“This whole country’s rotten with sentimentality.”¹ So declares Frank Wheeler, the craven protagonist of Richard Yates’s novel *Revolutionary Road* (1961), an exemplar of postwar, middle-class ennui. A former GI, Frank feels adrift in a world of meaningless corporate work and stifling suburban conformity. Having recently decided to relocate to Paris, Frank and his wife, April, discover newfound purpose that spills over into late-night, alcohol-fueled dissections of “the hopeless emptiness of everything in this country” (189). On this particular occasion, Frank catalogs a list of mid-century concerns and trends destroying America: “the profit motive,” “the loss of spiritual values,” “the fear of the bomb,” “emasculated” men, “television crap,” and “all this bleating about ‘adjustment’ and ‘security’ and ‘togetherness’” (128–29). Set in 1955 in a suburb of western Connecticut, *Revolutionary Road* dissects the friable cultural consensus that concealed a tumultuous decade. Although Wheeler gives voice to a white, male-centered “fantasy of victimization,” the novel also registers genuine fears about the repressive conformity of the nuclear family, prescribed gender roles, and the insularity of suburban domesticity in the first decade of the American Century.²

The celebration of the 1950s as the pinnacle of family values and democratic nationalism has long since been exposed as conservative whimsy, but the optimism of the period was real, as is its enduring hold on the American imagination. As Stephanie Coontz writes, following the economic hardships of the 1930s and the turbulent years of World War II, “The 1950s was the first time that a majority of Americans could even dream of creating a secure oasis in their immediate nuclear families.”³ Commitment to marriage, family, and clearly defined gender roles defined the postwar ideal for a majority of Americans, but this new, anomalous arrangement also enabled a disconcerting sense of isolation. The “television crap” Wheeler inveighs against was one facet of this disconnect. Sitcoms purveyed a “completely white and Anglo-Saxon” version of the 1950s family during a decade
that “saw a major transformation in the ethnic composition of America.”

While power remained concentrated in an exclusively white, Protestant establishment, an emphasis on civil rights for African Americans, greater access to college through the GI Bill, and “a more diverse and voluminous immigrant stream” marked a change in demographics and signaled the decline of WASP cultural hegemony.

A certain stratum of 1950s literature reflects an anxiety about these transformations, the new upward mobility, and the consequent precariousness of class status. Other literary works in this vein more directly target Wheeler’s pejorative trio: adjustment, security, and togetherness. These terms provide shorthand access to David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956), the two sociological studies that have come to define mid-century, middle-class malaise. Riesman documents what he sees as a new development in “social character”: the “other-directed” individual who emerged in the twentieth century amid the ranks of America’s urban middle and upper middle classes. These white-collar workers are driven not by an inner work ethic, but by the need for external approval, underwritten by an “ideological shift favoring submission to the group.”

*The Lonely Crowd* provides an informative – if less than rigorous – social discourse for novels like Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*, Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), and John Keats’s *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956). Such works explore the fault lines between traditional ideals concerning individualism and the new emphasis on conformity and togetherness. Whyte’s study provides a more direct link between these ideological interests and the social system of the corporation that demands “a belief in ‘belongingness.’” The conundrum for the organization man is, in part, the paradoxical persistence of the Protestant ethic – a belief in individualism, self-reliance, and meritocracy – despite its incompatibility with the “social ethic” of consensus and “adjustment to the system” (7, 286). In *Revolutionary Road*, Frank Wheeler initially rails against this obligatory “adjustment,” but months after April’s self-induced miscarriage and tragic death, gossiping neighbors report that he is in therapy and getting along at his new position on Madison Avenue. In other words, he’s adjusting.

The works examined in this chapter compose what we think of as WASP culture. In the cartoon version of the 1950s, the WASP experience explored in these works was 1950s American culture writ large, where every white man fought in World War II, lived in suburban Connecticut, and commuted to an office in the city. This, of course, was never the case, even if white, straight suburbanites could believe otherwise. As Coontz argues,
“There was tremendous hostility to people who could be defined as ‘others’: Jews, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, the poor, gays or lesbians, and ‘the red menace.’ Yet on a day-to-day basis, the civility that prevailed in homogeneous neighborhoods allowed people to ignore larger patterns of racial and political repression.” While a literary “fantasy of victimization” may have perpetuated these patterns, writers were also keen to question this illusion. As this chapter shows, not a single one of these works celebrates uncritically WASP culture. The literature reflects an era caught between an emergent, postwar US globalism and the privatism of nuclear-family domesticity that fostered an insular worldview. The male-centered literature of middle-class estrangement explores the hypocrisies of consensus culture, the disquieting uniformity of suburbia, and the repressive structures of the heteronormative family.

Emerging from these ideological concerns, 1950s literature evinces a number of shared thematic preoccupations, perhaps none more familiar than reckoning the legacy of World War II. In J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Holden Caulfield even takes time away from rooting out phonies and perverts to reflect on his brother’s Army experience. D.B. participated in D-Day and anecdotes about his time on leave indicate behavior consistent with PTSD. Yet the tone throughout is decidedly unsympathetic to the “good war,” as captured in D.B.’s remark that, had he been called upon to fire his weapon, he wouldn’t have known which way to aim. The staying power of *Catcher in the Rye*, though, has more to do with its Cold War-era interests in conformists, Hollywood, and sexual “perversity,” as well as Salinger’s attempts to craft a narrative voice suited to the historical era and the advent of the teenager. Although some of his behavior may fit the mold of directionless teen angst, Caulfield is hardly a nonconformist. As Alan Nadel writes, he “internalizes the mechanisms of surveillance” such that even his derision of phonies remains dependent on the approval of the implied reader. His niggling snobbery – about suitcases, out-of-season drinks, and the hats poor people wear – also speaks to a broader desire for stable lines of class demarcation, not rebellion. Reflecting on previous visits to the Museum of Natural History, Caulfield remarks, “Certain things they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone.” While this speaks to his futile desire to preserve childhood innocence from vulgarity and the corrupting power of sexuality, the passage also embodies a more pervasive anxiety about the upheaval of the era, including the threat of the atomic bomb: “If there’s ever another war, I’m going to sit right the hell on top of it” (183).
At the other end of the decade, John Knowles’s *A Separate Peace* (1959) also focuses on the emergent demographic of the teenager, but Knowles sets his retrospective coming-of-age novel in the grip of World War II, from 1942–1943, at the kind of elite prep school that Caulfield flees. As narrated by Gene Forrester from a distance of fifteen years, war lingers as a constant presence at the Devon School. The older students conduct training drills and perform calisthenics, but the campus also serves as a battleground between the school’s traditional prohibitions and the “code” of the Super Suicide Society led by the rebellious yet affable Phineas. The narrative turns on Forrester’s affection and admiration for Finny, which seems instinctually to manifest itself through resentment and hostility. Over the course of the novel, the unreal distance of war shades inevitably toward confrontation. Forrester’s classmate, Leper, who had left school to join the Army, goes AWOL and is hiding in Vermont, obviously suffering from psychological trauma. Forrester enlists but never leaves the country. Nonetheless, he identifies the war as his “moment in history,” the “reality” that exposed the American myth: “America is not, never has been, and never will be what the songs and poems call it, a land of plenty.” The novel reveals a marked disenchantment with heroism, the privilege of serving one’s country and, similar to D. B. Caulfield, a suspicion about the true enemy.

As these bookends to the decade suggest, World War II serves as a hinge in 1950s WASP literature, with novels recounting some combination of the lead up to war, wartime disillusionment, the fear of nuclear annihilation, or the struggle to fit within the trappings of postwar, organization culture. Louis Bromfield’s *Mr. Smith* (1951), a relatively unknown novel, provides a unique example in that the narrative shuttles between the war and the dull complacency of suburban life. The novel takes the form of the confessional manuscript of Captain Wolcott Ferris, an insurance agent, written while stationed on an island in the South Pacific. The chapter titles alternate between the Midwestern suburb of “Oakdale” and “The Jungle,” the island where Ferris is stationed with four other men, including Homer, a racist southerner who accidentally kills Ferris. “L.B.,” who writes the Prologue and the closing Note, comments on the aptness of this misadventure: as “one of the swarming ever-increasing ‘underprivileged,’” it is only right that Homer should be responsible for the death of “middle-class ‘Mr. Smith.”” A distinctly imperialist racism pervades the island sections, and the Oakdale chapters traffic in the rhetoric of dysfunction and pathology: the drudgery of marriage, family, and work; drinking bouts and infidelities; the cancerous sprawl of Levittown-style projects. Yet the alternating structure of the novel makes explicit the tensions between globalism.
and isolationism, as images of war and occupation complement the corrosive ideology of domestic privatism. Ferris also exhibits an unease over the democratization of class mobility. He laments how a pseudo-aristocratic tradition has been overtaken by “a torrent of mediocrity and uniformity, a torrent of ranch-type and bungalow houses, and picture windows and scatter rugs and dull conforming minds, of universities like ant heaps turning out ... hordes of uneducated and mediocre drones” (219). His enlistment and absurd death deliver him from the “mediocrity” of the “underprivileged.”

Whereas Bromfield’s bleak narrative derides the cancerous conformity threatening the nation, Keats takes a less strident approach to the new dilemmas of middle-class life in *The Crack in the Picture Window*. The novel — a touchstone for scholars but otherwise forgotten — blends sociology, urban history, satire, and jeremiad to skewer the dehumanizing nature of suburban settlements. Keats depicts the rise and fall of World War II veteran John Drone and his wife, Mary, who set out to buy a home and start their family. Keats takes aim at the mind-numbing triviality of John’s job at the Division of Miscellaneous Statistics, but he saves his venom for dishonest federal policies and loan practices, as well as the unexceptional planning and development of the mass-produced suburbs “spreading like gangrene” across the country. Special attention is given to the ennui of the housewife and the lack of public life apart from a network of embittered gossips. Mary Drone begins to perceive the house, the standard-bearer of the post-war middle class, as the source of contagion. Keats’s sexist commentary on the suburban matriarchy notwithstanding, Mary anticipates the “problem that has no name,” as Betty Friedan will define it in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). She has no access to a car or communal gathering spaces, and her home serves as a mass-mediated prison of consumerism, marital dissatisfaction, and sexual anxiety. But Keats is no feminist crusader; his interest lies in individualism: “More insidious and far more dangerous than any other influence, is the housing development’s destruction of individuality” (193). This sentiment aligns him with Riesman’s concerns about other-directed conformity and puts him firmly in the camp of Whyte, who fears the creeping collectivism of group consensus. While the novel voices critical concerns about residential sprawl and white flight, Keats peevishly worries about real estate value when a lower class of resident moves into older suburban neighborhoods.

Perhaps no American novel is more synonymous with 1950s WASP culture than Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. The novel’s central couple, Tom and Betsy Rath, live on Greentree Avenue in
Westport, Connecticut in a house described as “a trap.” When Tom takes a new job at the United Broadcasting Company (UBC) that promises a substantial raise, enough to purchase a newer house, things start to look up. Their dreams, however, soon unravel after Tom’s grandmother dies and bequeaths him a mansion in disrepair, which comes with a hefty tax burden and other prohibitive costs that prevent him from selling it.

Professional-class civilization and its discontents is Wilson’s primary preoccupation, and the main topic throughout is money. The Raths’ unkempt house betrays their disinterest in do-it-yourself projects and home maintenance, but it also advertises a lack of funds for proper help. Although Tom reminisces about a time before they obsessed over money, he now sees it everywhere, from the UBC elevators that “looked as though they were made of money” to the receptionist’s “money-colored hair” (7). While materialism and the infectious snare of suburbia were familiar topics by 1955, Wilson more sardonically portrays the suburban house as a failed version of America’s revolutionary spirit. Tom’s former, racialized dream that one day “they would move into a house something like Mount Vernon, with nice old darky servants,” yields to lesser domestic visions and the petty travails of white privilege as oppression (173). As Catherine Jurca astutely notes, “Ownership of a suburban house is treated [in the novel] as . . . the failure of the American dream instead of its fruition” (White 134).

World War II also looms significant in The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit. Like John Drone in Keats’s novel, Tom Rath is among the generation of veterans whose postwar life was underwritten by generous if discriminatory policies. With the assistance of the Federal Housing Administration, the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation, and the GI Bill, “sixteen million soldiers and sailors of World War II purchase[d] a home.” Alongside restrictive covenants, these federal programs forged a link between suburban homeownership and an exclusive white, middle-class culture. Wilson’s target, though, is not the policies and practices that propelled suburban sprawl, and despite Rath’s combat experience, there is little indication he suffers debilitating psychological trauma. Rather, his war experience serves as another facet of the novel’s interest in organization culture and the nuclear family. At UBC, Tom runs into Caesar Gardella, an elevator operator and a former member of Tom’s paratrooper unit. Caesar informs Tom that his wartime affair in Italy with Maria produced a son who now requires Tom’s financial support. Although Tom ostensibly desires to keep separate the “unrelated worlds” of war, work, and home, his reminiscences about Italy collapse the distance (22). Spending nights in Italy with María and
Caesar and his girlfriend, Tom recalls, “had been almost like a suburban community, with the men all working for the same big corporation” (82).

While the revelation of Tom’s affair causes a temporary rift in the marriage, Betsy returns home and, unsurprisingly, takes the blame on herself for not understanding his war experience or how it felt to be subsumed in a wave of gray flannel suits. The order restored to his family mirrors the generous arrangement Tom has managed at UBC: the directorship of a new mental health committee that promises good pay, minimal work, and no commute. Even the drama surrounding the grandmother’s property resolves itself in his favor. Pending an expected zoning board approval, the Raths will subdivide the property and embark on a lucrative real estate venture. Despite this rare happy resolution, the Raths’ plan foreshadows a trend toward the single-use zoning policies that will multiply the isolating, car-dependent residences of suburbia.

The gray flannel suit may be the most iconic image of 1950s WASP literature, but no writer is more associated with the disaffection of the white middle class than John Cheever. Alongside his first novel, The Wapshot Chronicle (1957), the stories collected in The Enormous Radio (1953) and The Housebreaker of Shady Hill (1958) established Cheever’s quintessential themes: couples trapped in tenuous marriages; city dwellers and suburbanites desperately clinging to social and economic standing; masculinity and homosexual desire; and the long shadow cast by genealogy. In his two Wapshot novels, Cheever traces the gradual dissipation of the family in St. Botolphs, an old Massachusetts fishing village, as they succumb to financial insolvency, sexual affairs, alcoholism, and suicide. Pastoral innocence and tradition give way to a menacing image of homogeneous settlements overshadowed by a missile site and the threat of Cold War annihilation.

Wapshot Chronicle eulogizes the fetishized family lines of the WASP establishment. Cheever relates the story of Captain Leander Wapshot and his wife, Sarah, their young adult sons, Moses and Coverly, and Cousin Honora Wapshot, the childless matriarch and keeper of the family fortune – bequeathed to Moses and Coverly, provided they each father male heirs. Underscoring an obsession with patrilineal heritage, the narrator limns a genealogy of the Wapshot clan, complete with an account of who begat whom, a list populated by biblical and Shakespearean names dating back to Ezekiel Wapshot’s arrival in America in 1630 and ending with the births of Moses and Coverly. The novel begins on Independence Day with a parade gone awry when a foreigner from the other side of the river sets off a firecracker. As noted above with the invocation of Mount
Vernon in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and as is implicit in the title of Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*, *Wapshot Chronicle* also suggests how the revolutionary spirit of independence has gone astray in the 1950s.

In the figures of Leander, Moses, and Coverly, Cheever explores generational anxieties about masculinity and virility. Leander mourns not only his age and waning strength but the lack of social spaces for men in St. Botolphs: “During his lifetime Leander had seen, in the village, the number of sanctuaries for men reduced to one.” 18 As Moses and Coverly set out to prove themselves worthy of Cousin Honora’s fortune, Leander drifts into a pattern of decline, punctuated by the wreckage of his beloved boat, the *Topaze*. Even after its recovery from the bottom of the sea, the boat remains moored and unrepaired until Sarah domesticates it, transforming the *Topaze* into a floating gift shop. One summer morning, after Moses’s wife, Melissa, and Coverly’s wife, Betsey, had both given birth to healthy sons, thus fulfilling Honora’s demands, Leander swims into the sea, never to return.

Coverly Wapshot and his marriage to Betsey also allow Cheever to explore a slate of intersecting mid-century concerns: homosexual desire and the heteronormative demands of the nuclear family; domestic security and Cold War anxieties; and the transition from establishment wealth to the rising middle class. “At the turn of the century,” he writes, “there were more castles in the United States than there were in all of Merrie England when Gude King Arthur ruled the land” (243). One of these remaining castles, Clear Haven, where Moses and Melissa temporarily reside, burns to ground by the end of the novel, but less symbolically, *Wapshot Chronicle* documents the shift away from aristocratic abodes to places like Remsen Park where Coverly and Betsey live. Coverly works for the military, as a civilian, in the Taping Department of a rocket development program. Neither town nor city, Remsen Park was swiftly built to accommodate the employees and their families. The houses “had well-equipped kitchens and fireplaces for domestic bliss and the healthy need for national self-preservation could more than excuse the fact that they were all alike” (259). Coverly embodies the alienated labor of the white-collar professional who knows little about how his particular job fits within the new military-industrial complex. The administration counters this by arranging wonderfully absurd rocket-launching parties so families can picnic while they witness the fruits of their labor. For her part, though, Betsey cannot shake the pervasive sense that Remsen Park is un-neighborly. After a miscarriage, the couple briefly separates, and Coverly begins a homosexual flirtation with a co-worker. Their short-lived relationship remains unconsummated; Coverly suffers under the whip of conscience, burdened by prohibitions against
homosexuality. This interlude recalls his earlier session with a doctor in New York. At that time, he lamented the “oppressive” power of women in St. Botolphs, noting it was difficult “to take much pride in being a man,” and he confessed to dreaming of sexual relations with men even though he could not imagine anything worse than being “a fruit” (143–44). Coverly appears committed to a mid-century discourse of sexual dysfunction, and in the end, he adjusts his desires according to the demands of “domestic bliss” and “national self-preservation.”

Despite success as a novelist, Cheever remains best known for his short stories, and Housebreaker of Shady Hill contains some of his most widely read pieces: “The Country Husband,” “The Five-Forty-Eight,” “O Youth and Beauty!” and the title story. These stories offer nuanced explorations of spiritual, psychological, and financial insecurity set in a quasi-pastoral Westchester suburb, but in less obvious ways, they also reflect the transitional economies that made upward mobility through homeownership possible for white families. As Cheever was writing the Shady Hill stories, the Levittown model of mass-produced development was reshaping the residential geography of the US, naturalizing the relationship between the single-family suburban home and middle-class status. Although not set in such common subdivisions, Cheever refracts these postwar transitions through prismatic stories about the tenuous prosperity and antiquated nature of life in Westchester. Indeed, a 1960 Cosmopolitan article cited Westchester as an example of suburbia’s “illusion of wealth,” and that illusion, in all its forms, seems the real focus of Cheever’s Shady Hill.

“The Country Husband” offers the most intricate portrait of this enclave’s fragile social and economic circumstances, and also the most striking depiction of Shady Hill’s ahistorical privatism. The story begins with the near-tragedy of a plane crash in a violent rainstorm outside of Philadelphia. Although a survivor of the emergency landing, Francis Weed cannot inspire any interest in the event among his family. No one can fathom his account because there had been no storm in Shady Hill; the world outside their suburb simply does not rank. This sense of insularity becomes more pronounced at the Farquarsons’ dinner party, where Francis recognizes their maid from his tour of duty during World War II. The woman had been publicly castigated for her relationship with a German officer during the Occupation. This is the only Shady Hill story explicitly to reference the war, and it does so only to show how these suburbanites repress that global reality. Cheever writes, “The people in the Farquarsons’ living room seemed united in their tacit claim that there had been no past, no war – that there was no danger or trouble in the world.” Although this intrusive
reality of turmoil and moral trespass may remain primarily offstage, Cheever’s stories suggest that this fantasy of domestic tranquility endures because to admit otherwise is to face one’s own social, sexual, or economic deprivation. On the advice of his psychiatrist, Francis takes up woodwork, building a coffee table, adjusting himself to domestic patterns. As the story draws to a close, the narrator reports, “The village hangs, morally and economically, from a thread; but it hangs by its thread in the evening light” (82). There is something untenable about Shady Hill that, nevertheless, Cheever lovingly portrays. While his depictions may be overly sympathetic, taken together, Shady Hill and Wapshot Chronicle suggest a delight in transgression that, if only briefly, shakes off social prohibitions and exposes the illusion of postwar stability. Moreover, a story like “The Country Husband” unearths the repressed contradictions that lie at the heart of the 1950s white fantasy: “no past, no war . . . no danger or trouble in the world.”

In the long list of timorous characters that populate mid-century American literature, perhaps none is more polarizing than Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, the protagonist John Updike introduced in Rabbit, Run (1960). Set in 1959, the novel recounts a few dismal months in the marriage of Rabbit and Janice Angstrom, who live in a cramped apartment in Mt. Judge, PA, a suburb that overlooks the industrial city of Brewer. Rabbit is twenty-six years old, which makes him and Updike’s novel distinctive within this examination of WASP culture. Rabbit was too young to have served in World War II, and though he complains about his middling job and the confines of marriage, these familiar grievances are not the result of a once-virile veteran adjusting to the insular arrangements of home and office. A former high school basketball star, Rabbit struggles against ordinary life, waning fame, and adulthood responsibility. He is, at best, an indifferent father to his son and a disloyal husband to his alcoholic wife, who is seven months pregnant with their second child.

Published between 1960 and 1990, the four Rabbit Angstrom novels each explore the terminal point of a decade, and Rabbit, Run seems a kind of summing-up of 1950s repressive mechanisms pertaining to family, sexuality, and religion. Even if the suburban trap is well-trodden ground, Updike skillfully renders the futility of Rabbit’s efforts to break free. On the night he first takes flight, the built environment itself undermines his escape. “The farther he drives the more he feels some great confused system,” and when he stops to consult a map, “The names melt away and he sees the map whole, a net, all those red lines and blue lines and stars, a net he is somewhere caught in.” Stymied, Rabbit returns only to abandon Janice and commence an affair with Ruth Leonard, a former prostitute. Janice’s family
asks their minister, Jack Eccles, to counsel him, but Eccles seems fraudulent as a religious adviser, and faith does not deter Rabbit. The novel is unapologetic about his lust, treachery, sexual jealousies, and persistent xenophobia. That prejudice is directed mostly at the city of Brewer. Rabbit’s father fears his son has become one of the “Brewer bums,” “[h]uman garbage,” and Rabbit expresses suspicions about “the south side of Brewer, the Italian-Negro-Polish side” (142, 148). Updike’s short story, “Ace in the Hole,” serves as a predecessor to the novel and is even more direct about its characters’ ethnic and religious biases. The eponymous Ace, like Rabbit, is a washed-up high school basketball star who agonizes over his diminished greatness and his unhappy marriage. Exchanging jibes at a stoplight, Ace calls a kid a “miserable wop”; later, he makes a derisive remark about his Jewish boss; and throughout the story, his wife’s Catholicism is referred to problematically by Ace and his mother, who proclaims that “Roman Catholics ought to marry among themselves.”

The WASP everyman in decline, Ace rails against his displacement in a multiethnic world.

That story ends in an awkward couples dance with Ace fantasizing about another child, a son, and imagining himself reborn into greatness. In *Rabbit, Run* the birth of a daughter, Rebecca, inspires Rabbit, temporarily, to return home and recommit to domestic life. When Janice falls into a depression, however, he grows weary of the crying baby, the messy apartment, and his new job selling cars for Janice’s father. One Sunday afternoon, feeling amorous after flirting with Eccles’s wife, Rabbit tries to ply Janice with alcohol. She takes the drink but rejects his sexual advances, and Rabbit runs away. The drink sets Janice on a binge, and in a state of drunken confusion, she drowns Rebecca while bathing her. Rabbit expresses remorse, but mostly he feels inconvenienced by how life has conspired to make him insignificant. When he visits Janice at her parents’ house, “he feels everything has been rearranged slightly to make a space into which he can fit by making himself small.” Unable to accept this diminution, Rabbit lashes out at Rebecca’s funeral and accuses his wife of murder. He returns to Brewer and discovers that Ruth is pregnant, and though he agrees to marry her, fearful she will otherwise abort the child, he remains anxious and detached. Planning frightens him, and at heart, as Ruth alleges, Rabbit is a man who simply cannot make up his mind. Figuratively caught between the “dark circle” of “the church window” facing Ruth’s apartment and the illuminating stretch of “streetlights,” Rabbit again flees (264). This persistent impulse to run marks Rabbit as a transitional, almost placeless figure at the end of the 1950s. He cannot harken back to the glory days of the war, and he will be too old to embrace the
revolutionary ethos of the 1960s. His resistance to the reductive patterns of domesticity belies a desperate urge to fit somewhere in a world moving on without him.

If, as acknowledged at the outset, the WASP experience is only one facet of the era, then why does the belief that WASP culture was synonymous with the 1950s endure? Is it a willful desire for delusion by privileged consumers of mass media? Or, as the works discussed here might suggest, a yen for white, middle-class dystopia? Perhaps these novels and stories should be read as substitute fantasies that run counter to the postwar celebration of home, family, and nation. These works are symptomatic of a decade in transition, and they register a moment of double crisis: the perceived waning of WASP cultural authority in the face of increasing racial and ethnic heterogeneity, and an untenable commitment to the insular domestic sphere in an era of political unrest. In *Revolutionary Road*, Frank Wheeler’s concern about “emasculated” men masks his own fear that he has not lived up to his father’s manly ideal, but in the figure of April, Yates examines the real gender trouble within the repressive patterns of 1950s domesticity. The self-reliant April serves as a foil to the diffident Frank, but her attempts to reimagine her role and an alternative to the suffocating confines of the nuclear family prove fatal. *Revolutionary Road* and the other works in this chapter uncover the turmoil and deep-seated repressions of the era and, in that way, they continue to give us exactly what we want: the obverse side of the 1950s idyll, the Cold War prohibitions and the transgressions they enabled, the bubbling unrest beneath the surface that promised a welcome end to the WASP fantasy.

NOTES

9 Coontz, The Way We Really Are, 39.
11 Nadel, “Fiction and the Cold War,” 168.
12 Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye, 158.
14 Louis Bromfield, Mr. Smith (New York: Harper, 1951), 278.
20 See T. F. James, “Crack-ups in the Suburbs,” Cosmopolitan (October 1960), 64.
24 Updike, Rabbit, Run, 238.