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Richard Bausch, entretien réalisé par Géraldine Chouard

A propos de son roman *Hello to the Cannibals* (2002), traduit par Jamila Ouahmane Chauvin

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- 1 This interview of Richard Bausch conducted by Géraldine Chouard took place in Paris, on October 1, 2004, at Gallimard's.
- 2 Géraldine Chouard (GC) : *Hello to the Cannibals* is your ninth novel, and the fifth to be translated into French. *Petite Visite aux Cannibales* has just come out, published by Gallimard. Into which other languages has it been translated ?
- 3 Richard Bausch (RB) : *German, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese.*
- 4 GC : You have received several prizes and awards in the United States, for the most part for your short stories, haven't you ? Do you feel that you are more of a short-story writer ?
- 5 RB : *No, I am a writer. Those who do not read my novels are missing a lot, if I may say so.*
- 6 GC : A few classic broader questions before we look into the text in more depth. You are from Virginia, where you currently live. Where exactly ?
- 7 RB : *Broad Run. One hour South-West of Washington DC.*
- 8 GC : You teach creative writing classes at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Virginia. What do you tell your students about writing ?
- 9 RB : *Oh, that would take me a whole book to answer. I will say here that the situation is that invariably my students are young people with talent—and with a complete set of misconceptions about the task at hand, which is writing prose fiction. They have yet to find a voice, and are filled with anxiety about that, and my job is to enable them to be themselves without feeling so much worry about it. Simply to write and be in the work, and to understand that it is all done in confusion and doubt, that it is always difficult to do well, and that one must learn to live in that*

difficulty. I like to say I don't really teach writing—I teach patience, cunning, toughness, stubbornness, the willingness to fail in pursuit of something good.

10 GC : Do you consider yourself to be a Southern writer ?

11 RB : I don't mind the appellation. But I'm writing for anyone who can read, and anyone who will ever be able to read.

12 GC : Do you talk about the South in your texts ?

13 RB : Some. I suppose. A lot of my characters live there, or come from there. But I am almost always concerned more with the interior landscape, if you will.

14 GC : Do you read other Southern writers ?

15 RB : Oh, yes. Yes indeed.

16 GC : Who in particular ?

17 RB : Well, Faulkner, of course, though I like him less well than I used to—I've grown a little tired of the modernist stance, really. All that linguistic monkeying around. It's a bit tiresome when you have to take it in large doses. But there's also the great Walker Percy, and Flannery O'Connor, and my beloved Tennessee Williams, and Eudora Welty, my old friendly acquaintance, and then there's the living ones : the unexampled George Garrett, Mary Lee Settle, Jill McCorkle, Lee Smith, Richard Ford, Allen Wier, Allan Gurganus, Josephine Humphreys, my brother Robert Bausch—oh, there's so many of them and they're all writing brilliantly about everything under the sun. Not just the south. Everything.

18 GC : You mentioned Welty. What about her most specifically ?

19 RB : One of my favorites is her great story « Petrified Man. » One of the story's last lines has a character saying « if you're so smart, why aint you rich ? » I love that. And I got to tell her once, at a party, that that line absolutely belongs also at the end of Flannery O'Connor's story « Good Country People. » That's a story where a fake bible salesman gets a supercilious and snobbish college-educated woman into a terrible position of vulnerability. I told Eudora that her line from « Petrified Man » would fit perfectly, there. And she loved it. And agreed about it, too.

20 GC : Did you know her ? Could you tell us something about your meeting her.

21 RB : Yes. I was fortunate enough to know her, and spend some time with her. She had the finest sense of humor, you know. And she was very gracious. Once at a banquet, I sat down next to her and I was incredibly hungry—I'd been out late the night before carousing, and misbehaving, and I was starving. So they put this Chicken Cordon-blue in front of me and I stuck a fork into it and was getting ready to slice a big chunk of it off, when I noticed that there was only one voice speaking in that great hall—some man was giving the invocation, and everyone, including people whom I knew perfectly well to be pagans, had their hands in their laps, heads bowed. So I tried to take the fork out of the chicken, and it wouldn't come out. It was stuck. So I had to sit back with the fork still sticking up out of that chicken. Eudora leaned over and murmured, « Richard, I believe it's already killed. » That's the way she was. That's Eudora all the way.

22 GC : Hello to the Cannibals is over 600 pages long : is it your longest work, your most voracious ? Why ?

23 RB : Just developed that way. I had no notion it would be so out-sized when I began it. In fact, when I sent in the first pages of it with a proposal, I estimated that it would be about 95,000 wds and that I could deliver it in a year. I was wrong by four years and 201,000 wds. I have been saying that I should've known that if I was going to deliver the sense and bravery of the lives of two women it was going to take more than a mere 95,000 wds.

- 24 GC : As far as the novel's genre is concerned, how would you describe it ? Is it a historical novel ? A fictional text that has been swallowed up by the historical novel ? (on amazon.com, it is classified as a « historical fiction »).
- 25 RB : *I don't think in terms of genres generally. I suppose it would be classified as a « historical novel ; » but for me, finally the whole thing is a metaphor and a meditation on the bravery of these two women. The different sorts of bravery.*
- 26 GC : Could you define « those different sorts of bravery ? »
- 27 RB : *Well, Mary's is, on the surface, anyway, an exotic, overt, out-in-the world, mountain-climbing, sort ; and yet Mary was pretty well terrified of intimacy, and fled from it or was very timid about it at every turn. She had dozens of friends who loved and admired her and to whom she was an utter mystery. Lily, my created character, possesses the tidal kind of bravery, the kind that involves the uncharted territories of intimacy. The book's most telling line, for me anyway, because it's finally the book's real subject, is the line : Another human soul is also a wilderness, and the exploration of that requires courage, too.*
- 28 GC : Where did the initial impetus to write this novel come from ? From a fascination for Mary Kingsley just like the character Lily ?
- 29 RB : *I was writing about Lily and Dominic and Tyler, and Mary Kingsley walked in and wouldn't leave.*
- 30 GC : The prologue is in some respects a short story, isn't it ? Tell us about it.
- 31 RB : *It's the last thing I wrote in the composition of the novel. I think, with some small alterations, it could stand alone as a story. But it was really done to keep the reader from feeling the difference to be too great between Mary's wayfaring courage and Lily's more subtle kind.*
- 32 GC : How do you explain the link between the two women, Lily and Mary ? One of them is a true explorer, while the other is inspired by her. However, does she really possess the same flame, the same courage and the same determination ? She is entirely focused on projection, not action. Or does this mean that in the end, it (Mary's) is a type of heroism that is no longer possible today ?
- 33 RB : *Mary is Lily's creation—so the whole book, as a story is about the brave imagination of a young woman who doesn't know how brave she is : The link is really that—but the novel, as such, is about the contrasting kinds of bravery. Or, more accurately, about the fact that bravery doesn't only happen in battles and on top of mountains in uncharted country.*
- 34 GC : There are thus two distinct voices in the text ; one is British, from the Victorian era, the other contemporary American. Is it a ventriloquist type of novel ?
- 35 RB : *In a way.*
- 36 GC : How did you manage the two voices ?
- 37 RB : *I just kept going over and over the whole thing, and imagined my way into it all. After a time, it was as though the voices were speaking to me. As if all I had to do was to write down what was being said to me.*
- 38 GC : You wrote: « I wanted to write a book about friendship, and about the affections we form for those who have gone before us ». Can you tell what type of affection you are referring to ?
- 39 RB : *Admiration and love—soul love ; when it is all spirit, outside time.*
- 40 GC : Outside time ? Is that why you quote Faulkner in the opening of your book (« The past is not dead. It is not even past »).

- 41 *RB : Well, sure. Although the quote is german to the novel itself more than to my idea of love outside time. And it is true of course that if one can achieve a clear, strong portrayal of emotional truth, that kind of truth defeats time. Will be true whenever anyone comes upon it. It's what is really meant by the idea that fiction is seeking truth. I don't know what Homer's politics were and I don't care. But when Hector has to remove his shining helmet so that his frightened son can recognize him, I know that truth. That truth has lasted all the centuries, and the mind that thought it up has been dust for 2700 years.*
- 42 *GC : There is an issue of pregnancy for 2 women, one comes full-term, (Lily's) one is aborted (Lily's step-mother's) : is this a way of saying that this is the first cannibalistic experience ?*
- 43 *RB : Could be, I suppose. But I never thought of it that way myself in the composing of the novel. For me the cannibals are all metaphor : the bravery thing again. One goes out into the world and is brave, one says « hello » to the cannibals, and goes on.*
- 44 *GC : What is the role of the hunting scene in the novel's economy ?*
- 45 *RB : After Buddy's death, the head of a deer is delivered. That provided me with a horrible surprise, so I kept it all.*
- 46 *GC : So who are the cannibals ? Is it the case that human bonds are always a matter of devouring, to a degree ?*
- 47 *RB : No, no, no. As I said, Hello to the Cannibals implies, to me, the going out in life, and seeing what one can see—being brave enough to run the risks of love AND life.*
- 48 *GC : But does Mary Kingsley decide to go to the African jungle and meet its cannibalistic populations, in order to escape the yoke of devouring parental authority ? Are you saying that the cannibals are perhaps less terrifying in the end than the Victorian society she comes from ?*
- 49 *RB : Not really. She cared for her mother all her young life, and was her father's amenuensis & social secretary, and then they both died within months of each other, and Mary went out into the world, thinking her usefulness was over. The cannibals are all those things in the world, domestic and otherwise, that we find to fear.*
- 50 *GC : Do you know the joke about cannibals ? (An ethnologist investigating anthropophagic cultures in Africa asks a tribal chief 'Have you still got any cannibals in your tribe ?' 'No' replies the chief, 'we ate the last one yesterday'). Did this inspire you ?*
- 51 *RB : Never heard the joke. Do you know Mark Twain's joke about the cannibals and the sandwich islands ? : « We understand christianity : we have eaten our missionaries. »*
- 52 *GC : What's in the pipeline now ?*
- 53 *RB : I'm working on a novel called TEMPORARY ROAD. It's been a long haul, as they all are, and I'm nearing the end of it. Thought it keeps taking turns I wasn't looking for. I never say much more than very general things about something that is presently being composed—let's just say it's a love comedy that isn't feeling so comedic right now.*
- 54 *GC : Thank you Richard Bausch.*
- 55 *RB : Thank you.*

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