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REBEL POWERS

By Richard Bausch

Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence. 395 pp.

When Richard Bausch's fifth novel, *Violence*, appeared last year, many readers applauded how masterfully Bausch had once again caught the tune of our times. He rendered the headlines flesh. That book showed the reality and aftermath of stepping casually into a contemporary urban night where disaster is plentiful and sudden.

But there's another side of this indisputably outstanding writer, displayed lavishly in his latest novel, that seems not of our time at all. While his view of events is distinctly modern, Bausch peers at character with a sensitivity to nuance that feels oddly Victorian. In our era of overcharged nerves and blown emotional fuses, Bausch observes with a subtle attention and respect the human sensibilities which give life its texture and richness.

Bausch builds bridges. In *Violence* he examined the connection between the inner and outer experience of brutality. In *Rebel Powers* he shows how societal dislocation and turmoil will be mirrored in the private breakdown of the family.

Thomas Boudreaux—genial, bookish and divorced—recalls his family in 1967-68, when he was 17. He assumed his parents, Daniel and Connie, had a loving and stable marriage. Then Daniel, a highly decorated Vietnam veteran and Air Force career man, steals a typewriter, gets dishonorably discharged and sent to Wilson Creek, Wyoming for two years at hard labor. This sets Connie, Thomas and sister Lisa, 8, on an ominous odyssey.

After briefly setting up a single-parent home in Virginia, Connie decides to take the children by train to Wyoming to be near Daniel, stopping briefly at her father's home in North Dakota. En route they meet fragile young Penny Holt, beautiful despite having lost an eye in a childhood accident. Shortly after mother and children take rooms in a Wilson Creek boarding house, Penny arrives and rents a room on the top floor.

At a deliberate, almost glacial pace, Thomas recreates how the lives of his family and Penny gradually transform under the strains of their various needs. Daniel needs to somehow survive his humiliation and retain the love of his wife and respect of his children. Connie must preserve her family without sacrificing her own happiness. Lisa must keep her eight-year-old world from quaking apart. Thomas, tottering on the cusp between boy and man of the family, needs to see into both parents' hearts while coping with a searing infatuation with Penny, who herself is desperate for connection to a family to end her fear and loneliness.

Connie confesses to Penny that the Daniel who'd returned from Vietnam with nightmares may no longer be the Daniel she once fell in love with. Penny sees this void in Connie's life as a spot she herself might fill. Eventually, a battle line for Connie's devotion forms between Daniel and Penny, each of whom may be more needy than Connie's own confusion can accommodate.

All the while, outside this private drama, things fall apart. Burning Vietnamese villages and massive domestic protests enter American living rooms nightly. First Martin Luther King, then Robert Kennedy are gunned down. Families divide over politics, and even hair length becomes emblematic of allegiance. It is no accident that the family's climactic event takes place on the day R.F.K. is shot, for Bausch is showing as clearly as a Shakespearean history play that public life is private life writ large, and the writing in 1968 spells disintegration.

Between the lines, we may read something more ominous. There is in Thomas's teenaged viewpoint a humility, vulnerability and native decency that make him as endearing a narrator as you'll find this side of *David Copperfield*. He feels credible for 1968 in a way he might not for 1993, when the popularity of Bart Simpson and tabloid-emulating news media and trash-talking athletes reflects a marked coarsening in our social fabric.

But then, much of the humanity in Thomas's narration must be credited to Bausch himself. For the past decade, Bausch has created a body of fiction that now places him in the top echelon of contemporary writers. *Rebel Powers* may be his most authoritative expression thus far of the virtues he blends to create his consistently powerful work. Bausch combines extraordinary insight into and compassion for his characters. His primary theme has always been society's most elemental cohesive factor, family love. With a firm sense of artistic structure and vibrant prose, he sets his characters free to seek meaning and purpose in a world whose tragic face he understands. In *Rebel Powers*, he has placed adrift in the same boat five sympathetic people whose hope for love and stability may be their only beacon through the murky fog of an alienated world. And it may not be enough.