

Baker Towers
A Novel
by Jennifer Haigh

About this Book

One of the literary world's rising stars, Jennifer Haigh earned coast-to-coast raves and the PEN/Hemingway Award for her debut, *Mrs. Kimble*. In her second novel, Haigh not only meets but surpasses the expectations established by her first book. **Baker Towers** traces the lives of three generations in a community that tenderly echoes the American experience. A family album peopled with vivid characters, this is the story of an America long past, a haunting meditation on the passage of time.

Polish immigrant Stanley Novak worked the night shift in the coal mines of western Pennsylvania, in close-knit Bakerton, a town named for its mines. When he dies suddenly, his widow, Rose, is left to raise their five children. The oldest son, George, becomes a soldier in World War II. Their daughter Joyce will join the military as well, hoping the Air Force can give her opportunities that working-class Bakerton could not. Her sister Dorothy takes a job in Washington, D.C., where her fragile beauty and romantic ideals make her dangerously vulnerable. The two youngest children grow up without a father while seeking their places in a rapidly changing world. But at each turning point in love or fortune or work, the siblings can't forget where they come from. Each, in his own way, feels the inexorable pull of home.

- Evoking a long-lost time and place with powerful precision, **Baker Towers** follows the Novak family through three decades of sweeping change. You'll not soon forget their story.

Discussion Questions

1. Do the opening paragraphs depict Bakerton as an oppressive community or a utopia, or a combination of the two? Viewing the town itself as a character, how would you describe its biography?
2. Discuss the social distinctions embodied in the Novak family. What roles did society prescribe for Rose and Stanley, based on gender and class? Did their children lead more fulfilling lives than their parents?
3. Do you attribute the differences between the siblings to temperament or circumstance? How was each one affected by Stanley's death?
4. How would you characterize the author's narrative style? What is the effect of her choices regarding scenery, storyline, and other aspects of the novel's architecture?
5. Before meeting Rose, Antonio Bernardi had never seen an Italian wife on Polish Hill. In what ways has the American immigrant experience, and the character of immigrant communities, changed over the past century?
6. George's parents named him after George Washington rather than calling him

the story opens, Lucy is two months old; by the end, she is a grown woman. It's important to me that the reader recognizes the child in the adult, that the character "turns out" in a way that seems organic and true.

Q: The novel is packed with details that re-create a vanished world. What were some of your best research sources?

JH: I do my best research by talking to people. These conversations yield more than simple facts; they give me a feel for how people talk, what they remember, which events in their lives hold the greatest significance for them. Beyond that, I spend a lot of time looking at old newspapers and magazines -- not just the headlines, but the advertisements. I care what people were wearing, what kinds of cars they drove, what groceries cost, what was playing on the radio. Some of this information finds its way onto the page, but most of it doesn't. It's my way of creating a world in my imagination, of making it real and vivid for myself.

Q: How did the experience of writing this novel compare to that of your debut? What is life like now, as a full-time writer?

JH: When I was writing **Baker Towers**, I felt a real sense of obligation to the region and the people who live there. It's a part of the world that doesn't get written about very often, and it was tremendously important to me that I do it justice, that I get it right. I'd been thinking about this book for many years, before I even wrote **Mrs. Kimble**; but I wasn't ready to tackle it. I think I sensed that I didn't yet have the skills to write it.

Writing full time is monotonous and lonely, but it works for me. When I'm deep into a novel, the characters are much more real to me than anybody in my own life, and that's necessary for me as a writer. Years ago, when I was writing mostly short stories, I could get by writing in the evenings or on weekends; but when I'm working on a novel, I really benefit from being able to work in long stretches. I write at home, in a quiet room with the curtains drawn. It sounds boring, and it is; but I can't write unless the world in my head is more vivid than my surroundings are. I'm amazed by writers who can compose on airplanes or in coffee shops. Writing is hard for me, and it only works in a place where nothing can distract me.

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5. Before meeting Rose, Antonio Bernardi had never seen an Italian wife on Polish Hill. In what ways has the American immigrant experience, and the character of immigrant communities, changed over the past century?
6. George's parents named him after George Washington rather than calling him Stanley Novak, Jr. They wanted to emphasize the American, not Polish, aspect of his identity. What freedoms and restrictions are illustrated by George's marriage, and his wistful love of Ev? What enables his son to embrace Bakerton?
7. What keeps Dorothy in Washington, D.C., in a life defined by repetitiveness and sterility for so many years? How does her definition of morality shift throughout the novel? What does her perception of the world reveal about her perception of herself?
8. Joyce's intellectual drive is accompanied by a strong dose of practicality. Do you view her as the family's savior or as a wet blanket? Why do so many of her efforts go unappreciated?
9. Is Sandy the antithesis of George, or a reflection of him? Does either brother remind you of Stanley?
10. What does Lucy convey about the nature of hunger, and the nature of beauty? What is the significance of her eventual role as healer?
11. The tragic mine disaster shapes the novel's conclusion, leading to the image of Amish settlers arriving in Saxon County. What dies along with Eugene Stusick and his co-workers? What allows something new to be reborn in this community?
12. Who are the novel's most prosperous characters? How do you define prosperity in your own life? What family legacies have shaped your dreams?
13. **Mrs. Kimble** also conveyed a theme of illusion versus reality. Compare the ways in which that theme plays out in both novels.

Critical Praise

"An elegant, elegiac multigenerational saga... Almost mythic in its ambition, somewhere between Oates and Updike country, and thoroughly satisfying."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"Haigh creates a real sense of a community and brings her mining town to life through a large cast of minor characters... **Baker Towers** is a novel possessing a rare, quiet power to evoke a time long past and the character of the people who lived then."

—*Booklist* (starred review)

"[Haigh] writes convincingly of family and small town relations, as well as of the intractable frustrations of American poverty."

—*Publishers Weekly*

Reading Group Guide

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Baker Towers

A Novel
by Jennifer Haigh

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About This Book

One of the literary world's rising stars, Jennifer Haigh earned coast-to-coast raves and the PEN/Hemingway Award for her debut, *Mrs. Kimble*. In her second novel, Haigh not only meets but surpasses the expectations established by her first book. **Baker Towers** traces the lives of three generations in a community that tenderly echoes the American experience. A family album peopled with vivid characters, this is the story of an America long past, a haunting meditation on the passage of time.

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Evoking a long-lost time and place with powerful precision, **Baker Towers** follows the Novak family through three decades of sweeping change. You'll not soon forget their story.

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Discussion Questions



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Jennifer Haigh

1968-

Also known as: Jennifer Haigh

Entry updated: 11/30/2005

Birth Place: Pennsylvania, United States

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Personal Information: Born 1968, in PA. **Education:** Dickinson College, graduated, 1990; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 2002. **Addresses:** Home: Hull, MA. Agent: Dorian Karchmar, Lowenstein-Yost Associates, 121 W. 27th St., Ste. 601, New York, NY 10001.

Occupation: Writer, editor

Career: Writer. Worked as an editor at *Self* magazine; also taught yoga.

Awards: Fulbright teaching fellowship; James A. Michener fellowship, 2002; Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, distinguished first book of fiction, 2004, for *Mrs. Kimble*.

WRITINGS:

- *Mrs. Kimble* (novel), William Morrow (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Baker Towers* (novel), William Morrow (New York, NY), 2005.

Contributor to periodicals, including articles and short stories to *Good Housekeeping*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Idaho Review*, *Global City Review*, *Men's Health*, and *Cosmopolitan*.

"Sidelights"

Jennifer Haigh's debut novel, *Mrs. Kimble*, is actually about the lives of three Mrs. Kimbles, all of whom at some point in time are married to "serial husband" Ken Kimble. Karma Sawka reviewed the novel for *Mostly Fiction*, saying that "each of the women that Ken Kimble develops relationships with has such human needs--love, acceptance, companionship--and he is so charming. The sad ways in which he deceives them are rendered with compassion and realism by Ms. Haigh. I felt for these women, whose lives were so altered by someone they

believe truly loved them, but someone the reader knows will betray each of them as the story unfolds."

On the *Baker Books* Web site, Haigh said that the three women "aren't victims. Ken Kimble isn't some kind of sociopath. He is, in fact, a very ordinary man; he simply takes what is given to him." Haigh called her novel "a meditation on marriage: why women hunger for it, what we're willing to sacrifice in order to have it."

The story opens with first-wife Birdie Bell, already abandoned, in a deep depression and succumbing to alcoholism. In the early 1960s, Birdie dropped out of Bible college to marry Ken, the choir director, fourteen years her senior. Ken was fired and the couple moved to Virginia, where he had been offered another job. After eight years of marriage, he left Birdie and their two children, Charlie and Jody, for another young student, Moira Snell. Birdie, who doesn't drive and has spent all of her married life at home, is unable to cope, and while she finds relief in a wine bottle, her children survive on peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches.

Ken and Moira go to Florida, where he meets her parents, who are his age, and their friend, Joan, a never-married Jewish New York journalist and a breast-cancer survivor who is living at the estate of her recently deceased father. Joan invites Ken to stay at her place, and seeing an opportunity, Ken lies to her, telling her that his mother was Jewish, and he is soon married to Joan and working in the family real estate business.

Ten years later, Ken is a wealthy widower when he meets Dinah, a Washington, DC, chef who had been his children's babysitter years ago in Richmond. Dinah's face is disfigured by a large birthmark that Ken, with all his resources, is able to have removed, and the now gray-haired businessman marries the beautiful young blond, who then abandons her own career, and they have a son. After fifteen years of marriage, Dinah begins to realize who her husband really is when his business dealings come into question.

Curled Up with a Good Book contributor Stephanie Perry commented that Haigh's writing "is solid and meaty, nicely portraying (though not explaining) the conflicting emotions that plague the three Mrs. Kimbles. The dialogue is convincing and natural, particularly that of Charlie, who learns to be the man of the house at a young age, and never sheds his resentment at being forced into the role by his father's absence. Although logic dictates that at least two of the three marriages don't last, the storytelling is nuanced and rich enough to keep us in suspense, waiting each time for the other marital shoe to drop."

A *Kirkus Reviews* writer remarked that Haigh's "measured prose and care for detail show a promising talent." Phoebe Kate Foster reviewed the novel for *Pop Matters*, writing that "on the surface, it might be easily dismissed as an all-too-familiar cautionary account of what happens when women depend too much on men to validate them and use them to fill in the blanks in their psyches much as one fills in empty spaces in a day planner. The book does work, to some extent, at this level. ... But there is a great deal more going on here than a refresher course in Feminist Principles 101. Haigh's deft hand at sculpting her female characters leaves no room for easy stereotypes and tidily glib plot summaries. Like a surgeon, she cuts to the bone of what makes love between two people such an elusive, baffling, frustrating, contradictory, confounding sort of thing."

Baker Towers is the story of a family rooted in the coal country of western Pennsylvania. In the mining town of Bakerton, the widow Rose Novak raises her son and four daughters in poverty in the years following World War II. Her son manages to escape Bakerton for the supposedly better city life of Philadelphia, two daughters leave briefly but return, and at least one daughter never leaves, tied to the community by the bonds of family and friends. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor called *Baker Towers* "almost mythic in its ambition ... and thoroughly satisfying." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer observed that, in *Baker Towers*, Haigh continues to focus on "the hardships of women's lives" and "writes convincingly of family and smalltown relations."

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Publishers Weekly, Nov 29, 2004 v251 i48 p13(1)

Coal miner's granddaughter: fueled by bookseller enthusiasm, Jennifer Haigh stakes a claim for a major breakout. (book news) Danford, Natalie.

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What do booksellers want? This winter, they want Jennifer Haigh reading in their stores. Due to bookseller demand, the tour for her new novel, *Baker Towers*, has grown from seven cities to close to 40, and will have Massachusetts resident Haigh criss-crossing the country from January through April.

Haigh's debut novel, *Mrs. Kimble* (Morrow, 2003; HarperPerennial, Jan. 2004), was no slouch. It was the #1 Book Sense pick for March/April 2003 and was included in the Borders Original Voices program. Nielsen BookScan, which is generally considered to represent approximately 70% of books sold, shows sales to date of 18,000 hardcovers and 30,000 paperbacks. (Morrow reports sales of 50,000 hardcovers and 60,000 paperbacks.) The title went on to win the PEN/Hemingway Award, and most critics were positive.

But with her follow-up, *Baker Towers* (Morrow, on sale Jan. 4; unabridged audio CD from HarperAudio), Haigh appears poised for a bigger breakout. Word of mouth about the book has traveled fast among booksellers, helped by Haigh's appearances at BEA, NCIBA, NEBA and SEBA, which prompted a return to press for the advance reader's edition, bringing the total in print to 10,000 copies. The hardcover, which will be the #1 Book Sense pick for January and Anna Quindlen's judge's pick for the Book-of-the-Month Club in March, has an announced first print of 100,000 copies.

While *Mrs. Kimble* had an intriguing premise--it explored the lives of three women who had married the same man--*Baker Towers* has a wider scope and richer historical setting. It recounts events in the lives of five siblings in a coal-mining town in Pennsylvania in the years after World War II. A starred review in *Kirkus* compared Haigh to Joyce Carol Oates and John Updike, while *PW's* review noted, "Haigh's prose never soars, but she writes convincingly of family and small-town relations, as well as the intractable frustrations of American poverty." There's also some feature potential in Haigh's own story: both of her grandfathers were coal miners, and the 36-year-old is a former Fulbright scholar and graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop who's worked as an editor at *Self* magazine.

Barnes & Noble sees *Baker Towers* as a book that can be a bestseller, according to v-p of merchandising Bob Wietrak, and will feature it in its online reading group in March. Borders is enthusiastic as well, in light of its strong sales of *Mrs. Kimble*.

But it's independent booksellers who have offered the groundswell of support that's likely to lift the novel above the crowd. Tim Huggins, owner of Newtonville Books in Newton, Mass., said, "I thought *Mrs. Kimble* was one of the most accomplished first novels I'd ever read, and with *Baker Towers*, it feels like she has actually written a better book." Huggins plans to order between 150 and 200 copies of *Baker Towers* and has made it the January selection for his signed first editions club, which includes about 50 customers.

Of Haigh's debut, Huggins said, "*Mrs. Kimble* was one of those books that had a lot of good things happening for it at once. The staff loved it, it had good reviews, good marketing and advertising--and when you have all of those filings it feels easy to sell a lot of books." The paperback edition, published last January, has remained on the store's bestseller list and has now shifted into the book club market, which Huggins estimated should move another 50 to 100 copies at his store.

At Blue Willow Bookshop in Houston, Tex., which will host Haigh in early February, owner Valerie Koehler reported that almost every one of the store's 30 clubs had read the book. Five clubs have already scheduled *Baker*

Towers for January, making it the rare hardcover book club selection. Koehler credited the success of Mrs. Kimble to Haigh's ability to depict the changing options for American women over several decades. "It's not chick lit, but it speaks to women of a certain age, like Anne Tyler's work does," she said.

Another Haigh fan is Wendy Sheanin, events manager at A Clean Well Lighted Place for Books in San Francisco, where 91 copies of Mrs. Kimble have sold in paperback. She's invited Haigh to read at the store on January 19, and to be a guest on Writer's Voice Radio, a radio program on local NPR affiliate KALW that Sheanin helps produce. Sheanin recalled that reading Mrs. Kimble, with its short chapters, "was like eating Ritz Bits--you just keep going." Sheanin did find one fault with Haigh, however, saying of the up-and-coming novelist, "She's never going to write fast enough for me."

Editorial Reviews

Amazon.com

Jennifer Haigh's first novel, *Mrs. Kimble*, was an auspicious debut about three women who marry the same man--consecutively--and their ability to kid themselves about who he is, and, more to the point, who they are. It won the PEN/Hemingway Award, given annually for best first fiction. Haigh has beaten the sophomore slump with another page-turner: *Baker Towers*. The action, such as it is, takes place in post-World War II Bakerton, a Pennsylvania mining town. "...[T]he town's most famous landmark, known locally as the Towers, two looming piles of mine waste. They are forty feet high and growing... The mines were not named for Bakerton; Bakerton was named for the mines. This is an important distinction. It explains the order of things. Haigh lets us know this on page two, setting the backdrop for the family drama of the Novaks.

The story begins with the death of Stanley Novak, wife of Rose and father of Georgie, Dorothy, Joyce, Lucy, and Sandy. This is an Italian-Polish marriage, tolerated, but a break with the town's tradition. The personality, temperament and needs of all five Novaks are made clear to us by their choices--although they are not always clear to the Novaks. Their interaction, with each other and their community, is the stuff of the novel. Life revolves around the mines, the Church, gossip, and sports. Many times throughout the book it seems that Haigh is using a camera rather than a pen, so perfectly does she create a scene for the reader.

Georgie struggles to get away from Bakerton after his military service by going to Philadelphia and marrying the boss's daughter, a decision he lives to regret. Dorothy gets a job in D.C., but never really fits into the scene. A breakdown brings her home for good. Joyce joins the military, is appalled by the way she is treated, and hastens home to care for her ailing mother. Lucy, overweight and unwelcome with the "in" crowd, longs to be Fire Queen, the pinnacle of acceptance in Bakerton. Sandy, handsome and unreliable, leaves for big city life, finds it, and comes home periodically to hide out.

Haigh has captured these people's lives as they play out, more acted upon than acting. None of the Novaks is self-reflective; the girls accept the status quo, the boys escape and find that they have taken themselves with them. A foreshadowing of the changes that will take place is symbolized by a horrific mine explosion at the end of the book. This life that Haigh has so carefully described will soon disappear forever, for good or ill, but she has illuminated its current reality with a sure hand. --Valerie Ryan --*This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.*

From Publishers Weekly

The second novel by the author of the award-winning *Mrs. Kimble* depicts life in a postwar Pennsylvania mining town and continues Haigh's exploration of the hardships of women's lives. In the town of Bakerton, dominated by the towers of the title (made of slowly combusting piles of scrap coal), poor families live in ethnic enclaves of company houses. Italian Rose Novak broke with tradition by marrying a Polish man, but he dies in the book's first chapter, and Rose and her five children struggle through the years that follow. The oldest son, Georgie, returns from WWII and avoids the mining life by marrying the posh, cynical daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia store owner. Rose's daughter Dorothy gets a wartime job in glamorous Washington but breaks down and returns to Bakerton, while capable daughter Joyce, who joins the military just as the war ends, comes home to take care of her ailing mother, resenting Georgie and Sandy, the handsome youngest brother, who escape town. Only Rose and Lucy, the awkward youngest daughter, are content with things as they are. The story climaxes with a disaster at the mine, which affects each of the Novak children. Haigh's prose never soars, but she writes convincingly of family and smalltown relations, as well as of the intractable frustrations of American poverty.

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School--The eponymous towers of the title are the still-smoldering slag heaps from the coal mines of Bakerton, PA. That the town was named after the mines rather than the other way around sets them firmly at the center of the lives of the inhabitants. The novel focuses on five siblings following the death of their father in 1944, and progresses through the late '60s. Of Italian and Polish extraction, they all have Bakerton firmly rooted in their psyches even as they attempt to move away. Georgie leaves the army and marries, uncomfortably, into Philadelphia society, Dorothy attempts to fit into wartime D.C., and

This gift is a significant one. The ultimate inheritors of Bakerton's legacies and its hopes -- Lucy Novak, her childhood friend Leonard, George's son Arthur -- are headed for neither the mines nor the dress factory, their economic and geographic options far greater than Rose's and Stanley's. "The town wore away like a bar of soap," Haigh writes, but she has brought this ephemeral world to light. Baker Towers is, finally, a rich portrait of place, its meaning not in the towers themselves but in the community that created them, and Haigh's readers will empathize with Lucy Novak's wish to remain.

Reviewed by Nancy Reisman

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From Bookmarks Magazine

Haigh, author of the award-winning *Mrs. Kimble* (***) May/June 2003) and the granddaughter of coal miners, grew up in a Pennsylvania mining town. She introduces an unsentimental, harsh beauty into her fictional rendering of one family's lives in a town that "wore away like a bar of soap" as mining left an economically bereft, scarred landscape. The heart of the novel centers on Haigh's characters as they make certain life choices within the era's social mores. Shifting narrative perspectives pierced by short chapters about Bakerton add depth to the story. Most critics praised Haigh's spare writing style; only *The Oregonian* thought it stripped the novel of energy. Overall, *Baker Towers* is a hymn to a vintage way of life from a promising new voice.

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From AudioFile

Combine an involving family saga with a skilled narrator and you have a winner. Anna Fields reads this story about the people of a Pennsylvania mining town with clarity, warmth, and sympathy. As the five Novak children come of age during WWII, they experience all the possibilities of a new era, as well as the opportunities and limitations of their background and class. Fields gives believable voice to everyone from Polish grandmothers to bored East Coast debutantes and helps us care about the infuriating characters as well as the sympathetic ones. You'll stay glued to your earphones. A.C.S. © AudioFile 2005, Portland, Maine-- *Copyright © AudioFile, Portland, Maine --This text refers to the **Audio CD** edition.*

From Booklist

Starred Review Haigh's second novel, following the glowing *Mrs. Kimble* (2003), is set in Bakerton, a mining town in post-World World II Pennsylvania. Haigh's focus is the Novak family, particularly the five children being raised by their Italian mother after their Polish father drops dead. All five make attempts to escape Bakerton at one point or another; some are successful, others are not. George, a veteran of WW II, neglects his Bakerton fiancée and marries a cold socialite. Dorothy goes to the nation's capital to work, but a nervous breakdown brings her home. Brilliant, cold Joyce thinks her future lies with the military, but she is sorely disappointed. Sandy is the golden son who escapes to dubious success. And Lucy is the youngest, who finds herself in college despite the nagging feeling that she never wanted to leave home in the first place. Haigh creates a real sense of a community and brings her mining town to life through a large cast of minor characters who pass in and out of the Novaks' lives. The mines that the town is built upon cannot be forgotten either, even as their time comes, disastrously, to pass. *Baker Towers* is a novel possessing a rare, quiet power to evoke a time long past and the character of the people who lived then. *Kristine Huntley*

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The Times (London)

"Haigh's writing is rich and mellifluous, and her story certainly has an old-fashioned charm and dignity to it." --*This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.*

Harlan Coben, The Birmingham News

"Terrific." --*This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.*

Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

"An elegant, elegiac multigenerational saga. . . . Almost mythic in its ambition, somewhere between Oates and Updike country, and thoroughly satisfying." --*This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.*

Publishers Weekly

"Jennifer Haigh stakes a claim for a major breakout." --This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.

Publishers Weekly

"[Haigh] writes convincingly of family and small town relations, as well as of the intractable frustrations of American poverty." --This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.

Entertainment Weekly

"In clean, authoritative prose, Haigh uncannily injects new life into an era too often entombed by nostalgia." --This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.

New York Times

"The living, breathing organism that is Haigh's captivating book... [is an] effortlessly haunting story... [Haigh is] an expert natural storyteller." --This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.

People Magazine, Critic's Choice, Four Stars

"In prose rich in sensual detail... Haigh proves herself a fine storyteller... She has created a heartfelt and heartrending tale." --This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.

Daily News

"A good old-fashioned read... the author deftly evokes the particulars of a time and place." --This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.

Washington Post Book World

"Jennifer Haigh's ambitious, elegiac second novel, Baker Towers [is]... a rich portrait of place." --This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.

Download Description

"E-Book Extras: ONE: An Interview with Jennifer Haigh; TWO: Reading Group Guide

A stunning follow-up to her bestselling debut, *Mrs. Kimble*, Jennifer Haigh returns with *Baker Towers*, a compelling story of love and loss in a western Pennsylvania mining town in the years after World War II

Bakerton is a company town built on coal, a town of church festivals and ethnic neighborhoods, hunters' breakfasts and firemen's parades. Its children are raised in company houses -- three rooms upstairs, three rooms downstairs. Its ball club leads the coal company league. The twelve Baker mines offer good union jobs, and the looming black piles of mine dirt don't bother anyone. Called Baker Towers, they are local landmarks, clear evidence that the mines are booming. Baker Towers mean good wages and meat on the table, two weeks' paid vacation and presents under the Christmas tree.

The mines were not named for Bakerton; Bakerton was named for the mines. This is an important distinction. It explains the order of things.

Born and raised on Bakerton's Polish Hill, the five Novak children come of age during wartime, a thrilling era when the world seems on the verge of changing forever. The oldest, Georgie, serves on a minesweeper in the South Pacific and glimpses life beyond Bakerton, a promising future he is determined to secure at all costs. His sister Dorothy, a fragile beauty, takes a job in Washington, D.C., and finds she is unprepared for city life. Brilliant Joyce longs to devote herself to something of consequence but instead becomes the family's keystone, bitterly aware of the opportunities she might have had elsewhere. Sandy sails through life on looks and charm, and Lucy, the volatile baby, devours the family's attention and develops a bottomless appetite for love.

Baker Towers is a family saga and a love story, a hymn to a time and place long gone, to America's industrial past and the men and women we now call the Greatest Generation. This is a feat of imagination from an extraordinary new voice in American fiction, a writer of enormous power and skill.

Kirkus Reviews /* Starred Review */ An elegant, elegiac multigenerational saga about a small coal-mining community in western Pennsylvania that shows how talented she really is.

Fast on the heels of her PEN/Hemingway-winning if stagy first novel (*Mrs. Kimble*, 2003), Haigh turns a careful, loving eye on the sociology of the town of Bakerton, resting her focus most intently on the Poles and Italians who work together but live in their own neighborhoods. At the heart of the story are the five children of Stanley Novak, a Polish miner, and his Italian wife Rose. When Stanley dies of a heart attack in 1944, oldest son George is away in the Pacific. Eighteen-year-old Dorothy, diffident and plain, takes a secretarial position in Washington, DC, after losing her factory job. High-schooler Joyce shows unusual academic gifts. Eight-year-old Sandy is a charmer. And Lucy is a baby. Over the years, the siblings, along with a host of friends and neighbors, grow and evolve, sometimes as expected, sometimes not. George, eager to escape the mines, marries into a wealthy Philadelphia family (the one jarring note here being his spoiled wife's lack of redeeming characteristics) and erases his connection with home. Dorothy, broken by her experience in the outside world, returns to Bakerton, where she's redeemed by a love affair with a divorced man. Joyce attempts to escape into the Air Force but comes back home out of a sense of duty to her ailing mother, then slowly builds a rewarding life for herself. Sandy becomes a drifter. Well-educated, thanks to Joyce, Lucy chooses life in Bakerton. Their lives unfold in episodes that tie the individual to the community, and the lines of connection between characters—even the most minor—weave an intricate social tapestry. By the time the mines close for good, every thread connects.

Almost mythic in its ambition, somewhere between Oates and Updike country, and thoroughly satisfying. (*Kirkus Reviews*, September 15, 2004)