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LONG WAY FROM HOME

By Frederick Busch

Ticknor & Fields, 292 pp.

Nearly a decade ago, Gloria Vanderbilt wrote, "It came to me, and I knew what I had to have before my soul would rest. I wanted to belong—to belong to my mother. And in return—I wanted my mother to belong to me." Her words express exactly what propels the central character of Frederick Busch's latest sifting through the psychological complexities of family love.

It isn't that Sarah feels disconnected from her mother. She just isn't certain who her mother is. For most of her 30 years it seemed clear enough. Sarah's mother was Lizzie Bean, the spirited, kindly woman from Busch's earlier novels *Rounds* and *Sometimes I Live in the Country*. Lizzie has done all a mother can for Sarah except actually give birth to her.

But now a newspaper's "Am I your mother?" personal ad provides Sarah a clue to finding the woman from whose body she came. So Sarah leaves her six-year-old son Stephen and architect husband Barrett in their plush home just north of Philadelphia to dash across Pennsylvania to Gloria Dodge, the woman who gave Sarah up for adoption at birth.

Sarah's expedition precipitates a series of consequent treks by others desperate to reclaim a lost loved one. Barrett, suspecting that Sarah has fled marital ennui to see a former lover, takes Stephen to upstate New York where Lizzie is a high school principal married to newspaper editor Willis Mastracola, then drives in phantom pursuit of Sarah to Santa Fe.

After Sarah meets and rejects psychopathic Gloria, Gloria tries to recapture what she's lost by driving to New York to kidnap Stephen, which launches Sarah and Lizzie back across the interstates to retrieve the boy. Meanwhile, having found unexpected and painful bedroom adventures but not his wife, Barrett heads homeward out of the Southwest.

While this sounds more like a road atlas than a plot, it forms an almost kaleidoscopic format to explore what lies at the heart of family love. Pulled between highway memories of a torrid earlier love affair and the pedestrian reality of life with Barrett, Sarah calls in question whether our most intense love is also the love most prone to last a lifetime. Barrett encounters men who measure how much pain to inflict by the gauge of how much sexual license has been taken with their wives. But mostly, Busch puts before us, in a different but almost equally absorbing way, the question Ann Beattie raised in her last novel, *Picturing Will*: in the conflict between biology and love, who is the truer parent?

Faced with two mothers, Sarah seems confused whether she actually has any, thus the title's allusion to the spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child."

Nor is it an easy call, despite an obvious sympathy for Lizzie. As Busch moves through the viewpoints of Sarah, Lizzie, Gloria, Barrett, Stephen and Willis, his charitable eye makes us empathize with each of their longings, even the kidnapping Gloria's, who one careless night in 1963 made Sarah while "writhing in the back of a Buick Roadmaster" with a boy she knew she'd never marry.

Lizzie may have raised Sarah, Gloria concedes, but doesn't the use of her womb give Gloria indisputable rights? "We really have no definition of 'mother' in our lawbooks," stated Judge Marianne O. Battani of Wayne County Circuit Court in Detroit on March 14, 1986, adding, "'Mother' was believed to have been so basic that no definition was deemed necessary." Basic, perhaps, but to whom does the title belong? And how much say in the issue has the now adult child?

With its several characters and constant movement, as likely to end in traffic court as family court, this novel becomes an apt vehicle to showcase Busch's gift for blending tension with empathy for his characters, the skill that made his "Ralph the Duck" arguably the best short story of 1988. Busch renders each character's world vividly if sometimes implausibly.

Gracefully written, tautly plotted and sensitively observed, *A Long Way from Home* moves a reader rapidly about the complex web of family relationships wondering which threads will prove strongest.