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THE FIREMAN'S WIFE AND OTHER STORIES

By Richard Bausch

Simon & Schuster/Linden Press. 205 pp

Richard Bausch is an Andre Dubus/George Garrett kind of writer, the kind passed around and treasured by other writers as models of approach and perception, yet to the reading public little known and vastly underappreciated. In last year's volumes of *Best American Short Stories* and *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best* Bausch wrote what are arguably the best stories in each collection, and his 1989 novel *Mr. Field's Daughter* showed a talent extending to long forms as well as short.

Our thin-is-beautiful era of gaunt fiction yields the "workshop" story, where to feel would be tenderminded. Writers often demand that a more creative reading must compensate for their lack of creative writing. Look for reverberations, many insist, in the hollow places. Knowing that rich reverberations can echo only off carefully polished substance, Bausch carves his own substance from the most challenging and rewarding of material, what Jane Smiley recently phrased as "the experience of perfect family happiness, and the certain knowledge that it could not last."

Smiley's words come from her ironically titled "Ordinary Love" (ironic because love is never ordinary). Like her, Bausch sees that Tolstoy was dead wrong: happy families are *not* all alike. Nor do they often remain happy for very long.

In most of the ten stories in *The Fireman's Wife* Bausch takes commonplace slices of family life and gently peels them to the fear and pain writhing underneath. He shows moments of domestic terror and disillusionment with unwavering familiarity.

In "Wedlock," Lisa and Howard celebrate their wedding night. Howard "was a very funny, very good-natured young man. It was what she loved about him." But his good nature starts to sink beneath the evening's champagne, and his playfulness turns steadily to aggressive teasing about Lisa's first husband until he brings her to tears. Through their blur she sees a bright future transforming into a life sentence to a man who may be quite different from who she thought he was, and her marital joy careens torturously into fear.

Half the stories employ a woman's viewpoint, giving Bausch ideal artistic distance from his material. Two of these, the title story and its sequel "Consolation," offer disturbing accounts of the wives of two firemen. In "The Fireman's Wife," Jane, despite her husband's benevolence, feels alone and trapped in her marriage. Around her she sees alternatives to her life, her single and lonely co-worker Eveline and her pregnant and complacent friend Milly. She neither envies their lives nor wants the one she has. Longing for a lasting, comfortable marriage but blind to having the possibility of one at hand, Jane cannot keep from inventing her own misery.

While still pregnant, Jane's friend Milly loses her husband in a fire. Bausch relates the aftermath of that disaster in "Consolation," juxtaposing images of how people cling to what remains to console them after tragic loss: Milly and her in-laws to the new baby and each other, Milly's sister to her husband's romantic tenacity after a marital rift.

Bausch has a psychologist's grasp of his characters' life histories, how they got to be who they are. Nowhere is this more true than in "The Brace." Marilyn is surrounded by the three most significant men in her life: her often-married father, a famous playwright just back from Rome; her prodigal brother, a vagabond secret government agent visiting after being wounded in Beirut; and her husband Tom, "a kind, gentle man who happens never to have been overseas." While her brother drinks every night and her father sits in condescending judgment of Tom's textbook salesman job and the ordinariness of her life, Marilyn takes pride in her husband's dependable presence and interest in his family. But yet . . . There remains her lifetime of timidity and trying to please and impress a self-involved father and superior older brother. It has left her a woman struck with the startling realization of how alienated she may be from all men, even the devoted Tom.

Kenneth in "The Eyes of Love" also knows the pain of living with critical judgmentalism. Only four years earlier it had been different with Kenneth and Shannon, "when they were in graduate school and had first become lovers and moved with a crowd of radical believers and artists, people who were somehow most happy when they were wakeful and ruffled in the drugged hours before dawn—after the endless far-flung hazy discussions, the passionate sophomoric talk of philosophy and truth and everything that was wrong with the world." But the smug bliss of shared cynicism has not translated well into marriage, impending parenthood and underemployment. Now Kenneth clearly sees his wife's—but not his own—incapacity to look on anything with eyes of love.

Two stories are marked departures from the rest, one in setting, one in format. In "Old West" Bausch mutes characterization to focus on an ingenious retelling of "Shane." Returning to the western setting he employed earlier in his award-winning story "The Man Who Knew Belle Starr," Bausch uses a narrator who might be Brandon deWilde grown up. Shane returns, a bounty hunter in quest. Watching his boyhood hero with adult vision, however, the narrator sees a different Shane, questions what his childhood eyes had seen, and muses on the lies we tell ourselves and others to add color and moral texture to our lives.

Bausch takes his greatest risk in the collection's final story, the epistolary "Letter to the Lady of the House." This poignant meditation, written by a man on the eve of his seventieth birthday to his wife of half a century, reflects the course by which early marital hope and warmth can erode to suffocation, even rancor. His letter is written with a pained empathy, as he insists he finds their marriage worth it for its moments of "loveliness." Throughout, Bausch treads the precipice edge of sentimentality but never slips in this collection's glowing close.

Few explore with wiser compassion than Richard Bausch the dangers lying along the path to family love, and few so richly deserve a wider audience than they have thus far reached.

