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Review of Richard Bausch, *Hello to the Cannibals*

Géraldine Chouard

- 1 Richard Bausch is credited with five collections of short stories and nine novels that have received various awards in the United States. His latest work, *Hello to the Cannibals*, blends a historical epic and a more intimate tale. Watch out—this is a voracious novel.

Other Carnage

- 2 An ethnologist investigating cannibalistic rites in Africa asks the head of the tribe : « Do you still have cannibals in your tribe ? » « No, we ate the last one yesterday, » answers the head of the tribe. Undoubtedly, Richard Bausch wrote his latest novel in memory of the « last » cannibal, thus extending his investigation into the « endangered species » that was the subject of the collection of short stories published last year. A world away from the subtle tropisms of intimacy that punctuate his short texts, *Hello to the Cannibals* is an imposing tome—over some 600 pages, the narrative incorporates the adventures of explorer Mary Kingsley in the heart of darkest Africa, at the end of the 19th century with those of the young Lily Austin, the daughter of two actors, and a budding playwright living in the southern United States, a century later. This hybrid novel combines several narrative devices, integrating extracts from Mary Kingsley’s diary, and the letters she drafts, before embarking on her journey to West Africa, to a ‘far-away friend’ and her later travel notes. Rediscovered by Lily, this collection is fleshed out by fragments of the play she herself writes in homage to the pioneer who becomes her idol, also entitled *Hello to the Cannibals*. Everything is interconnected, intertwined—cannibalism is omnipresent, with its procession of incorporations which together form the plot and structure of the narrative.
- 3 As indicated by a note at the end of the book, the writer’s intention was to talk about « the affections we form for those who have gone before us ». A thought-provoking piece concerning the inheritance we receive and how it can possess us, *Hello to the Cannibals* evokes what Danièle Sallenave has called the « gift of the dead »—this legacy thanks to which certain truths of experience are played out eternally. Just like any good Southerner—Richard Bausch was brought up in Virginia—the author has not

forgotten Faulkner's lesson, with its epigraph of his uncompromising words « The past is not dead. In fact, it is not even the past ». Beyond and above the simple affection which is built up over the pages between the two women, *Hello to the Cannibals* breaks down into a series of successive decodings, and many other affects which bond us to one another (dead or alive), from the contacts which forge closer ties to the control relations which destroy them.

- 4 In a certain way, the whole book is contained in the prologue : after attending the première of *King Lear* at the Washington Theater (where her father plays Edmund), Lily celebrates her fourteenth birthday with a classmate, who gives her a book about *The Great Explorers*. Mary Kingsley immediately fascinates her. Later the same evening, Lily falls prey to the sexual advances of her friend's grandfather. An intense, blindingly fleeting sequence. The rapt of a childhood. The cat was among the pigeons.
- 5 It is from this formative scene onwards that the theme of cannibalism finds its real, imaginary and symbolic dimensions, which are entwined with a calling into question of the far-off and the near-at-hand. When closeness and promiscuity become bedfellows and when object threatens to become one with subject, a way must be found of escaping to pastures new, in order to start making a difference again. The narrative follows this escapist tendency, which is risky yet salutary. After coming under the yoke of a devouring parental authority, Mary Kingsley who had been her mother's carer, decides after her mother's death to go to the African jungle and meet its cannibalistic populations, which may be less terrifying in the end than the Victorian society she comes from. Inspired by the boldness of her elder, Lily Austin attempts in turn to live her own life, far from imposed models. After her parents' separation, she makes a series of hasty decisions—giving up college, having an affair with a man, marrying another, and moving to Mississippi. When she falls pregnant, her plans collapse around her, her stepmother miscarries, her father-in-law dies during a hunting trip, and she has repeated marital crises. Everything falls to pieces. When her daughter is born (whom she calls Mary), Lily has already left, having gone back to find her heroine on the black continent of her imagination where indigenous rites revitalize her vision with the symbolic dimension that was so badly lacking.
- 6 This parallel story, which provides a privileged insight into investigating the primitive, does however give rise to a number of narrative problems. The overlap of the two plots effectively comes at a price through links that are at times artificial. Thanks to a conversational aside, Lily learns that Rosa, her in-laws' maid, comes from Gabon, where Mary stayed for a time. Devastated by the torment about her absent father, the young Mary believed at the time that he had fallen alongside General Custer at Little Bighorn. Later, we discover that a man whose son was killed during this massacre built the house where Lily and her husband live. And so on and so forth. This is actually not too surprising, since Mary is none other than Lily's *doppelgänger*, her likeness, her sister. At the end of the journey, the two women share the same voice and their story is embodied in *An African Odyssey*, the play written by Lily in memory of Mary.
- 7 In response to the question of whether cannibals still exist in Bausch's world, the answer is a definite yes. But the cannibals are not the ones you think. Come and visit.

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