Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 166

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Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

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PROJECT EDITOR

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- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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Contents

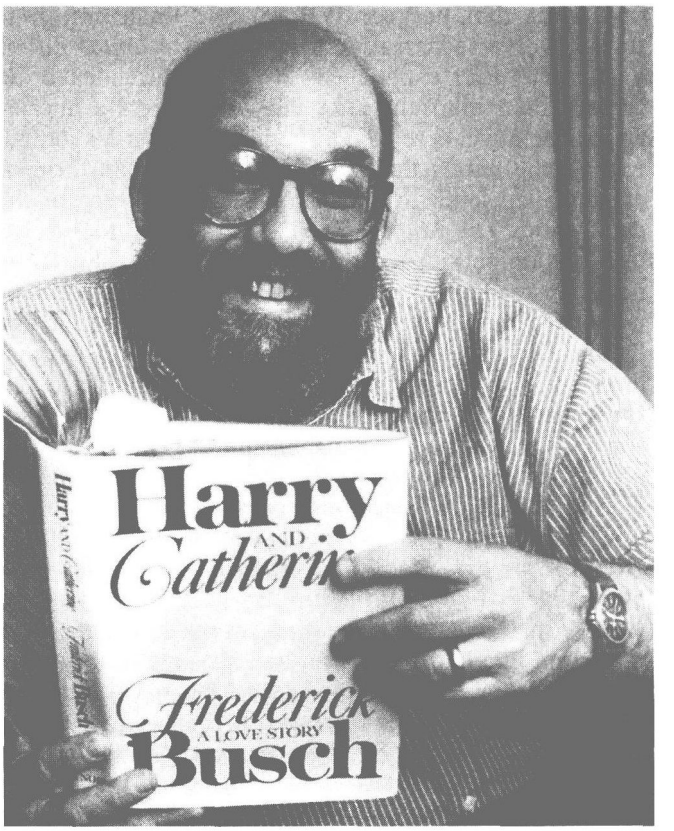
Frederick Busch
1941-

American novelist, short story writer, essayist, editor, and critic.

The following entry presents an overview of Busch's career through 2000. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC,* Volumes 7, 10, 18, and 47.

INTRODUCTION

Regarded as a skilled and insightful author, Busch is admired for his realistic fiction in which he experiments with different narrative voices to examine the private lives of his protagonists. In many of his novels and short story collections, including *Manual Labor* (1974) and *Harry and Catherine: A Love Story* (1990), Busch explores the strength of familial relationships and depicts the quiet heroism of characters who confront domestic catastrophes. While his works often examine such subjects as death and alienation, they also affirm Busch's faith in the nobility of human life.



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Busch was born in Brooklyn, New York, on August 1, 1941. After attending local schools, he entered Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where he earned a B.A. in English in 1962. After graduating, Busch became a Woodrow Wilson fellow at Columbia University in New York. At Columbia, he studied seventeenth-century English literature while pursuing a master's degree, but eventually left the university without completing the program. Between 1963 and 1965, Busch held a variety of jobs including working as a clerk in a market-research firm, writing and editing for a series of small magazines, and briefly teaching English at Baruch College in New York City. In 1966 Busch was hired to teach at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. While teaching at Colgate, Busch enrolled in the university's Ph.D. English program. Although he never finished his doctorate, Busch earned a M.A. in English in 1967, writing a thesis on the fiction of John Hawkes. Busch's first two novels have never been published, but his third effort, *I Wanted a Year without Fall* (1971), and his first collection of short stories, *Breathing Trouble and Other Stories* (1973), were published and both met with critical acclaim. Busch was awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1976, a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship in 1981, and an Ingram Merrill Foundation fellowship in 1982. In 1986 he won the National Jewish Book Award for Fiction for *Invisible Mending* (1984) and was honored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters for his body of work. In 1991 he was awarded the PEN/Malamud Award for "distinguished achievement in the short story." Busch has also been a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1995 for his short story collection *The Children in the Woods* (1994), and was a finalist for both the National Book Critics' Circle Award for Fiction in 1999 and the PEN/Faulkner Award in 2000 for his novel *The Night Inspector* (1999). Busch continues to teach at Colgate University as the Fairchild Professor of Literature while additionally serving as the director of the Living Writers program, a program that Busch founded.

MAJOR WORKS

Busch's literary career began in the 1970s with *I Wanted a Year without Fall,* a humorous contemporary adaptation of the *Beowulf* legend. *I Wanted a Year without Fall* was followed by the celebrated novels *Manual Labor, The Mutual Friend* (1978), and *Rounds* (1979). These works garnered Busch recognition as an author of novels that poignantly convey human emotions through diverse narrative viewpoints. *Manual Labor* evokes the grief experienced by a couple endeavoring to save their marriage after the wife suffers a miscarriage. The novel is related through the husband's journal entries, the wife's thoughts—presented in the form of an unmailed letter to her mother, and the voice of the dead child. *The Mutual Friend* departs from Busch's usual examination of contemporary relationships: the novel instead relates the story of the final years of author Charles Dickens from the perspective of George Dolby, Dickens's secretary. *Rounds* returns to familial concerns in its examination of pediatrician Eli Silver. Estranged from his wife following the death of their son, Silver suffers guilt and loneliness while trying to order his life through the discipline of his profession. During the 1970s, Busch also published several collections of short stories, including *Breathing Trouble and Other Stories, Domestic Particulars: A Family Chronicle* (1976), and *Hardwater Country: Stories* (1979). In *Domestic Particulars,* several members of an American family recount their ancestry and history from 1919 to 1976. The strained relationships within the family and their encounters with real and imagined crises are tempered by their enduring love for one another.

Busch's writing in the 1980s continued to depict domestic situations. *Take This Man* (1981) follows isolated events in the lives of Tony Prioleau, his lover Ellen Larue Spencer, and their illegitimate son Gus. Alternately comic and sad, the novel generates interest by contrasting the insecurities and hopes of the protagonists. *Invisible Mending* reminded some critics of the works of authors Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth in its depiction of a Jewish protagonist who struggles to come to terms with the Holocaust and its relationship to his heritage. In *Sometimes I Live in the Country* (1986) Busch explores marital discord and racial prejudice from the viewpoint of a suicidal urban adolescent who is removed to a rural community. Busch again departed from examining human relationships with *When People Publish: Essays on Writers and Writing* (1986). In this collection of essays, he shares his personal reflections on writing and examines the works of an assortment of his favorite authors. *Absent Friends* (1989) is a collection of short stories in which the common theme revolves around the characters' attempts to deal with love, loss, joy, and guilt—ideas Busch also treats in the novel *War Babies* (1989).

Harry and Catherine: A Love Story continues the on-again, off-again relationship of Harry and Catherine, first glimpsed in "The Trouble with Being Food," a short story in *Domestic Particulars,* and who appear eight years later in the short story "The News" in *Too Late American Boyhood Blues* (1984). The novel follows the struggles of a fiercely independent woman and an almost too compassionate man who try, for the third time, to create a life together. Busch's next novel, *Closing Arguments* (1991), centers on Mark Brennan, a former Vietnam POW who is still haunted by the experiences he faced during the war. Now a lawyer, Brennan faces a modern world that seems to parallel his past in its violence and depravity while he searches for a simpler and more peaceful life. In *Long Way from Home* (1993), a mother abandons her husband and son to search for her birth mother in an attempt to come to grips with her past. The husband in turn abandons the child to search for his wife. The story is told from the son's point of view, exploring loneliness, abandonment, and a family's often stunted attempts at building relationships. Busch's disheartening view of the deterioration of relationships is central to the short stories in *The Children in the Woods* and *Don't Tell Anyone* (2000) as well as the novel *Girls* (1997). *Girls* is a continuation of the short story "Ralph the Duck," which first appeared in *Absent Friends.* Jack, a college security guard, is asked to help solve the disappearance of a local teenage girl. He must cope with the loss of his own child—as described in "Ralph the Duck"—and come to terms with the widening chasm between his wife and himself, all while searching for the missing girl. With *The Night Inspector,* Busch returns to the genre of historical fiction. The novel is narrated by William Bartholomew, a Civil War veteran who is torn apart by the past both emotionally and physically. Bartholomew is forced to wear a mask after losing half of his face in the war. In an attempt to right various wrongs, Bartholomew tries to liberate a ship full of children destined for slavery. He enlists the help of a customs inspector known only as "M," who is the author of a novel subtitled "The Whale." *The Night Inspector* has been interpreted by some critics as a commentary on how novelist Herman Melville felt about the state of America after the Civil War.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Reception to Busch's writing has been generally positive, with many critics lauding his novels and short fiction for their precise use of language and uncluttered prose style. Reviewers have also praised Busch's compassionate characterizations and realistic use of dialogue, with critics such as Donald J. Greiner noting that Busch's works contain ". . . some of the most thoughtful dialogue written today." Greiner has ad-

ditionally praised the unique perspective that Busch brings to his modern love stories, arguing that "Busch is interested not in the cliché of the star-crossed lover but in the little tensions of the quotidian, the apparently insignificant slips and slides of the daily routine that eventually cause trouble in the kitchen, heartache in bed." However, some reviewers have criticized Busch's attempts to expand characters and narratives from his short story collections into full-length novels, most notably in *Harry and Catherine* and *Girls*. Antonya Nelson has commented that *Girls* "does not achieve the same high level of synthesis" as "Ralph the Duck," which she contends is a "short-story masterpiece." Scholars have also commended Busch's works of historical fiction, complimenting the detailed descriptions of nineteenth-century America and England in *The Mutual Friend* and *The Night Inspector.*

PRINCIPAL WORKS

I Wanted a Year without Fall (novel) 1971
Breathing Trouble and Other Stories (short stories) 1973
Hawkes: A Guide to His Fictions (nonfiction) 1973
Manual Labor (novel) 1974
Domestic Particulars: A Family Chronicle (short stories) 1976
The Mutual Friend (novel) 1978
Hardwater Country: Stories (short stories) 1979
Rounds (novel) 1979
Take This Man (novel) 1981
Invisible Mending (novel) 1984
Too Late American Boyhood Blues: Ten Stories (short stories) 1984
Sometimes I Live in the Country (novel) 1986
When People Publish: Essays on Writers and Writing (essays) 1986
Absent Friends (short stories) 1989
War Babies (novel) 1989
Harry and Catherine: A Love Story (novel) 1990
Closing Arguments (novel) 1991
Long Way from Home (novel) 1993
The Children in the Woods: New and Selected Stories (short stories) 1994
Girls: A Novel (novel) 1997
A Dangerous Profession: A Book about the Writing Life (essays) 1998
Letters to a Fiction Writer [editor] (letters) 1999
The Night Inspector (novel) 1999
Don't Tell Anyone (short stories) 2000

CRITICISM

Frederick Busch and Miriam Berkley (interview date 30 March 1984)

SOURCE: Busch, Frederick, and Miriam Berkley. "*PW* Interviews: Frederick Busch." *Publishers Weekly* 225, no. 13 (30 March 1984): 58-9.

[*In the following interview, Busch discusses his works, analyzes his attachment to his characters, and shares insights on his life and his approach to writing.*]

Frederick Busch writes fiction in a barn built for sheep in the small upstate New York town of Sherburne. Visible in the distance is Cooperstown, with the Baseball Hall of Fame he loves. A few hundred yards from his study is the renovated farmhouse he shares with his wife, Judy, and their two sons; the kitchen is toasty from a wood-burning stove. It's clear, crisp and cold outside on the late January day on which we speak with Busch, a man of moderate height and immodest heft, about his new novel, ***Invisible Mending,*** out this month from Godine (*PW* Fiction Forecasts, Feb. 3).

At the age of 42, Fred Busch, with five previously published novels and three collections of stories—a fourth is due this summer—has an enviable reputation for the sensitivity he brings to his characters, a striking ability to assume a wide range of fictional personas, and elegant prose. ***Invisible Mending,*** which shares the virtues of its predecessors, also charts what is for Busch hitherto unexplored territory: his Jewishness. As it begins, Zimmer, a Jew separated from his non-Jewish wife and their young son, hears the voice of an old girlfriend, Rhona Glinsky, calling to him on a Manhattan street. He flashes back on their relationship—especially their relentless pursuit of a supposed Nazi war criminal.

Why this subject now? we ask Busch. "I don't know," he admits. "I was not raised in any particularly Jewish way, though I had the awareness I was Jewish. It was hard to grow up in the '40s and '50s and '60s and *not* know you were a Jew; periodically, people might beat you up to remind you. I guess when people hit their 40s they think about things they've not thought about before. I think it was the over-whelming mass of books and movies about the Holocaust—one should legitimately never tire of them, and I don't mean to say I was tired of them, I was *burdened* by them. I felt there was a worship of death going on in the culture and that there was an intellectual interest and a sort of worshipful zeal in talking about dead Jews in ways that disturbed me. I wanted to see people getting on with being Jewish without worshipping death, even though they as Jews had been enslaved by death, thanks to the Nazis.

"I wrote the book in hopes that I could puzzle a way through to seeing love become stronger than history. Now that is a horrible contest for a Jew; a Jew is supposed to worship history, including the history of the murdering of the six million. So maybe I'm treacherous in this. I don't mean to be—I mean the book very respectfully, and I don't mean to tell people how to think, I don't even mean to tell *me* how to think, and I don't know what to think. But I suppose I was hoping for something as sappy and direct as the healing powers of love that would enable us to, if not defeat history, at least come to terms with it."

Busch has been writing fiction for 20 years, after giving up poetry for short stories. ("A little star poet in college," he realized he was "a bad poet because I didn't know where to end the lines on the right hand side, and found that if I didn't end the lines on purpose but just let them end arbitrarily and kept on talking, I had stories.") After graduating from Muhlenberg College, he was a Woodrow Wilson fellow at Columbia, ostensibly studying 17th century English poetry. Most of the time, however, he cut classes, spent his fellowship money on beer and paperback books—the works of Malamud, Saroyan, Vance Bourjaily and the English author Frank Tuohy—and wrote stories. When his funds ran out and Columbia refused him more without his commitment toward a Ph.D., he left.

He married Judy, whom he had met at Muhlenberg, and the two lived in Greenwich Village and worked at a variety of jobs which included, for Busch, doing market research, writing for uninspired magazines and teaching English at Baruch College. At night, he sat in the bathroom of their one-room apartment, his typewriter on the toilet seat, himself on the edge of the bathtub, and wrote. During that period, he "got fired a good deal," because he was "cranky and selfish, confident all the while that it was a matter of minutes before people recognized that Ernest Hemingway was working on 42nd Street in this office building in his new incarnation as me. So I always felt I was too good for what I was doing, which is a terrible way to be."

Impressed by Colgate on a 1966 visit to his brother, an undergraduate there, he thought college teaching would be an improvement over the work at hand; he's been at Colgate ever since. Early on, he began to publish stories in *Transatlantic Review, Quarterly Review of Literature* and *New American Review.* His first novel, written at the age of 22, "was a very bad thing," and it went unpublished, as did his second. The title of that work, *Coldly by the Hand,* came from a poem by Robert Nye, who lived in London and to whom he'd written for permission. The two men became friends long distance, and when Busch sent Nye his third novel, ***I Wanted a Year without Fall,*** Nye showed it to his publisher, Marion Boyars, who liked it. Boyars published ***Breathing Trouble,*** a book of short stories, in 1974, the year that New Directions in the U.S. published his novel ***Manual Labor.*** Two years later came his second American publication, ***Domestic Particulars,*** a cycle of stories about a single family.

The Mutual Friend, Busch's next novel, was a result of his teaching. In London with a group of Colgate students for a semester's off-campus study, he was searching for a subject when a friend suggested Dickens. Busch, no Dickens fan then, resisted, but he read him again, with growing excitement, and thought, "The man's a genius." Then he read a biography of Dickens and wondered, "How could anyone have lived with this man? So I thought I would try to answer that question." He started to write a play about Dickens, but "within a page it turned into a novel."

New Directions' James Laughlin wanted to publish ***The Mutual Friend,*** but told Busch that if he could get more money from "an uptown publisher," he was to take it "with his blessing." Harper & Row's Fran McCullough offered five times the advance Laughlin did, and Busch switched publishers. When Harper & Row pronounced his next book, ***Hardwater Country,*** "unsuitable," he went to Knopf. Then, for reasons he doesn't go into, he moved again, to Farrar, Straus, for the next two novels: ***Rounds*** (1979) and ***Take This Man*** (1981), before finally settling (he hopes) with David R. Godine, whose "witty and incredibly hard-working" publicity director, David Allender, had been trying to recruit him for several years.

Busch acknowledges a major debt to Bill Goodman, his editor at Godine, for the book's present state. "Rhona Glinsky is bewitching and infuriating and funny, and she interests me. Bill agreed with me that she was wonderful, but he thought that Zimmer's wife, Lillian, was a little pallid, couldn't compete with Rhona, and if the book was to work, she would have to compete with Rhona, and that was hard to do. He talked me round into adding many, many pages about Lillian, until—I think it was his intention to make me find out who she really was that she could take a man away from a Rhona Glinsky, and I did—I found out she's wonderful. It was a wonderful tug-of-war, I think, that he led me to see."

Indeed, redemption by love is not absent from Busch's earlier books, in particular, ***Take This Man.*** "Boy, that was a hard book to write! It ended up with the burial by a boy and his mother of her husband and his father, and it killed me to write the end. I was horribly shaken by it. But I felt that that was a novel about a couple who had been together over so many years, driven together by circumstances and staying together because of what had begun as romantic love and ended finally as profound commitment and respect."

It's not unusual for Busch to find himself moved by his own characters, but this doesn't happen while he's

creating them. "When I write, I'm the coldest-hearted bastard in the world. I make children sick, I ruin men's lives, I bully women, and I do it with an absolutely cold heart. When I write it, I don't believe it, I'm living it. I'm an actor speaking his lines except I'm also writing his lines, and I'm thinking . . . I don't know what I'm thinking, I don't think when I write, I just write. But I suspect what I'm trying to do is be as cunning as possible. Then, when I'm revising it, it shatters me, it breaks me. Then I cry."

Often Busch doesn't want to let go of his characters. ***Manual Labor,*** he says, "started out as a long story, and six months after I had written it I realized I had kept thinking about the characters and would have to find out what became of them. So I wrote the rest of it to find out; it grew 200 pages." Still not content, he wrote ***Rounds*** to follow the fortunes of some of them, and his latest novel, ***Sometimes I Live in the Country,*** as yet unpublished, in response to the woman Lizzie Dean, in ***Rounds.***

Very recently, impressed by a TV production of *King Lear,* with its twin subjects of family life and government, Busch has found himself "attracted to the idea of attempting a novel about the larger world of public events and the smaller, common world of daily living." What's on his mind is a book dealing with, and set during, the Korean War. Already into the research, he's "even had wild thoughts" of visiting Korea. But he adds, "I hope I don't follow through—I'd much rather go to Paris!"

Writing short stories has helped him as a novelist, Busch feels, and he invokes Hemingway, who wrote short stories as a young man while working up the energy to write a novel, just as one does short sprints before running longer distances. "If you have real talent—which means that you are enough in love with the world to describe it and respond to it—then the most crucial element in your life is energy. I believe that writing is manual labor"—he points to the depression made by his thumb on the space bar of his typewriter—"but also takes psychological energy." In addition, "short stories have to be the most precise in language and form, and if you learn your lessons from them well, you can write novels with a certain justness and delicacy and aptness of language."

Before beginning to write, Busch does careful research. For ***The Mutual Friend*** he returned to London for a week to study a site important to Dickens. A central character in ***Rounds*** is Eli Silver, a pediatrician, who is based on a real-life doctor friend. To prepare for this book, Busch went on actual hospital rounds and joined Silver's prototype in his office practice for many weeks. In addition, he studied *Nelson's Pediatrics Handbook, Gray's Anatomy* and a wealth of pharmaceutical literature. He also watches and listens to workmen and tradesmen of all kinds. "I always hang around when these men come and work," says Busch. "First of all, there's so much I don't know and need to know. Also, they're smart and they do stuff that matters. I really admire that. I'm not being romantic—they do things with their hands that produce useful results and make your life happier."

Fred Busch is pleased when he can, in his writing, "expunge Busch. I get very tired of his prose, I roll around in it all the time." For this reason he's fond of the Dickens book, and even more so of ***Sometimes I Live in the Country,*** about a 13-year-old boy. "I've cut myself out of the book totally, and I've totally served that boy, and I'm very proud of myself."

That people remark on the harmony between the voice of a character and the time and place in which he or she belongs is to Busch somewhat remarkable, and, despite his gratitude for appreciation, worrisome. "That's our job, isn't it? My mission is to satisfy this insane need to write. But what I hope the books do, once I have satisfied my own itches and cravings, is tell wonderful stories about people who matter to readers, stories that have significance and that are useful and fun. I don't know what there is to write about if you can't write about women and children. I happen to love a number of women and children, and so I write about them perhaps with a lot of enthusiasm. But that's what you're supposed to do."

Fatherhood, says Busch, which "has profoundly, radically, permanently changed me, I hope for the better," has been important both for his subject matter—these same women and children—and for the way in which he looks at the world. "Obviously, I'm so impressed with it, I keep on writing about it. I love being a father, I love the boys I'm father to. When you have children, you are offering the world a hostage, as Hemingway said. You're so much more vulnerable to the world as a parent, just as when you become married you're that much more vulnerable. And you become more aware of it, you listen to it, you can't ignore it. As a writer, you have to pay homage to it, you write about the dirt and the earth and the stones and the water, and you have to get it right—it's more than you. That's what happens! Less and less of yourself matters, because there's more and more of *it* and them."

William H. Pritchard (review date winter 1987)

SOURCE: Pritchard, William H. Review of *Sometimes I Live in the Country,* by Frederick Busch. *Hudson Review* 39, no. 4 (winter 1987): 646-47.

[*In the following excerpt, Pritchard presents a primarily favorable assessment of Busch's* Sometimes I Live in the Country.]

Mr. Busch is a veteran whose book [***Sometimes I Live in the Country***] (the eleventh to his credit) takes as its familiar stomping ground the unmemorable patch of run-down upstate New York farm country north of Binghamton, south of Utica, dotted by towns with names like Sherburne, Poolville, Hubbardsville. This area, filled with marginal houses ("shitboxes" the narrator calls them here) and people ("corn-heads" is the term) is the country to which the hero, a four-teen-year-old named Petey, and his father, an ex-detective turned school administrator, have migrated from Brooklyn. Petey's parents are divorced, his mother disappeared, and the lad is in such dangerous shape that he plays Russian roulette with his father's revolver. The novel traces Petey's emergence from self-destruction into a recognition and even acceptance of the world outside his head. It is told in a prose verging on the flat and toneless, often effective as it renders the dismal:

> There was a horrible house made of thin boards nailed in every direction. It was green-brown and it looked like the air blew through it. A school bus painted blue was in the side yard. Dogs ran next to the car and barked. A little baby in a shirt and no pants stood on the lawn and watched. The place looked like everyone else who used to live there was dead.

Sometimes it gets too flat, too many sentences beginning with "He," but Busch has a firmly sympathetic way with his young hero that manages to make something touching of the nervous relationship between father and son, or between Petey and "Miz Bean," the sort of understanding schoolteacher everyone wants to encounter. The good and bad guys are very apparent—a racist Ku-Kluxer of a clergyman and two evil hunters provide the most notable of heavies—and the good does win out in a storybook finish. But it is such a friendly, intelligent, modest book that a triumph like that feels appropriate.

John Blades (review date 8 February 1987)

SOURCE: Blades, John. "Author Revels in the Joys and Dangers of Writing." *Chicago Tribune Books* (8 February 1987): 3.

[*In the following review, Blades praises Busch's essays in* When People Publish, *giving particular commendation to the selections that are introspective.*]

Taking his cue from Hemingway, Frederick Busch calls serious writing a "dangerous" practice, going on to warn: "It doesn't keep the darkness out. Nothing so safe: it lets the darkness *in*." By that definition, Busch himself is a dangerous man, a prince of darkness, and anyone with delusions about writing as a reasonably safe and sane occupation had best avoid his books, in particular his newest, ***When People Publish: Essays on Writers and Writing.***

With writing manuals a dollar a dozen in our inflationary era, Busch's book of essays—autobiographical, critical, inspirational—is a genuine rarity as well as a paradox. Busch is no false messiah, promising eternal rewards for those who follow his advice on how to write. He has little formal advice to offer; nor does he pretend to know how to teach others how to write. If anything, he's ruthlessly honest about the occupational hazards of writing, especially fiction writing, which could be what he calls, in another context, **"The Language of Starvation."**

And yet, while it is often dark and brooding, Busch's book is also an illuminating work, casting an inner light on the act of writing, telling how it feels to be a "writer obsessed, a wandering voice in search of a listening ear. . . . A voice that must tell its story." This he does in a voice that is highly opinionated, lyric and idiosyncratic, whether he's sharing his personal tribulations or discussing writers he reveres, with Hemingway, Melville, Dickens, Mailer, Arthur Conan Doyle, Reynolds Price and John Hawkes at the head of his list.

At this point, you may ask: Who is Frederick Busch? It's a fair question. Busch does have credentials as a teacher: He's an English professor at Colgate University; more to the point, he is the author of almost a dozen works of fiction, short story collections and novels, the latest of which—***Sometimes I Live in the Country***—was published last May. Despite high praise from most quarters, Busch has remained, in his own words, "New York's leading upstate obscurantist," a writer who has never enjoyed "the rank smell of small fashion."

Even though low sales have qualified him to talk about the downbeat side of being an author, as he so frequently does, Busch cannot help but be uplifting, beginning with his preface, in which he describes how, as a Brooklyn teenager in 1958, he purchased his first "dirty" book: Joyce's *Ulysses*. In that same vein, the best pieces in this ***When People Publish*** are autobiographical. **"In the Ossuary,"** which opens the book, is made up of lively free associations on libraries; the literary-academic-commercial complex that "endangers . . . venturesome books"; how [or how not] to weed books from overloaded shelves, and other literary and domestic matters. And the final essay, **"The Floating Christmas Tree,"** is a joyous recollection of the "real poverty [and] heartbreak" in his struggle to find a voice, as well as a market for his work.

In his extended discussions of other writers, such as Dickens, Conan Doyle and Leslie Epstein, Busch is lively and instructive but not nearly so provocative or so engaging as he is in his more personal chapters. And because several of these critical pieces were written as introductions to books by the authors under consideration, they somehow seem out of context here.