



Wives & Lovers

By Richard Bausch
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Introduction

From Richard Bausch -- "one of the most expert and substantial of our writers" (*Boston Globe*) -- comes a collection of three short novels that delve into the world of *Wives & Lovers*.

They hadn't ever been a family that was very good at telling their feelings. In *Requisite Kindness*, the family matriarch Elena dies, bringing together her family and all the pain that haunts them. Her son Henry who "never felt any ease in the society of his own house, his own wife and children" must not only come to terms with his mother's death but also his own dark past with women and the demons he has handed off to his son Brian.

It's kind of scary that it's there, like a place you go to. Suicide. A woman's suicide shatters the lives of her family and affects those who didn't even know her in *Rare and Endangered Species*. As they all struggle to find meaning in her seemingly meaningless act, they will be forced to find that place within themselves where they can balance despair with hope while trying to make it to the other side of a tragedy.

I had come into an area of my life that was utterly uncharted and dark. And in *Spirits*, a young teacher arrives at a small southern university where he is about to learn that things are not as they seem. Whether it is the exalted faculty member who offers him his apartment, the local motel owner who enjoys mothering him, or the wife back home who is scheduled to join him, all will rattle what he believes to be true in the world ... and in himself.

Questions for Discussion:

Wives & Lovers

1. Consider the three titles in *Wives & Lovers* -- "Requisite Kindness," "Rare and Endangered Species," and "Spirits" -- and determine their meanings to their stories.
2. Beyond the relationships between couples, these stories are linked by other elements including relocation, infidelity, and death. Examine these threads and discuss how each affects the main characters.
3. Within the three stories, which couple or relationship do you find to be the most flawed?

"Requisite Kindness"

1. In "Requisite Kindness," the first half, entitled *After*, is told from the perspective of Brian, the son; and the second half, *Before*, is told from the perspective of Henry, the father. How does this format -- both the change in perspective and the chronological reversal -- enhance the overall story?
2. "She wasn't the kind of family member who made demands, yet one felt the force of her hopes like some exacting requirement" (page 8). Discuss the character of Elena and how she influences the other characters' lives, specifically those of Henry and Brian.
3. "When a relationship begins in and is soaked in dishonesty, the dishonesty seeps into everything else" (page 15). Analyze Brian and Tillie's relationship -- why it failed and whether or not the author offers hope for reconciliation.
4. "There isn't any bravery without fear. Fear is what the coward and the hero have in absolutely the same amount" (page 21). What does this statement say about the character of Henry?
5. By the end of the novel, do you think that you have an understanding as to why Henry is angry with his son Brian?

"Rare & Endangered Species"

1. Does foreshadowing exist regarding Andrea's death in the novel? If so, at what point?
2. "One person's refusal to go on living made others turn and look at their own lives" (page 98). How did Andrea's death affect the other characters -- her husband Harry, her children James and Maizie, Gehringer, Ridley, and Pamela.
3. Discuss the scene with the vultures and the cow. What does it contribute to the story?
4. "... all my married life I'd carried the feeling with me that the woman with whom I was spending my days lived her real life separate from me" (page 137). What does Harry's letter reveal about himself and his relationship with his wife?
5. Andrea and Harry's relationship weathered an affair but ended in suicide. Do you view their marriage as a failure?

"Spirits"

1. "You'd think somebody would've noticed something" (page 209). Do you believe Mrs. Sweeney never suspected anything about her husband's dark side or do you think, like many people, she uses denial as a way to preserve a moment in time as she wants to see it?
2. "Sweeney and Brooker occurred to me then as though they were, together, the opposing principle—a naked manifestation of the forces that would always be lurking in the darker corners of the spirit" (page 223). Discuss our narrator's fascination with both William Brooker and Mr. Sweeney.
3. Why does Maria Alvarez commit suicide after she learns of Brooker's separation?
4. "There was a thing in us both that moved us in each other's direction, that made us recognizable to each other. Whatever our complications, this obdurate fact remained" (page 223). How do you feel about the narrator's relationship with his wife, both at the beginning of the story and the end?

5. The author never gives us the name of our protagonist. Did you notice? If so, did it bother you? Why or why not?

About the Author

Richard Bausch is one of his generation's most celebrated fiction writers. He is the author of nine novels and five volumes of short stories. His work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Esquire*, and many other national magazines and has been featured/anthologized in numerous "best of" collections, including the O. Henry Awards and *Best American Short Stories*. He is the recipient of an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, a National Endowment for the Arts grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and many other prizes and honors. He teaches at George Mason University and is the coeditor of the esteemed *Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*.