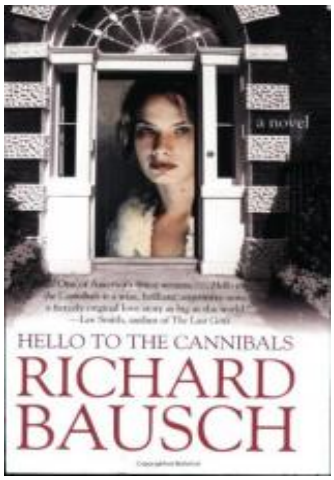
Hello to the Cannibals

by Richard Bausch



About the Book

Mary Kingsley and Lily Austin are two women born more than a century apart. They will never meet, yet they sense each other's existence. For each, the other is a confidante with whom she can share her sense of displacement in the world. Because her curiosity about the world is stronger than her fear of traveling alone in a strange and dangerous country, Mary is set apart from other women her age. Lily sets herself apart from others because she is determined to be true to herself, even if it means leaving college without graduating, marrying a man she has only recently met, caring for a child alone, and living each day with no idea about what the next day will hold. Both are women of their time, stifled by its conformities, but also freed by their realization that the rules do not apply to them simply because they do not believe in the rules.

Throughout the novel, marriages dissolve and are reformed, acquaintances become lovers, and strangers become friends. Families are torn apart by divorce or betrayal, or knit together by convenience and circumstance. Truths are withheld out of fear of rejection and reprisal -- and then revealed with more painful consequences. When disrupted by tragedy, death, and even birth, the order that a family brings to the world may feel random and false. Yet it is that very connection that so many of these characters crave. Richard Bausch reminds us how frail we are, how needy and selfish we can be, and yet how generous we are when we love and are loved by the right people.

Through Bausch's uncanny sense of place, the dark jungles of Africa -- swarming with killer insects smaller than a fingernail and man-eating crocodiles larger than a boat -- as well as 19th century Cambridge's crowded, fetid streets vividly come to life. A lazy, late summer afternoon, poolside at a sprawling Mississippi estate reeks of hedonistic pleasure, even when compared to the French Quarter during Mardi Gras. Yet no matter how comfortable their surroundings, both Lily and Mary feel suffocated in places where the natives are only too happy offer opinions on how to live, think and act.

Hello to the Cannibals reveals with delicious complexity the lives of two intriguing female explorers. One explores the

world, the other explores the terrain of her own heart, yet both women fight their battles with courage and truth, both struggle to feel at home in the world. This sweeping novel reminds us that truthfully lived, one's life is never anything less than a perilous, mysterious, and wondrous journey.

Discussion Guide

1. The pivotal moment in Lily's adolescent life occurs during an overnight stay at a friend's house. There is a dangerous ice storm, and her parents are late picking her up. That same night, Lily meets Dominic; her friend's grandfather molests her; and she is introduced to the exploits of Mary Kingsley. How are these events interconnected? How will they shape Lily's future?

2. How do Lily's relationships with the men in her life compare and contrast with that of Mary Kingsley to her father?

3. Discuss the relationship between Lily and Mary Kingsley. Is it really a relationship? How is each woman helped by her correspondence with the other?

4. What qualities do Mary and Lily share? How are they different? How are Mary and Lily each a product of their family, society, and times? How is each woman's life determined by external forces, and how does each break out of the molds thrust upon her?

5. How does Bausch explore the significance of family? How do our parents help us define who we are? How does our family shape our concept of the world?

6. What roles do prejudice and bigotry play in the novel? How do the characters of Rosa, Buddy, Manny, and Aunt Violet reflect these themes?

7. What impact does Buddy's death have on the lives of the people who lived in his house? What did he mean to the people around him?

8. One night in Paris, Mary experiences an epiphany about herself: that she is not just different from other women her age, but that she is extraordinary. "It is a distance, from the feeling that one is different from everyone to the discovery that one is extraordinary." Describe what this difference might feel like, and the ensuing responsibilities to one's self such a discovery would mean. Do you think Lily is extraordinary?

9. After waiting out a terrible storm in her cabin, and then heroically keeping a piano from crashing into anyone on deck, Mary realizes something about herself: "She looks at the place where, earlier, she lay in such terror of her own solitary little life in the immense, turning world. Without quite voicing it to herself, she understands now, finally, that the one hedge against this fear...the one weapon available to her for battling it and keeping it at bay is action, even if the action is nothing more than movement from one place to another." How is this truth played out in Mary's later life? How do fear, action, and movement occur in Lily's life?

10. Dominic's interpretation of the message of Lily's play is different from Lily's own. With whom do you agree? What is your opinion of Lily's play? Do you think it will be successful?

11. While Bausch tells Lily's story in the past tense, Mary's is told in the present. How do the different narrative techniques affect their stories? How might the novel have been different had Bausch used only past or present tense? Or if the tenses had been switched?

12. Lily writes to Mary, "Writing these small entries to you, people will say that's a conceit. For me, it's a beautiful mystery." Do you consider Bausch's narrative structure a literary conceit? How might Lily's own use of a journal dedicated to Mary feel like a mystery to her?

13. Bausch ends his narrative about Mary with her lone ascent to the summit of Mt. Cameroon -- an incredibly arduous expedition that proves, in the end, disappointing, even though it means that she is the first woman to achieve the summit. How does this climb -- and the fact that she leaves only a small paper calling card as a record of her achievement -- fit in with the rest of Mary's story, and with the novel in general?

14. Likewise, what did you think of the way Lily's story ends. How do the final scenes tie together some of the novel's themes? What do you think Lily's future holds?

15. How do you think Bausch chose the title for his novel? Do you think it is fitting?

Author Bio

Richard Bausch is the author of 13 novels and 10 volumes of short stories. He is a recipient of the Rea Award for the Short Story, the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Lila Wallace?Reader?s Digest Writers? Award, the Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize for his novel PEACE. He is past chancellor of The Fellowship of Southern Writers, and his work is widely anthologized, including in *Pushcart Prize Stories*, *The O. Henry Awards*, *Best American Short Stories* and *New Stories from the South*. He is on the Writing Faculty of Chapman University in Orange, California.

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