

Boston Globe Aug. 7, 1994

## **RARE & ENDANGERED SPECIES**

By Richard Bausch

Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence. 257 pp.

Richard Bausch's central theme has always been society's most elemental cohesive factor, family love. Yet, his work, among the most consistently excellent in contemporary American fiction, illuminates the countless rivulets into which that love can flow off course.

After two superb recent novels, *Violence* and *Rebel Powers*, the eight stories and title novella of *Rare & Endangered Species* mark Bausch's return to the less elastic shorter forms at which he is arguably even more masterful.

Here, anguished parent-child relationships and broken or breaking marriages abound, charging each tale with tension between the sorrow we have and the happiness we still believe possible.

The long-distance phone conversation that comprises "Aren't You Happy for Me?" finds a pregnant 23 year-old informing her father she's about to marry her 63 year-old English professor. The father, 44, grows so mired in sarcastic rebuke that he never gets around to telling his daughter that he and her mother plan to separate. As the mother consoles him: "Who knows, maybe they'll be happy for a time," questions surface mistily in the background. If marital happiness is fleeting, why should this May-December union prove any less fulfilling than another? Is the professor serving as the nurturing father figure the young woman obviously lacks? Like pebbles tossed in water, questions keep rippling into view as a Bausch story ends, for, like haiku, his stories expand after their final word.

The more optimistic "Weather," possibly the best of the shorter pieces, offers an enlightening account of a mother and daughter shopping at a mall record store. The protective mother meddles at irritating length into the chronic strain in her daughter's marriage, but, when she believes a man has insulted her daughter, the mother defends her to the point of assault, leaving the daughter aware how much her mother cares and of "what was required, what must be repeated and done and given and listened to and allowed, in all the kinds of love there are."

Bausch's technical command, psychological insight and thematic depth coalesce in the title novella. This tour de force told from seven interconnected viewpoints blends past and present tense narration into a patchwork of formats ranging from epistolary to stream-of-consciousness. Sixty-five year-old Andrea, whose suicide sets the plot in motion, once had a chance to run away for love, leaving a 42-year marriage that was dead at its heart. But she didn't. Even though it taught her that "sometimes being forgiven is worse than being thrown out," Andrea stayed in her home. Its view of the mountains

perpetuated her memories of raising her children. But now they are grown and gone, and Andrea and her husband are about to vacate their house. She chooses instead to end her life with sleeping pills.

One by one, a prismatic spectrum of characters whose lives touched Andrea's assess the pains and voids in their lives. Her son and pregnant daughter confess to each other the numbness taking hold in each of their marriages. A co-worker of the daughter's must contend with his wife's jealousy and their son's misbehavior at school, where the boy's teacher (a friend of Andrea's) struggles to cope with a beautiful, self-destructive daughter. Andrea's widowed husband suspects "I wasn't the husband she apparently needed" and confesses "how it can feel like starvation to be intimate with someone you can't really reach."

But from Andrea's ashes an awareness will arise. As Andrea's daughter gives birth, the wailing new baby, that most tangible embodiment of hope, reminds those Andrea has left that there is a common plaintive music of humanity, that those still able to hear it remain bound within the human community, and that those like Andrea who drift "out of earshot" to listen only to their own private dirge can wander into fatal isolation.

With each new book, Bausch further divides his readers into two camps. Most, myself included, marvel at the tension of his plots and how in an era of overcharged nerves and blown emotional fuses, Bausch so subtly and accurately delineates the inner lives of his characters. Others note a troubling absence in his work, specifically the absence of Richard Bausch.

They have a point. Most of our best writers leave stylistic signature imprints on their writing: the vibrant narrative voices of Ellen Gilchrist, the sympathetic tone of alienation in Madison Smartt Bell, the intermittent rapture of Annie Dillard. We'd know their work anywhere. Reading it, we feel we know them. Not Bausch. He stands invisible, unknowable somewhere beyond the bookjacket. Expectedly, then, some readers charge him with being all technical perfection but no personality, the Modern Jazz Quartet of writers.

Bausch's invisibility, however, is of the kind Keats adulated in Shakespeare, the writer's capacity to shed his own ego and completely enter the world of his characters. If we never know Bausch, we know his characters profoundly.

They are pained and adrift, stumbling on shifting ground that shakes their vague expectations of life and themselves. Sometimes they make it through to solid ground intact, strengthened by their suffering. But inevitably, whether they do or not, looking inside them we see our own heart.