



Hello to the Cannibals

By Richard Bausch
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Best known as a short story writer, American author Richard Bausch proves that he is indeed an accomplished novelist with this dazzling and intriguing account of two unusual women whose parallel lives intersect in unexpected ways. One of the women, Mary Kingsley, is the famous English explorer and writer who died in 1900 at the age of only 38, after having traveled through West Africa. Bausch's other heroine is a young woman called Lily Austin who lives in the United States in contemporary times. Although these two women can obviously never meet they seem to sense each other's existence, and Lily has had a fascination with Mary even since she was given a book about explorers for her fourteenth birthday.

Both Lily and Mary are unconventional women according to the standards set by the society into which they are born. After nursing her mother and brother for years, Mary decides to use her inheritance to become an explorer in Africa, far removed from her confining life in Cambridge. Lily sets herself apart from others because she is determined to be true to herself and her ideals. Despite being white, middle-

class, intelligent and financially comfortable thanks to the support of her parents, Lily leaves college without graduating, marries a man she has only recently met and brings up a child conceived in unusual circumstances.

While Mary keeps a diary in which she writes down her most private thoughts and feelings, as well as accounts of the people and experiences she encounters in Africa, Lily finds herself writing letters to Mary as she imagines her to be. Even though they are separated by time, distance and imagination Lily and Mary are clearly soul mates - the true friend each longed for. Eventually Lily, who has studied drama, writes a play about Mary, thus bringing together both her own story and Mary's.

Bausch has written an emotionally complex novel about the different ways we can be both explorers and observers of the societies we choose to immerse ourselves in. While Mary explores the physical unknown continent, Lily explores the terrain of her own heart. Both women struggle with the knowledge that they are outsiders and yet neither of them is prepared to sacrifice their own integrity and values for the sake of convention. Friendship is also an important theme in *Hello to the Cannibals* and Bausch states in his author note that he wanted in particular to write about "the affections we form for those who have gone before us".

1. The night of Rhonda's birthday party is a major pivotal event in Lily's life. Discuss the things that happened that night, the people she met and her first encounter with Mary Kingsley. How do these people and events shape the rest of Lily's life.
2. How do Lily's relationships with the men in her life compare with Mary's relationships with men? How important are their fathers to them?
3. Discuss Lily's "relationship" with Mary. Do the links between them seem too contrived? How is Lily helped by Mary? How does the thought that one day her diary may be read by someone who understands her comfort Mary?
4. What qualities do Lily and Mary have in common? How do they differ? Who did you prefer?
5. How important is family for both these women?
6. What effect does Buddy's death have on those who knew him?
7. While Lily's story is told in the past tense, Mary's story is told in the present tense. How does this affect the style and the tone of their stories? Which did you prefer and why?
8. What is the significance of the title of this novel?