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IN THE NIGHT SEASON

By Richard Bausch

HarperFlamingo. 326 pp.

Richard Bausch's mentor, George Garrett, cites three stages in the evolution of our best novelists: first, the writer has verbal facility; then, a high degree of insight into character; finally, the mature ability to recognize patterns in events, how they fit into our life as a whole.

Few who have watched Bausch reach the full blossoming of his artistic maturity in the 1990s would dispute that he has mastered these three stages.

With *In the Night Season*, Bausch weds a plot with all the pulse-racing suspense of a popular crime novel to a sensitive limning of two themes at the heart of his recent work: the rivulets causing family love to wander off course, and the reaction of ordinary people to extraordinary dangers.

Bausch works masterfully against the grain of expectations, throwing in enough red herrings to stock an aquarium. When black, middle-aged TV/VCR repairman Edward Bishop starts receiving ominous notes saying, "Watch your step with the white woman," these notes signed "The Virginia Front," we suspect he's in danger because he supervises the 11-year-old son of his young next-door neighbor, the newly widowed Nora Michaelson. Small-town detective Philip Shaw suspects so too.

We grow attached to the reclusive Bishop, a wounded vet who employs his housekeeper just to provide her an income and watches Nora's boy Jason because he pities the widow's loneliness and fear. An aging Benny Goodman fan, Bishop inspires our concern. But quickly and unexpectedly, Bausch kills Bishop off.

His death did result from his connection to Nora and Jason, the true quarry of those who killed Bishop. But the Virginia Front proves the least of their concerns.

Bausch paints Nora's as a life that could have beaten a lesser woman down. Too principled to keep teaching in a school system that doesn't educate, Nora has been left deep in debt by her husband's failed construction career. But "the truth was that she had been grieving the loss of Jack for several months before he died." [p. 72] During his final year, Jack had grown uncommunicative, haunted by something he refused to speak of.

When three sinister gunmen kidnap Nora and Jason, while a fourth holds Nora's parents hostage in Seattle, we learn why Jack had spent the last year of their marriage in silent terror.

Now, the terror shifts completely to Nora and Jason. Their captors are a mysterious lot. There's plodding, doughy Bags, who can't keep his unwashed hands off Nora and looks forward to the moment he can kill Jason. Bags repulses even his erudite brother Travis, who quotes Conrad but also lusts for Nora. Both brothers suffer the disdain of the calm German Reuther, who coolly points his revolver at Jason's head and cocks the hammer. They're dangerous, but it's not clear if they're bright. Are Nora and Jason in the hands of deadly masterminds or a gang that can't shoot straight?

Though Jason and Nora are imperiled, they are not helpless. Since toddlerhood, Jason had heard his parents ask, "What is it that you have lots of to face the big bad world with?" They were teaching him to never forget the answer: "resources." Through

Bausch's superbly manipulated pacing, taut as a hangman's rope, we follow the confrontation of their limited resources and the gunmen's ruthless pursuit of what they thought Jack Michaelson had left behind for them.

But, for all its suspense, this is no mere genre piece. Beneath its surface tension lurk profound human dilemmas. The novel contains three marriages, two now over, one through death, the other divorce. As counterpoint to a surface plot threatening sudden, violent death we watch the slow deaths of marriages.

Nora's parents have a long-standing marriage, and sometimes "Nora thought of her parents as representing the luck people in love seemed to have." But even a grown daughter can't see inside another marriage. Nora doesn't know that her W.W.II-hero father and her mother, who keeps her watch set to Eastern time so she'll know what hour it is where Nora lives, now "spent more time in different parts of the house."

Long before her distracted husband was run over by a bus, Nora watched her marriage grow silent, mistrustful, and finally dead at its heart. One of the novel's tangential but stabbing pains comes when Nora, searching for what the gunmen want, finds a suspicious letter to Jack from a strange woman.

Reinforcing this running theme is the destruction of the family life of Det. Shaw, a supporting but far from minor character. Watching Shaw with his young daughter, we feel, as we do with Fitzgerald's Charlie and Honoria Wales, that these two should be together. Having lost his nine-year-old son to a freak accident for which he still blames himself, recovering alcoholic Shaw watches his wife in the grip of a newfound feminism decide to reject "the male-dominated idea of herself as wife and mother" and take their daughter hundreds of miles away. As he pursues Nora's captors, Shaw suffers the knowledge that "there were people all around him who had solid families; the ground under their feet was shifting slower for them, changes were coming at a speed they could bear."

Yet, even as Shaw's world crumbles and Nora sees in her ordeal that, no matter its outcome, her "life would now be colored by this—her perceptions would continually give off the sense of the proximity of har," they find consolation in the resources they develop as they cope. As in life, much is taken but much abides.

With as deft a control over language as Charlie Parker had over his alto sax, Bausch offers here in abundance the pleasures of both literary and popular fiction. He has a Tolstoyesque gift for the perfect characterizing detail, like the smug school administrator with her "mannish, round-jawed, grandiosely ugly face, still smiling, but with the faintest edge of the sardonic: the face of a well-fed peasant who has just been proved right about something."

Like his mentor Garrett, Richard Bausch has long been one of the most expert and substantial of our writers. And, as with Garrett, his talent is long overdue for wider recognition.