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VIOLENCE

By Richard Bausch

Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence. 293 pp.

As Erik Erikson noted nearly a half century ago, each life stage presents its own critical task. To fail is to thwart further development.

At 27, Charles Connally in Richard Bausch's powerful fifth novel faces the challenges of becoming a grown man: shouldering the responsibilities of husband and father and coping unsheltered in a world where the dangerous exits and the horrible can happen. His story is, at its heart, a timeless coming-of-age tale.

On the day after Christmas, Connally, an aspiring history teacher going through college on the G.I. Bill, and his wife Carol, a dental hygienist in the early weeks of pregnancy, set off from their Virginia home to visit Connally's mother in Chicago. Connally is remote, moody, vaguely convinced he does not want the baby but unsure why. In a petulant moment, Connally bolts from their motel bed to visit an all-night convenience store. There, an attempted robbery results in gunfire and two murders, with Connally in the middle and mistakenly credited with being a hero.

For the already distraught Connally, the convenience store trauma proves overwhelming. Irritated by the unmerited accolades of heroism, he feels some vague terror unleashed by the violence he has witnessed. "He was convinced that something in him had been set loose by what happened in the convenience store, and it was floating around in his soul, dark, interested only in its own nourishment."

Returning to Virginia where Carol's pregnancy grows precarious, confining her to bed rest, Connally stops attending classes and grows increasingly haunted by the murders, sensing connections between them, his reluctance to have the child, and dim memories of his brutal father. He leaves the distressed but devoted Carol and returns to Chicago where he hopes confronting his mother and the other witnesses to the murders will take him past layers of psychic scar tissue and draw his hazy turmoil into focus.

Throughout, Bausch concentrates on Connally as a man so out of touch with his most powerful emotions that he cannot communicate with his wife or anyone else. To write precisely about the imprecision of a central character's feelings is a challenge only the bravest writer would dare and only an artist of Bausch's extraordinary gifts could manage. He slaloms between the maudlin on one side and the foggy on the other to depict the common prospective parental fear that we might parent as we were parented. If we were parented abusively, we might not want a child at all, fearing what we might do to it.

Rapidly becoming acclaimed as one of the most skillful and perceptive writers of our time, Bausch increasingly divides his readers into two camps. Most, myself included,

marvel at the tension of his plots, his penetrating accuracy in revealing the inner lives of his characters and his poignant illumination of the many ruts into which love can flow off course. Others note a troubling absence in his work, specifically the absence of Richard Bausch.

They have a point. Most of our best writers leave some signature imprint on their writing: the love for her quirky characters of Anne Tyler, the verbal acrobatics of Lee Abbott, the joy at her own voice of Ellen Gilchrist. We'd know their work anywhere. Reading it, we feel we know the writer. Not Bausch. He stands invisible, paring his nails somewhere beyond the bookjacket. We know how flawlessly he writes, how deeply he reads human character. But we don't know *him*. Expectedly, then, some readers charge him with being all technical perfection but no personality, the Modern Jazz Quartet of writers.

What Bausch's invisibility amounts to, however, is a quality Keats praised so highly in Shakespeare, the capacity of the writer to shed his own ego and completely enter the characters and world he creates. If we never know Bausch as we know Tyler or Abbott or Gilchrist, we know his characters profoundly.

Like Charles Connally, they are pained and often lost, stumbling on shifting earth that shakes their vague expectations of life and themselves. Given sufficient love, faith and space, sometimes they make it through to solid ground intact, strengthened by their suffering into someone capable of compassion. Bausch's triumph is how he makes us believe every step of the journey.