

## Our Souls at Night,' by Kent Haruf

By Joan Silber

June 5, 2015

Kent Haruf, who died in November at the age of 71, was best known for his justly praised novel “Plainsong” (1999). Haruf set all of his books in the fictional small town of Holt, Colo., integrating his bare-bones descriptions of the high plains so strikingly and crucially into his plots that setting is generally the first thing people mention about his work. But this emphasis can make Haruf sound parochial. In fact, his great subject was the struggle of decency against small-mindedness, and his rare gift was to make sheer decency a moving subject.

“Our Souls at Night,” his final novel, opens with an evening visit that Addie Moore pays to her longtime neighbor, Louis Waters. Both are widowed — Addie is 70, Louis about the same — and Addie makes the surprising proposal that they begin sleeping together, without sex, just to talk in the dark and provide the sleep-easing comfort of physical company. They don’t know each other all that well, but Addie has decided to ask at once for what she really wants. It’s an odd premise, but we get to watch these two, night by night, pass through phases of awkwardness, intimacy and alliance.

The town soon gossips, and Louis’s daughter complains, but why should they care? They narrate their pasts to each other — the death of a child, a serious affair. The first complication is the arrival of Addie’s 6-year-old grandson, sent while his parents work out a separation. Louis proves adept at tending to the shaken boy and even gets him a dog from the pound. Scenes of Louis watching over the child — during cookouts, town parades, trips into the backcountry — balance charm and a nicely spring-loaded tension.

As the town assumes Addie and Louis are already having sex, the reader is left to wonder: Will they ever? When they have to spend the night apart from each other’s embrace, we get this lovely bit of flirting (Haruf omits quotation marks):

“Sometimes you’re a pretty nice man.

“I suppose we’re going to have to stay like this, divided all night.

“I’ll think good thoughts across to you.

“Don’t make them too racy. It might disturb my rest.

“You never know.”

The scene in which these two finally do approach the great, uncertain experiment of intercourse has good moments, but suffers from sparse dialogue. No one wants to accuse a writer like Haruf of underwriting — it would be like complaining that Rothko didn’t use enough colors — but the unsaid might have been hinted at by access to characters’ thoughts. He uses both characters’ points of view throughout, but very temperately, respecting their privacy. The result is a kind of politeness that was absent from “Plainsong,” where (for instance) in one haunting scene two preteen boys peek through the window of an abandoned house as a high school girl is persuaded by her boyfriend to have sex with his friend.

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Physical life is always before us in Haruf’s fiction. In “Eventide,” a rancher is battered by a bull; in “Benediction,” the main character faces a slow death by cancer. “Our Souls at Night” does not avoid this candor, but it goes lighter on its subjects; in the scenes between Addie and Louis I was sometimes reminded of the famous difficulty of writing about good people.

But enough about sex. The chief opposition this couple faces comes less from their own physical limits — they can cope, with good humor — than from the interference around them. A spoilsport, motivated by fear and greed, has his say. Addie has been adamant about not caring what the town thinks; early on, there’s a nicely wry moment in which the two of them have lunch at the town cafe, sitting at a central table and flaunting their alleged torrid romance. But an intensifying pressure later threatens what is closest to her.

Back story is crucial in the progress of this novel, and takes up a high percentage of pages. The recollections are most touching when the characters regret what they didn’t get right, as when Addie remembers the aftermath of her husband’s death and its effect on their son, Gene:

“But even now I can see it all clearly and feel that kind of otherworldliness, the sense of not knowing you had to make, or if you were sure of what you were saying. Gene was terrible, we could have helped each other but that didn’t happen. I don’t think I tried too hard myself

Haruf’s plots tend to turn on gruff characters evincing tenderness, so a moment like this, was poignant.

In this last book, Haruf, a very loved author, seems occasionally to speak to his longtime audience of the real-life Denver Center for the Performing Arts’ theatrical productions of Haruf Holt . . . but it’s not this town. All that’s made up.”

This is a playful detail in a book that saves its saddest parts for the end. “Our Souls at Night

Dickensian views of the lives of the poor, or “Plainsong,” where favorite characters draw relentless spite; its tone is milder and more melancholy. But the novel runs, like his others, on the dogged insistence that simple elements carry depth, and readers will find much to be grateful for.



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Books

# Kent Haruf's posthumous novel offers a tender look at love in the twilight

By Ron Charles

May 19, 2015

Readers took their time finding Kent Haruf, but he was a patient man who didn't care much for the trappings of fame anyhow. His popularity swelled quickly, though, when he published his third novel, "Plainsong," in 1999 at the age of 56. The book was a bestseller for months and a finalist for the National Book Award, which meant he had to dress up for the ceremony in New York and wear a medal on a ribbon around his neck and feel genuinely uncomfortable. Afterward, he told the *New York Times*, "We're nuts, crazy in this country about fame. We expect writers to be something between Hollywood starlet and a village idiot."

By the time he died last November at the age of 71, he had successfully avoided either of those fates and published five quiet, beloved novels about the people of Holt, Colo., a fictional town drawn from his itinerant adolescence. In his obituary, there was mention of a manuscript he'd completed just before dying, and now we have a chance to read that final book. Such posthumous publications come trailing clouds of skepticism, but "Our Souls at Night" is such a tender, carefully polished work that it seems like a blessing we had no right to expect.

The novel opens with a sentence as simple as a line from the Gospels: "And then there was the day when Addie Moore made a call on Louis Waters."

That initial "and" is a modestly brilliant touch, an assumption that we're already involved in the lives of these people, already waiting for the next — and, alas, last — installment about Holt, Colo. The story that quickly develops follows Addie and her neighbor Louis. Both live alone, nursing memories of doleful marriages they stuck with until illness stole away their spouses. Neither has any reason to expect the remaining years will offer relief from the arid rituals of retirement in a small town. Indeed, what older folks are allowed to expect from their lives becomes the central theme of this slim but never slight book.

When Addie knocks on Louis's door, he knows her only as the widow of a local insurance salesman. He invites her to sit in the living room, and after a few sputtering starts, she make an outlandish proposal: "I'm lonely. I think you might be too. I wonder if you would come and sleep in the night with me."

Half-a-century after the sexual revolution, in the shame-free age of Tinder, Blindr, Grindr et al., it's funny how bold Addie's proposal sounds. Decent folk know that old people are supposed to live lives of resolute solitude to protect their dignity (and our inheritance). When the time comes, we'll move them to an institution where they can be tended by cheery strangers until they pass away in drugged incoherence.

But for some reason that modern pact doesn't appeal to Addie. She's tired of her isolated life and particularly of those long nights, but she has no intention of checking out early. Instead, she's devised a solution: "I think I could sleep again if there were someone else in bed with me," she tells Louis. "Someone nice. The closeness of that. Talking in the night, in the dark. What do you think?"

That's a question not just for Louis, but for us. After all, we live in a culture fiercely intolerant of any articulated prejudice except ageism. Popular entertainment spews out stereotypes about older people and their cloying desire for companionship. And if the possibility of sex in the golden years isn't being entirely ignored or derided for comic effect, it's being announced on magazine covers like the discovery of levitation.

Addie and Louis know all this, but they're determined to make one last attempt at happiness even at the risk of scandalizing their adult children and town busybodies. "I made up my mind I'm not going to pay attention to what people think," Addie says. "I've done that too long — all my life. I'm not going to live that way anymore." And so she waits while Louis gets his hair cut, takes a long hot shower, trims his fingernails, packs his pajamas in a paper bag and walks over to her house. "I don't know how this will go," he confesses.

How it goes is utterly charming. Watching Addie and Louis tiptoe into this self-conscious plan for intimacy is a pleasure. They're nervous as teenagers, unsure about what they're up to and what they can expect from each other, but they possess the wisdom and kindness of long, contemplative lives. "I don't know if I'll be able to sleep tonight," Louis says. "I'm too keyed up." It's impossible to resist the thrill these two sweet people feel as they get to know each other night after night.

This isn't a traditional romantic comedy — that is, it doesn't end in marriage — but it's wonderfully romantic and, for a time, comic. It's delightful to see Haruf having some fun with these two — and even engage in rare moments of autobiography and metafiction. At one point, Addie and Louis talk about a Colorado novelist who writes books about Holt County. "He could write a book about us," Addie says. "I don't want to be in any book," Louis responds.

But those sweet moments of humor are subsumed in the poignancy of the stories they tell each other every night. Clothed in darkness, Addie and Louis can finally speak of their failings and disappointments, the losses and tragedies that break and reset our bones. "Life hasn't turned out right for either of us," Addie says without a hint of self-pity, "not the way we expected."

"Except it feels good now, at this moment," Louis reminds her.

There's a little more action, to be sure, including some unkind gossip and family opposition that these two new old friends must contend with, but, in a sense, Addie is right when she says, "It's just two old people talking in the dark." In Haruf's spare sentences, though, it's a lot more than that. He's working within the tight boundaries of two lives that don't much matter in a small town that has never mattered, but he makes everything seem consequential with his unadorned style. Perhaps more so than any of his previous books, the language of "Our Souls at Night" is distilled to elemental purity. Most of the novel consists of dialogue without

quotation marks; the narrator's light descriptions are factual and tone-free. Any particular line may sound flat, even colorless, but the cumulative effect of these Shaker sentences is absorbing and reverent.

Toward the end of "Our Souls at Night," Louis says, "I just want to live simply and pay attention to what's happening each day," which probably comes pretty close to what Haruf wanted, too.

*Ron Charles is the editor of Book World. You can follow him on Twitter @RonCharles. For more books coverage, go to [washingtonpost.com/books](http://washingtonpost.com/books).*

On June 25, Kent Haruf's editor, Gary Fisketjon, will be in conversation with The Washington Post's Mike Rosenwald, a former student of Haruf's, at Politics & Prose Bookstore, 5015 Connecticut Ave. NW.

## OUR SOULS AT NIGHT

By Kent Haruf

Knopf. 179 pp. \$24

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 **5 Comments**

### **Ron Charles**

Ron Charles writes about books for The Washington Post. Before moving to Washington, he edited the books section of the Christian Science Monitor in Boston. Follow 

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## Our Souls at Night (Haruf)

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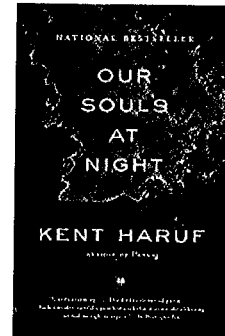
### *Our Souls at Night*

Kent Haruf, 2015

Knopf Doubleday

192 pp.

ISBN-13: 9781101911921



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### Summary

*A spare yet eloquent, bittersweet yet inspiring story of a man and a woman who, in advanced age, come together to wrestle with the events of their lives and their hopes for the imminent future.*

In the familiar setting of Holt, Colorado, home to all of Kent Haruf's inimitable fiction, Addie Moore pays an unexpected visit to a neighbor, Louis Waters.

Her husband died years ago, as did his wife, and in such a small town they naturally have known of each other for decades; in fact, Addie was quite fond of Louis's wife. His daughter lives hours away in Colorado Springs, her son even farther away in Grand Junction, and Addie and Louis have long been living alone in houses now empty of family, the nights so terribly lonely, especially with no one to talk with.

Their brave adventures—their pleasures and their difficulties—are hugely involving and truly resonant, making *Our Souls at Night* the perfect final installment to this beloved writer's enduring contribution to American literature. *(From the publisher.)*

### Author Bio

- Birth—February 24, 1943
- Where—Pueblo, Colorado, USA
- Died—November 30, 2014
- Where—Salida, Colorado
- Education—B.A., Nebraska Wesleyan University; M.F.A., Iowa Writers' Workshop
- Awards—(see below)

Alan Kent Haruf was an American novelist and author of six novels, all set in the fictional town of Holt, Colorado.

### Life

Haruf was born in Pueblo, Colorado, the son of a Methodist minister. He graduated

with a BA from Nebraska Wesleyan University in 1965, where he would later teach, and earned an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1973.

Before becoming a writer, Haruf worked in a variety of places, including a chicken farm in Colorado, a construction site in Wyoming, a rehabilitation hospital in Denver, a hospital in Phoenix, a presidential library in Iowa, an alternative high school in Wisconsin, as an English teacher with the Peace Corps in Turkey, and colleges in Nebraska and Illinois.

He lived with his wife, Cathy, in Salida, Colorado until his death in 2014. He had three daughters from his first marriage.

### **Works**

All of Haruf's novels take place in the fictional town of Holt, in eastern Colorado, a town based on Yuma, Colorado, one of Haruf's residences in the early 1980s. His first novel, *The Tie That Binds* (1984), received a Whiting Award and a special Hemingway Foundation/PEN citation. *Where You Once Belonged* followed in 1990. A number of his short stories have appeared in literary magazines.

*Plainsong* was published in 1999 and became a U.S. bestseller. The *New York Times*' Verlyn Klinkenborg called it "a novel so foursquare, so delicate and lovely, that it has the power to exalt the reader." *Plainsong* won the Mountains & Plains Booksellers Award and the Maria Thomas Award in Fiction and was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction.

*Eventide*, a sequel to *Plainsong*, was published in 2004. *Library Journal* described the writing as "honest storytelling that is compelling and rings true." Jonathan Miles saw it as a "repeat performance" and "too goodhearted."

On November 30, 2014, at the age of 71, Kent Haruf died at his home in Salida, Colorado, of interstitial lung disease.

*Our Souls at Night*, his final work, was published posthumously in 2015 and received wide praise. Ron Charles of the *Washington Post* called it "a tender, carefully polished work that it seems like a blessing we had no right to expect."

### **Recognition**

1986 - Whiting Award for fiction

1999 - Finalist for the 1999 National Book Award for *Plainsong*

2005 - Colorado Book Award for *Eventide*

2005 - Finalist for the Book Sense Award for *Eventide*

2009 - Dos Passos Prize for Literature

2012 - Wallace Stegner Award

2014 - Folio Prize shortlist for *Benediction*

(*Author bio adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 8/26/2015.*)

**Book Reviews**

His great subject was the struggle of decency against small-mindedness, and his rare gift was to make sheer decency a moving subject.... [This] novel runs on the dogged insistence that simple elements carry depths, and readers will find much to be grateful for.

**Joan Silber - *New York Times Book Review***

Short, spare and moving.... *Our Souls at Night* is already creating a stir.

**Jennifer Maloney - *Wall Street Journal***

Utterly charming [and] distilled to elemental purity.... such a tender, carefully polished work that it seems like a blessing we had no right to expect.

**Ron Charles - *Washington Post***

Lateness—and second chances—have always been a theme for Haruf. But here, in a book about love and the aftermath of grief, in his final hours, he has produced his most intense expression of that yet... Packed into less than 200 pages are all the issues late life provokes.

**John Freeman - *Boston Globe***

A fitting close to a storied career, a beautiful rumination on aging, accommodation, and our need to connect.... As a meditation on life and forthcoming death, Haruf couldn't have done any better. He has given us a powerful, pared-down story of two characters who refuse to go gentle into that good night.

**Lynn Rosen - *Philadelphia Enquirer***

Haruf is never sentimental, and the ending—multiple twists packed into the last twenty pages—is gritty, painful and utterly human.... His novels are imbued with an affection and understanding that transform the most mundane details into poetry. Like the friendly light shining from Addie's window, Haruf's final novel is a beacon of hope; he is sorely missed.

**Francesca Wade - *Financial Times***

A marvelous addition to his oeuvre...spare but eloquent, bittersweet yet hopeful.

**Kurt Rabin - *Fredericksburg Freelance-Star***

More Winesburg than Mayberry, Holt and its residents are shaped by physical solitude and emotional reticence.... Haruf's fiction ratifies ordinary, nonflashy decency, but he also knows that even the most placid lives are more complicated than they appear from the outside.... The novel is a plainspoken, vernacular farewell.



***Catherine Holmes - Charleston Post and Courier***

A fine and poignant novel that demonstrates that our desire to love and to be loved does not dissolve with age.... The story speeds along, almost as if it's a page-turning mystery.

***Joseph Peschel - St. Louis Post-Dispatch***

Haruf spent a life making art from our blind collisions, and *Our Souls at Night* is a fitting finish.

***John Reimringer - Minneapolis Star Tribune***

Elegiac, mournful and compassionate. . . a triumphant end to an inspiring literary career [and] a reminder of a loss on the American cultural landscape, as well as a parting gift from a master storyteller.

***William J. Cobb - Dallas Morning News***

By turns amusing and sad, skipping-down-the-sidewalk light and pensive.... I recommend reading it straight through, then sitting in quiet reflection of beautiful literary art.

***Fred Ohles - Lincoln Journal Star***

Haruf was known as a great writer and teacher whose work will endure.... The cadence of this book is soft and gentle, filled with shy emotion, as tentative as a young person's first kiss—timeless in its beauty.... Addie and Louis find a type of love that, as our society ages, ever more people in the baby boom generation may find is the only kind of love that matters.

***Jim Ewing - Jackson Clarion-Ledger***

Blunt, textured, and dryly humorous. . . this quietly elegiac novel caps a fine, late-blooming and tenacious writing career... Haruf's gift is to make hay of the unexpected, and it feels like a mercy.... This is a novel for just after sunset on a summer's eve, when the sky is still light and there is much to see, if you are looking.

***Wingate Packard - Seattle Times***

There is so much wisdom in this beautifully pared-back and gentle book.... [A] small, quiet gem, written in English so plain that it sparkles.

***Anne Susskind - Sydney Morning Herald***

A delicate, sneakily devastating evocation of place and character.... Haruf's story accumulates resonance through carefully chosen details; the novel is quiet but never complacent.

***The New Yorker***

In a fitting and gorgeous end to a body of work that prizes resilience above all else, Haruf has bequeathed readers a map charting a future that is neither easy nor painless, but it's also not something we have to bear alone.

***Esquire***

Haruf once again banishes doubts. Our souls can surprise us. Beneath the surface of reticent lives—and of Haruf's calm prose—they prove unexpectedly brave.

***Ann Hulbert - Atlantic***

(*Starred review.*) [A] gripping and tender novel.... [Haruf] returns to the landscape and daily life of Holt County, Colo.,...this time with a stunning sense of all that's passed and the precious importance of the days that remain.

***Publishers Weekly***

(*Starred review.*) [A]claimed novelist Haruf captures small-town life to perfection in his signature spare style.... Poignant and eloquent, this novel resonates beyond the pages. Don't miss this exceptional work from a literary voice now stilled. —*Donna Bettencourt, Mesa Cty. P.L., Palisade, CO*

***Library Journal***

A sweet love story about the twilight years.... [Addie] and Louis find an emotional intimacy beyond anything either has previously known, and both come to recognize that they "deserve to be happy," no matter what friends and family think.... Those who have been immersed in Holt since *Plainsong* (1999) will appreciate one last visit.

***Kirkus Reviews***

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#### Discussion Questions

1. What does the title mean?
2. The novel begins with the word "and": "And then there was the day when Addie Moore made a call on Louis Waters." What do you imagine came before it?
3. Kent Haruf was known for using simple, spare language to create stories of great depth. How does the modest action in *Our Souls at Night* open onto larger insights about getting older?

4. It takes a considerable amount of courage for a woman of Addie's generation to invite a man she hardly knows to sleep in her bed. What do you think propelled her to do it?
5. When Louis comes over for the first time, he knocks on her back door in the name of discretion. Addie says, "I made up my mind I'm not going to pay attention to what people think. I've done that too long—all my life. I'm not going to live that way anymore. The alley makes it seem we're doing something wrong or something disgraceful, to be ashamed of" (8). How does her attitude influence Louis's?
6. Both Louis and Addie have to contend with gossip about their relationship. Who handles it better?
7. What does Addie's friendship with Ruth show us about Addie's character?
8. Addie and Louis both had troubled marriages, but stayed married until their partners died. How does that sense of propriety, of loyalty, influence their relationship with each other?
9. In describing his affair, Louis says, "I think I regret hurting Tamara more than I do hurting my wife. I failed my spirit or something" (42). What does he mean by this?
10. Why did Addie refuse to move after Connie's death? How did this decision color Gene's reaction to his mother's late-in-life love affair?
11. On page 52, Louis describes his relationship with Addie to his daughter, "It's some kind of decision to be free. Even at our ages." Why does he feel freer with Addie than he does alone? How does his behavior become more uninhibited as the novel progresses?
12. How does Jamie's arrival deepen the connection between Addie and Louis?
13. When Louis confesses that he wanted to be a poet, what effect does it have on Addie's opinion of him? And on your opinion?
14. Addie and Louis both have regrets about the way they raised their children. How does that influence their relationship with Jamie?
15. Why did Addie buy new clothes for her trips to Denver that she never wears in Holt? What signal does it send to the reader?
16. On page 145, Addie mentions the Denver Center for the Performing Arts production of *Benediction*, based on the author's own novel. Addie and Louis discuss the fact that it's set in Holt, the fictional town in which they live. Why do you think Haruf slipped this into the story?

17. At the end of that conversation, Addie says, "Who would have thought at this time in our lives that we'd still have something like this. That it turns out we're not finished with changes and excitements. And not all dried up in body and spirit" (147). What point is Haruf making?

18. Jamie's arrival ultimately leads to grave consequences. What is Gene afraid of?

19. Several times during the novel, Addie is described as being brave, but she gives in to Gene's demands. Is this a brave act? What is she protecting?

20. How would you describe the ending—as heartbreaking, hopeful, or something else?

21. In his final interview, conducted a few days before his death from interstitial lung disease, Haruf discussed *Our Souls at Night*: "The idea for the book has been floating around in my mind for quite a while. Now that I know I have, you know—a limited time—it was important to me to try to make good use of that time. So I went out there every day. Typically, I have always had a story pretty well plotted out before I start writing. This time I knew generally where the story was going, but I didn't know very many of the details. So as it happened, I went out every day trusting myself to be able to add to the story each day. So I essentially wrote a new short chapter of the book every day. I've never had that experience before. I don't want to get too fancy about it, but it was like something else was working to help me get this done. Call it a muse or spiritual guidance, I don't know. All I know is that the trust I had in being able to write every day was helpful." How does reading this affect your understanding of the book?

*(Questions issued by the publisher.)*

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