own work. The key to overcoming the block came from his wife, who chided him: "You're *trying* too hard." (...) "You're being so insufferably *literary* about it, Bob, it's ridiculous. All you have to do is think of every corny, tear-jerking thing you've ever read or heard. Think of Irving Berlin"² (Yates 2001: 151). Initially taken as an insult, this proved to be the catalyst to get Prentice started. Embracing Bernie's construction metaphor as the road to producing the sought-after sappy sentimentality, "something kind of wonderful happened" (Yates 2001: 151). Convinced of his own artistry while detaching himself from ownership of the text, he allowed himself to freely lampoon the writing or construction process, with *Readers Digest* and Bernie in mind. As he confesses with no small degree of sarcasm, how "I took that little bastard of a story and I built the hell out of it. First I bulldozed and dug and laid myself a real good foundation; then I got the lumber out and bang, bang, bang – up went the walls and on went the roof and up went the cute little chimney on top." (Yates 2001: 151-152). Not to miss the most important element, the light or illumination of the story, Prentice continues, "Oh, I put plenty of windows in it too – big, square ones – and when the light came pouring in it left no earthly shadow of a doubt that Bernie Silver was the wisest, gentlest, bravest and most lovable man who ever said 'folks.'" (Yates 2001: 152).

Prentice clearly found this contemptable, but his client/patron was enthusiastically convinced of his talent for producing just the right kind of work, paying him cash on the spot for the story. The work continued over several months, with Prentice sharing, almost as if confessing, some of the stories he wrote for Silver, including one he "thought was loathsome" in its drippy sentimentality of how Silver saved an elderly man from despair and suicide with a small remark about geraniums, but "Bernie loved it" (Yates 2001: 157). Yet cracks began to appear in the edifice. As Prentice's contempt for himself was reaching a breaking point, the project of writing stories about Bernie (and the hope of a movie to be made) transformed into one of writing hack stories about an up-and-coming local politician. Prentice could do no more and produced a story so contrived

² Yates made several references to Irving Berlin as shorthand for a kind of sentimentality devoid of depth, e.g., his short story "The Best of Everything" was in one draft entitled "All in Clover" (see Bailey 2003:167), a line from the song "Easter Parade" that figures in the story and was later used in his later novel *The Easter Parade*. Song titles and lyrics evidently were something Yates was well familiar with – several people remembering him posthumously recalled his fondness for singing 1940s popular songs and knowing all the lyrics to them (see Berriault et al. 1993).

that even Bernie found it ridiculous. The productive relationship came to an end, with Prentice telling Bernie he had to return to his own, ‘serious’ work.

The end of the story, however, is all about Prentice. Returning to his own work, he begins to discover his own voice, and as the story ends, the author-narrator begins to embrace the metaphor of builders again, with a certain sense of self-irony. As he concludes the tale, telling the reader how, despite the fact that “its very walls are somehow out of kilter; its foundation feels weak” (Yates 2001: 172), he is now “putting on the roof” on the story, we feel a sense of how the author has grown in self-awareness – something quite unusual for Yates’ characters, whose critical flaw is often a lack of insight into themselves. Hack work, however, did not teach him the tools of the trade, so to speak, but rather took his ego down a notch, not teaching him to sacrifice his notions of artistic quality, but rather to let go of his self-inflated belief in his ability to produce such quality. He speaks of his own work, the story which he has just told us, as an edifice, albeit a rickety and poorly built one. Finally, in a shift of tone addressing both the reader and Bernie simultaneously, suggesting perhaps that we might be more like Bernie than we care to think, he concludes:

And where are the windows? Where does the light come in?

Bernie, old friend, forgive me, but I haven’t got the answer to that one. I’m not even sure if there *are* any windows in this particular house. Maybe the light is just going to have to come in as best it can, through whatever chinks and cracks have been left in the builder’s faulty craftsmanship, and if that’s the case you can be sure that nobody feels worse about it than I do. God knows, Bernie; God knows there certainly ought to be a window around here somewhere, for all of us. (Yates 2001: 173)

Letting the light in here seems to be both something desirable and to be avoided at the same time. True craftsmanship – which Yates here implies he may not have achieved – avoids the big, square windows of Bernie’s vision, but at the same time, he seems uncertain of whether or not he has built any of the million possible windows that James would have him provide. Bob Prentice may have learned a degree of humility, which ironically, might help him to unlock his creative potential. Yet we, the readers, are uncertain of the ultimate outcome.

This, however, was not merely a finely rendered portrait of a kind of coming of artistic coming of age story, but strongly reflected Yates’ own experience in a highly autobiographical fashion. Yates’ use of autobiographical content has been a (relatively, for the still understudied author) much-discussed aspect of his work, with some critics finding this to be an essential flaw. For instance, Robert Tower wrote in his review of Yates’ second collection of short stories *Liars in Love* (1981) that Yates’ longer work, including his later novels short stories, appears to lack the ability of his early work “to escape the

prison of an (apparently) autobiographical self” (Tower 1981). This was something the critic was willing to concede had been achieved in Yates’ first novel *Revolutionary Road* and his stories from the 1950s collected in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (work all written prior to “Builders”), suggesting that the ‘decline’ of Yates writing came with the turn to his own lived experience. Others, such as his biographer, Blake Bailey, argue that Yates’ best work can transcend the limitation of his own experience to create works that reach to more universal value, while implicitly accepting the critique that too much autobiographical content can be a flaw (2003: 514-515). More recent work, however, suggests a different view. As Sophie A. Jones has recently argued, “the ostensibly illicit nature of Yates’ use of his experience – usually framed as a concealment of the autobiographical within the fictional – has often been approached by his critics as a problem to be solved” (2017: 88).

The most frequent solution to this has been to rely on Yates’ sense of honesty and integrity as an author. As Kate Charlton-Jones, for instance, has argued in her analysis of Yates’ short story “Saying Goodbye to Sally” that his use of his own life in the writing process was his way of “ensuring that he adhered to the truth of an experience” and “give flesh more faithfully to the emotions those experiences generated. It is primarily the human condition he is illuminating” (2014: 42). As a way of apprehending how Yates “contravenes the pact” (Jones 2017: 87) that would separate autobiography from fiction, Sophie A. Jones proposes the use of Serge Doubrovsky’s term of “autofiction, rather than autobiography” as a “more generative descriptive term for his work” (2017: 93), a conscious blending of elements of both fiction and biography.

Jones’ attempt to rehabilitate the value of Yates’ autobiographical content is clearly a useful contribution. If autofiction, as in Boyle’s characterization, “involves supplying indicators which suggest that the text is an autobiography, whilst at the same time contradicting these indicators by asserting its fictional status” (2007: 18), then the description might fit Yates’ “Builders” and his other more mature works rather well. Thoughts regarding the writing process frame the narrative: it begins with an opening warning that one should never (if one hopes to be published) write about writers, and certainly not in a clichéd manner, and it concludes with the above meditation on the art, all while making clear that this is a story that the fictional author-character protagonist wrote in the first person for the reader to consider.

At the same time, however, Yates’ work only imperfectly meets the criteria of Doubrovskian autofiction. According to Schmitt, autofiction, strictly speaking, in addition to a literary style, must show “a perfect onomastic correspondence between author, narrator, and main character” (2010: 126). This is never the case in Yates’ fiction: some of his characters may have been thinly veiled renditions of himself or his own experience, but never did he explicitly write about himself, whereas autofiction tends to present itself as autobiographical, yet may be partially or wholly fictitious in content. Dix has argued that “[a]utofiction in effect treats the self as a form of archive”, which

could certainly be said of Yates and his work, but in its practice “radically revises the notion of absolute truth, supplementing it with a critical but creative skepticism of all the distortions, digressions and departures that the acts of remembering and narrating entail” and, in fact, represents a “properly theoretical approach to representations of subjectivity and the self” (2017: 83). One might contend that some of Yates’ work might be better characterized as “self-narratives” as Schmitt proposes, somewhere on the spectrum between fiction and autobiography, allowing authors to draw on the “intensity and directness” of their own lived experience while retaining artistic freedom to reshape that material (2010: 130).³

It is not entirely clear how fond Yates himself would have been of such a discussion, however. He was notoriously skeptical of what he felt were too theoretical approaches to writing and to his own work, and resisted categorization. While the comments he made in his final interview before his death in 1992, dismissing “slick” questions with remarks such as “I guess I’m just not smart enough to answer big questions about things like ‘themes’ or ‘purposes’ in my work” (Bradfield 1992: 31), might be dismissed as the curmudgeonly responses of a terminally ill man (Yates was still smoking two packs a day at this point while tethered to oxygen bottles for his ‘touch of emphysema’), they do resonate with other, more detailed and poignant remarks made twenty years before.

In the 1972 interview with DeWitt Henry and Geoffrey Clark for *Ploughshares*, Yates candidly reflects on the writing process and his place within literature. While expressing how he felt the limited quantity of his work made him a bit unqualified to criticize the literary establishment, he then proceeded to do so with relish, saying “Oh hell, I rant and rail against the literary establishment all the time, qualified or not” (Henry et al. 1972: 76). A particular object of scorn were postrealists, whose work he found utterly unpalatable with their “endless supply of witty little intellectual puzzles and puns and fun and games for graduate students to play with” (Henry et al. 1972: 76). For Yates, it seems, the fault of these writers and others was not necessarily form or technique *per se*, but rather when the form became too ‘slick’ (a word he seemed to apply to form-without-substance, an accusation he leveled against some of John Cheever’s work); he seemed to believe that too much emphasis on technique prevents the emergence of real quality work. This he contrasted with the work of Kurt Vonnegut, whom he believed to have been mistakenly regarded as among the cohort of postrealists. As he saw it, in Vonnegut’s best work there was “real fictional meat (...) despite the surface flippancy of his style – real suffering, real passion, real humor – especially in books like *Mother*

3 Self-narration is not unproblematic, either. Schmitt in general presumes that personal experience is shown in an undisguised manner, and yet at the same time offers Henry Roth’s *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, in which all the paratextual signposts suggest fiction (including the name of the narrator), deeper analysis reveals the how autobiographical the tetralogy may in fact be. For more, see Schmitt (2010: 134-135).

Night and Slaughterhouse Five” (which we might add, could perhaps also be regarded as exhibiting elements of autofiction). The objection he had to postrealists was that their work was “emotionally empty. It isn’t *felt*” (Henry et al. 1972: 76).

While it might be difficult to read Yates’ work as Doubrovskian autofiction *sensu stricto*, the author’s own statements and those by people who knew him seem to support Charlton-Jones’ view that he regarded drawing on his own lived experience as a means of keeping himself honest, not in the sense of rendering experience in a factually accurate manner, but rather of reaching for something artistically and emotionally true. Beginning, it seems, with “Builders,” the use of autobiographical content was a vehicle to reach this end. Yates made explicitly clear in the 1972 *Ploughshares* interview that taking on autobiographical material was an experiment he undertook when writing “Builders.” Until that point, he had aspired to follow Flaubert’s ideal of an “omnipresent and invisible” (Henry et al. 1972: 70) God-like author. “Builders” was to be a laboratory, an “experimental warmup” to writing an autobiographical novel. That final product would be his second novel, *A Special Providence*, regarded by both contemporary critics and Yates himself as disappointing.

“Builders,” however, was different. Yates offered his own assessment:

“Builders” (..) was almost pure personal history, with a protagonist named Robert Prentice, who was clearly and nakedly myself. And I think that story did work, because it was formed. It was objectified. Somehow, and maybe it was just luck, I managed to avoid both of the two terrible traps that lie in the path of autobiographical fiction—self-pity and self-aggrandizement (Henry et al. 1972: 70).

Here we can discern two main elements of how in Yates’ view, his story was successful, and by extension, what constituted a successful story for him more generally. Aside from a short 1981 essay in the *New York Times Book Review* about writers he admired, Yates did not leave behind any manifesto or essay explaining his approach to writing. He did teach throughout his career, however, most notably at the Iowa Workshop in the mid-1960s, and remarks made by his friends and former students after his death corroborate his interview statements and provide additional insight into what, for Yates, constituted good writing.

The first level, of course, is that the story was properly formed. This is not necessarily about any particular technique. As he remarked in 1992, “all fiction is filled with technique” [...] “It’s ridiculous to suggest one technique is any more realistic than any other” (Bradfield 1992, 31), but more about the quality of construction, that all elements of the story, every word, is properly placed to ‘do its job’ as it were. Vonnegut in his eulogy of Yates, for instance, spoke of his friend’s writing:

When I made a journey, a forced march, through all his books in preparation for these obsequies, not only did I fail to detect so much as an injudiciously applied semicolon; I did not find even one paragraph which, if it were read to you today, would not wow you with its power, intelligence, and clarity (1993: 14)

The second element, however, reaches for Yates' critique of what he regarded as poor work – too well constructed, “slick,” but “not *felt*.” That feeling, as he had praised Vonnegut for, had to be genuine, real, and true to experience. This is alluded to in the second part of Yates' self-assessment – avoiding both self-pity and self-aggrandizement. The work, even if autobiographical, is not about the author, but about a feeling experienced.

It does seem clear that Yates, especially starting with “Builders” looked to lived experience as the primary source for inspiration. Here, two other memories shared at Yates' New York memorial service in 1993, provide insight into the writer's view on the use of such material. Writer and journalist Susan Braudy recalled how Yates, when pressed about the “nuts and bolts” of one of his two best novels, *The Easter Parade*, he confessed how he had mined himself for the main character, stating with characteristic candor, that the novel “was... actually... well... is... my autobiography, sweetheart. Emily fucking Grimes is me” (1993: 21). The autobiographical continued, together with a certain skepticism toward any insinuation of highfalutin intentional technique. As Braudy complimented Yates on his use of symbolism in the novel, he contradicted, asserting that he simply sought inspiration from life, claiming that he “didn't make up any easy allegory (...) I mean, it was all there lying around [in his life] (...) But I'm the one who saw it” (Braudy 1992: 22).

This ability to see, to discern the interesting in real life and to render it into a well-formed story is what for Yates is the rich fount of material for writing. He was under no illusion that this was an easy task. *A Special Providence*, his first novel-length attempt to do so, proved a humbling experience, revealing his limitations at extending the autobiographical into a longer work of art. As he remarked in the *Ploughshares* interview:

I think it's a right that has to be earned. Anybody can scribble out a confession or a memoir or a diary or a chronicle of personal experience, but how many writers can *form* that kind of material? How many writers can make it into solid, artistically satisfying fiction? (...) you have to be one hell of an artist to bring it off. To *form* it. (Henry et al. 1972: 70-71).

As examples of authors who had done so beautifully, he set the bar high, mentioning Dickens, Joyce, and Hemingway, and of course Proust. And yet, this did not appear to be an insurmountable barrier, even if he at often felt his own work did not measure up. As Maura Stanton recalled how when she was a young beginning writer and student at

Iowa, Yates encouraged her to look into the most ordinary of experiences to seek material for her own short stories. Telling of a mentoring session in Yates's office in which she complained how her simple, midwestern background had given her nothing interesting to write about, she recounts how Yates inspired her to see a beautiful story could be made from the rich material of her own life. After asking her a few simple questions, he learned that she had indeed been in love, "really in love," and that while she had indeed never set foot outside the Midwest, he had been on a simple trip to a modest Minnesota amusement park called Brainerd. Hearing about the performing domestic animals there, he lit up and exclaimed:

"Well, hell." Mr Yates smiled at me suddenly, his whole face lighting up. "There's your story. Don't you see? My God, that's great material."

"What?" I said.

"Those fucking rabbits and chickens and Paul Bunyan and being twenty-two and head over heels in love. Put it all together. What more do you want? I wish I had that much."

I stared at him in amazement. "Write about that?"

"Of course. You've got a thousand interesting things you can write about. Just go for a walk on the ceiling and look down at your life and you'll be amazed." (Stanton 1993: 51).

While Yates' aspiration was clearly to bring the autobiographical to the novel, he still saw the short story as a worthwhile and valuable form, praising the stories of many writers (Flannery O'Connor, among others) And yet, it seems he felt it a secondary form. For instance, as an instructor in Iowa, he compared in class the use of an unreliable narrator. Mentioned as a praiseworthy example was Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," yet with the qualifier that "that was a short story" (as in, 'only'). Singled out for lavish praise was Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, for it sustained the effort over an entire novel (Lacy 2010: 424). That he would see it this way perhaps does not surprise. For Yates as a writer, the short story was a somewhat instrumental medium to hone his skills and –always an issue for Yates– to earn money. Throughout his early career in the 1950s, Yates wrote stories for magazine publication with this very intent, a process which we see in some ways reflected in the learning period reflected in "Builders." The story contains a sweep of thirteen years, starting in 1948, precisely the years when Yates was writing and polishing stories for magazine publication, and ending with work on his first novel in 1961, just as *Revolutionary Road* was nearing completion. In this period, just like Prentice, Yates had in fact also worked for United Press.⁴

⁴ As to just how autobiographical the content of "Builders" is, beyond the persona of Prentice, is difficult to ascertain. Blake Bailey, Yates' biographer, seems to take this at face value and that Yates actually did answer a classified in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, but provides no direct evidence. A search of the

After a long and tortured period of producing little fiction, but including work as Robert Kennedy's speechwriter, in Hollywood scriptwriting (both material which Yates would mine for his works), and mental breakdowns in the 1960s, in the 1970s Yates began again to write prolifically. In addition to writing three novels in the 1970s, he also returned to the short story, producing the collection *Liars in Love* in 1981. These are longer and richer than the stories of the 1950s, and yet they very clearly follow in Yates' "Builders" approach of mining his life for material to use in writing. What Tower saw as a limitation allowed Yates to produce some of his finest and otherwise most critically acclaimed work, for instance, the story of his sculptor-mother in "Oh Joseph, I'm So Tired" or of his own time in Hollywood in "Saying Goodbye to Sally" (both topics he had tried to address in novels, *A Special Providence* and *Disturbing the Peace* respectively, with less critical success). That Yates would in some ways be more successful in writing a genre he seemed to have felt was a utilitarian tool toward the end of a novel is somewhat ironic, but the stories must have been more than that to the author, for it is clear that he invested a great deal of emotional energy in them as well.

While in "Builders" the contempt the young Yates felt for the likes of *Readers Digest* was quite apparent, this certainly does not mean he was contemptuous of all magazines. He was quite conscious of the placement of his stories, and what that would mean for his reputation. For example, when his first story "Lament for a Tenor" was to be purchased for the then hefty sum of eight hundred and fifty dollars in 1952, Yates (self-conscious artist like Prentice that he was) saw "the depressing aspect of the thing": namely, that *Cosmopolitan* was a 'dead-loss prestigewise" (Bailey 2003: 153). Other, more prestigious magazines, such as *The Atlantic* followed, but his ultimate goal eluded him for his entire career: *The New Yorker*.

What prevented Yates from acceptance by this country club of magazines was not the quality of his work, but rather his strict adherence to his own vision of artistic expression, of what makes a good story. Yates was loath to make compromises to his exactly written work, especially regarding questions of content. One of his finest stories, *A Really Good Jazz Piano* waited nearly three years for publication, as the author refused to modify the grim ending to make it more 'saleable' (in the end he did, and the story sold). When he resumed writing short fiction in the mid-1970s, one of his goals was to achieve his long-held aspiration of publication in *The New Yorker*. It was not to be, however. The trouble lay with editors.

1948 classifieds in the Saturday Review (admittedly, what is available online may not be complete) no such ad can be found. The closest thing to an ad of the kind Prentice responded to is an ad from a young writer with copywriting experience seeking a freelance opportunity, which could suggest a quite different scenario. But the fact is, we do not really know.

While Sam Lawrence at the Atlantic praised Yates' stories of the late 1970s as "magnificent" and "simply marvelous" (Bailey 2003: 508), Roger Angell, the gatekeeper at the *New Yorker* clearly simply did not like his work. The key seemed to be that Angell, unlike many other reviewers, readers and writers, felt Yates' work to be "mean spirited" and "for effect" casting into doubt what others saw as one of his major assets, sincerity. In his final rejection letter, Angell wrote that "it seems clearer and clearer to me that his kind of fiction is not what we're looking for. I mean this without offense, and I wonder if it wouldn't save a lot of time and disappointment if you and he could come to the same conclusion." (Bailey 2003: 508).

Yates had been seen by many reviewers and readers alike as bleak or grim, but this pronouncement of judgement by *The New Yorker* that "his vision of life was *repulsive*" (Bailey 2003: 509) seems to have cut to the bone. Clearly, publication of short stories away from the pages of *Cosmopolitan* and to the urbane *New Yorker* would have meant acceptance for Yates, confirmation in some sense of his 'arrival' in the club. Yet admission might have well been blocked not by faulty craftsmanship or failure to dig the right foundation, but by an artistic integrity that prevented him from building in the kinds of windows that a particular highbrow editor wanted to see.

Yates, then, remained true to his vision of his art, even if it meant that some of his aspirations for his career as a writer went unfulfilled. Seen for much of his later years as a writer whose initial great promise shown in his masterful first novel failed to materialize in subsequent works, he has gained a degree of recognition in recent years as a writer of significance. Yet the success and awareness of *Revolutionary Road* (no doubt propelled also by the film adaptation by Sam Mendes), continues to dominate the view of Yates, comparatively little attention is paid to his later novels and his short stories. Perhaps what had once been seen as a flaw, Yates' use autobiographical themes and content, was in ways ahead of his times, and may in turn become a new and interesting approach to an enriched and more contemporary appreciation of this author's more mature works.

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Karl Wood is on the staff of the Department of Anglophone Literatures in English at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland, where he teaches courses in American Cultural Studies. His research interests and publications have included several shorter works on the work of Richard Yates and on twentieth century US-American culture, as well as work related to transnational spa culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He is a member of the Department's team participating in the Horizon-2020 DIGITENS project, an international research consortium on forms of sociability in the long eighteenth century.