

## Questions for Richard Bausch's "Design"

*Please note that "Design" is told in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person subjective point of view, meaning that while the narrator is "outside" the head of his central character, who is Father Russell, everything that is observed and thought in the story comes from Father Russell's consciousness. The only way the narrator could have more closely aligned his own consciousness with Russell's would have been to tell the story in the first person point of view—the "I" point of view. Bausch has elected not to do that, and for a reason. That's always a good question to ask of a work of fiction: Why has the author selected to tell the story from the point of view s/he has?*

1. We might say that Richard Bausch's greatest wisdom in the composition of "Design" lies in never coming out and stating in words what it is about Father Tarmigan that so "infuriates" and "appalls" and "bewilders" Father Russell. In electing not to tell the reader what is special about Tarmigan, Bausch effectively aligns our point of view with Russell's, so that we, too, find ourselves studying Tarmigan almost to the point of obsession. By the end of the story, we are as puzzled by Tarmigan's example as Russell is, Tarmigan's actions and words bearing a kind of parable-like significance—even though all the man has done during the course of our (but) acquaintance with him is rake his lawn, paint his church, and advise a couple in marital distress.

One thing we might do this coming Monday is look at the ways Bausch has revealed the special-ness of Tarmigan's character without, as I say, summarizing it in words. Bausch has clearly obeyed the old adage trotted out in every beginning Creative Writing class, "Show, don't tell." Before we meet, please review the story for those remarks and gestures of Tarmigan's that seem especially revelatory of his character. How has Bausch composed his scenes so that they reveal the mystery that is Tarmigan? This question has been included in our study materials so as to encourage us as a group to attend to what is actually IN the story, rather than what we may think or believe is in the story.

2. Every character in the story besides the 43 year old Father Russell is much older than him, and many of these characters are infirm or dying. You have Father Tarmigan, who is 72, and sickly—or, so it would appear. You have the elderly couple on the hospital gurney, the husband having just died of a heart attack. And you have the Aldenberries, the couple who, though married fifty years, are now seeking a divorce, the wife of which is nearly totally deaf.

Why has Bausch elected to surround Russell with people who are much older than him, many of whom are sick? How is this choice consistent with the message of the story?

3. To me, one of the most expressive moments in the story is when Tarmigan holds up his bandaged hand in the emergency room. As you may remember, Father Russell has come to the hospital to attend to the needs of one of his older parishioners. Once he arrives there, however, he is waylaid by a nurse who asks him to go to the emergency room to administer the sacrament of extreme unction to a man who is dying. En route, he briefly espies Tarmigan sitting on one of the chairs near the television, “his hand in a bandage, his white face sunk over the pages of a magazine.”

“Tarmigan looked up, then smiled, held up the bandaged hand.” (p. 14, *God: Stories*.)

As I said above, to me, this is one of the most expressive moments in the story—and yet I’m not quite sure what the moment is expressive of. We attend to it because Russell has attended to it: later that night, it will be the image of Tarmigan raising his hand--rather than the dead face of the man for whom he has performed the sacrament- that will prevent Russell from falling asleep. Then, towards the end of the story (p. 20), Bausch will again have Tarmigan raise his hand, as though to intensify the mystery generated by the gesture’s first appearance.

What do you feel this gesture means, both to Russell and to the story as a whole? Try not to think symbolically here, rather contextually, meaning, in a way that derives from the context of the story.

4. Why do you think the story bears the title, “Design”? How is this a story about design? And, who’s doing the designing?

### **Questions for Trevor’s “Autumn Sunshine”**

*Please note that “Autumn Sunshine” is told in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person subjective point of view, meaning that while the narrator is “outside” the head of his central character—Canon Moran—everything that is observed and thought in the story comes from Canon Moran’s consciousness.*

1. What if we said that there is something in Frances’ character that makes letting go—of anger, resentment, the wish to control—endurable? This quality in Frances even makes death endurable, and it even makes Frances’s death endurable. Do you agree with this observation? Why or why not?

2. Do you feel that Canon Moran has been changed, in a positive, life-giving way, by Deirdre’s (and Harold’s) visit? Or do you feel that he has not?

3. Why do you think Trevor has selected the phrase “Autumn Sunshine” for the title of his story? The particular autumn featured in the story offers a special kind

of light. What is the nature of that light? Do you feel that that special light serves somehow as a metaphor for the story as a whole?

4. This is an instructive question to ask of any good character story: How does the central character's (in this case, Canon Moran's) mind work? How do the operations of that mind keep Canon Moran from a deeper, more truthful experience of his life; or, how do they help him embrace his life? Study the text for the operations of Canon Moran's mind. How does Moran's consciousness bias the narrative? Refer to the text in your answer.

*Please note that I will focus on this question fairly extensively during our discussion, both with regards to Trevor's story and to Tobias Wolff's story. The proposition will be that a story tends to "think" as its central character "thinks"—a proposition to keep in mind as we go on reading short character fiction in the coming months.*

### **Questions for Tobias Wolff's "The Missing Person," composed by George Sieburg**

*Please note that "The Missing Person" is told in close 3<sup>rd</sup> person subjective point of view, meaning that while the narrator is outside the head of the story's central character—who is Father Leo—everything that is observed or thought in the story comes from Father Leo's consciousness.*

1) In the opening lines of the story, the narrator tells us that Father Leo always wanted to be a missionary in the arctic – a cold, desolate, and silent place. Contrast that location with the story's two major settings, the convent and Vegas. How do opposites work in the story: cold/cool versus hot, and noisy versus silent? Find those moments when the author consciously uses those words. (Look at Vegas not just as aural but also as visual. Notice all the signs and people, the noise of space and things, the cacophony of visual stimulus.)

1a) Sub-question: what is the significance of Sandra being sunburned?

1b) Sub-question: does Father Leo ever become that missionary?

2) On page 370 the narrator, using Father Leo's point of view, explains Father Leo's reaction to finding the old priest's papers: "He couldn't understand why the old priest had hated him. But the more he thought about it the less strange it seemed.... Vocation was a mystery, love was a mystery, and Father Leo supposed that hatred was a mystery." What other ideas or concepts are mysteries in the story? Does Father Leo still feel the same about these "mysteries" at the end of the story?

3) Contrast the concepts of coincidence/fate and choice. Notice that the

words "choice," "design," or "plan" are never used in the story. Why? How is their absence reconciled in the story, especially in Father Leo's final conversations with Jerry and with Sandra?

4) Who is/are the "Missing Person/s" in the story? Why/How is/are he/she/they missing? "To be missing" is intransitive: that is, it takes two to be missing - one to be missing and one to miss. So who in the story is doing the missing?

5) finally, two images really strike me, and I feel their meaning right next to me like a ghost, but I can't quite touch them. So I'm wondering: what is the symbolic significance (if any) of the following images from the story:  
a) page 370: "It was the first warm night of the year. The window was open. A moth fluttered against the screen."

b) page 394: "He thought of a coyote loping home with a rabbit dangling from its mouth, yellow eyes aglow."