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## Kent Haruf

1943-

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### WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

#### BOOKS

- *The Tie That Binds* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984).
- *Where You Once Belonged* (New York: Summit, 1990).
- *Plainsong* (New York: Knopf, 1999).
- *Eventide* (New York: Knopf, forthcoming 2004).

#### PRODUCED SCRIPT

- *Private Debts*, motion picture, Chanticleer Films, 1989.

#### SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS--UNCOLLECTED: FICTION

- "Now (And Then)," *Puerto del Sol*, 17 (Summer 1982): 39-42.
- "The Autopsy of Sam Adams," *Grand Street*, 5 (Spring 1986): 7-18.
- "Private Debts/Public Holdings," *Grand Street*, 6 (Autumn 1986): 18-32.
- "Dancing," *Prairie Schooner*, 66 (Summer 1992): 53-65.
- "Inside T.O. Judy's Mouth," *Gettysburg Review*, 7 (Summer 1994): 483-495.

#### SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS--UNCOLLECTED: NONFICTION

- "To See Your Story Clearly, Start Pulling the Wool over Your Own Eyes," *New York Times*, 20 November 2000, p. E1.
- "What We Did for Love," *More* (October 2001): 66-68.

Kent Haruf's novels relay the struggles of high-plains farmers and teachers, children and parents, husbands and wives, whose lives proceed along differing trajectories. Like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, Haruf's fictional Holt, Colorado, is a place where momentary kindnesses and abiding despair intersect in the lives of small-town people. Collectively, the stories of these people create a history that all the inhabitants of Holt share as they seek emotional connections to sustain them through long winters and years of hard work in this isolated region of northeast Colorado. In a profile published in the *Omaha World Herald* (19 December 1999), Haruf revealed that he has created a map of Holt in his mind and carefully located the homes, businesses, and even the water towers that mark the landscape of his fictional town. Holt is based in part on the real Colorado towns of Yuma, Wray, and Holyoke, where Haruf lived as a child; he says that Holt

seems like home to me. There seems to be plenty to write about there. . . . You know their family stories. You know the connections between people. You know how society works. You know whose pickup is parked in somebody's driveway where it doesn't belong, and you know whose dog is loose and whose bicycle is parked in front of the bakery. All those things are important to a writer.

The sudden and unexpected acclaim afforded Haruf's 1999 novel, *Plainsong*, belies the gradual and assiduous efforts of its author to tell the seemingly simple story of Holt.

Haruf was born Alan Kent Hoerauf in Pueblo, Colorado, on 24 February 1943. (The family name was changed in the 1940s by Haruf's father; Haruf's grandfather had immigrated to America from Germany in the 1880s and found that no one could pronounce Hoerauf.) Haruf is the son of Eleanor V. (Shaver) Haruf, a teacher, and Louis A. Haruf, a Methodist minister who moved his family to various small Colorado towns where the populations rarely exceeded two thousand people. Haruf spent his childhood riding his bicycle and exploring the countryside with his brother, sitting in church while his father preached, and reading avidly. Haruf's parents were book lovers and nurtured their son's desire to read. Storytelling was also part of family life; after dinner Haruf's father would recall tales of his childhood on a remote North Dakota homestead. In such family sessions, Haruf first heard stories of a place like Holt.

Haruf enrolled in Nebraska Wesleyan University, where he majored first in biology before discovering writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Faulkner. From the former, Haruf learned the power of a clear and direct prose style, while from the latter he discovered the value of stories set in a small town populated by hardworking people. After graduating in 1965 with a degree in English, Haruf spent two years in the Peace Corps teaching English to children in Turkey. He returned to the United States intent upon pursuing graduate studies in English. He entered the University of Kansas but left quickly, displeased with the way literature was taught. A conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, Haruf spent the next two years working in a hospital as an orderly and in an orphanage as a house parent in lieu of military service.

After one failed attempt to gain entrance into the prestigious Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa, Haruf was admitted in 1971. He was twenty-eight years old. Haruf's classmates at Iowa were such now notable authors as Tracy Kidder, Stuart Dybeck, T. Coraghessan Boyle, and Ron Hansen. In the *Omaha World Herald* profile, Hansen identified a difference between Haruf and his classmates: "He was a quiet, reserved, but friendly guy, and when he had something to say, it had resonance. He was older and seemed more assured about what he wanted to do as a writer." After graduating with an M.F.A. from Iowa in 1973, Haruf needed to support his growing family--he had married Virginia K. Koon in 1967 and had three daughters--so in 1974 he began teaching in an alternative high school in Madison, Wisconsin. In 1978 the Harufs moved back to Colorado. After several lean years working construction, Haruf earned a teaching certificate and began teaching English to farm kids in several rural schools, spending his summers writing what became his first novel, *The Tie That Binds* (1984).

In 1982, at the age of thirty-nine, Haruf published his first piece of fiction: a four-page, stylistically self-conscious story titled "Now (And Then)," in which the narrator recounts his mother's drive home from

Wisconsin through Iowa. Shortly thereafter, John Irving, one of Haruf's teachers at Iowa, encouraged Haruf to contact his agent, John Matson, with the new novel, warning Haruf that Matson had rejected the past fifty authors Irving had sent to him. Matson, however, liked Haruf's novel and quickly found a publisher in Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. *The Tie That Binds* appeared in 1984.

In *The Tie That Binds* Haruf employs a circular narrative structure in which the narrator, Sanders Roscoe, tells the story of a woman, Edith Goodnough, who has been charged with murder and lies in the Holt hospital awaiting trial. Edith's situation is complex, though, and Roscoe feels compelled to tell her whole story because he knows that a reporter from the *Denver Post* has been collecting information for a story about Edith. Roscoe thinks the city reporter, foolishly wearing yellow pants to interview people living on a ranch, has no clear sense of either Edith or the town where she has lived for more than seventy years. Thus, after snubbing the reporter, Roscoe begins his story in the present but in the course of relaying events quickly retreats into the past. For Roscoe, in order to understand Edith Goodnough and the events that led to her current state, one has to begin back in 1895, when her parents, Roy and Ada Goodnough, got married and moved from Iowa to Holt. The past is not a distant abstraction for Roscoe but a series of events that both link him with the Goodnough family and cast light on Edith's recent transgressions. Events that impact the country as a whole are not ignored, but the real history Roscoe presents involves people whose lives are inseparably interconnected. Roscoe seems to have learned the importance of the small stories within a larger one from his father, whom he recalls saying, "Well, this is a piece of history that won't appear in no history books."

The story revolves around siblings Edith and Lyman Goodnough, their overbearing father, and the meager land they farm. Edith and Lyman's story is one of joyless forbearance as they suffer the rage and intolerance of their loveless father. Edith represents a recurring type of female character in Haruf's fiction--hardworking, enduring, and faithful, surviving on brief moments of affection and emotional connection. When Lyman, who is particularly persecuted by his father, has the chance to escape the farm, he does so with apparent detachment, leaving the sister who loves him and not returning home until twenty years later, well after his father's death. In the interim, Edith patiently braves the life given her, remembering the brief love affair she had with Roscoe's father and watching Roscoe grow into a man. Though not her biological child, Roscoe becomes a figurative son for her. The interaction between the aging woman and growing boy and then the old woman and adult narrator poignantly reveals Edith as a woman who has spent her life caring for an emotionally and physically crippled father while quietly observing the life and son she might have had.

Roscoe is in many ways a typical Haruf narrator: simple, direct, and scrupulous in his own sense of accuracy. To some extent, Roscoe resembles F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (1925): both men articulate a clear sense of right and wrong that springs from their middle-American roots; both participate from the periphery in the stories they tell; and both bring their own sense of morality to bear upon the events of the story. The similarities between Nick and Roscoe end there, for Roscoe is different from Nick in terms of reliability. In Haruf's novel Roscoe eagerly, if not longwindedly, distinguishes between what he knows with certainty because he witnessed it; what he believes happened based on long experience; and what he assumes happened based on speculation. For example, early in the novel when Roscoe explains why the sheriff, Bud Sealy, arrested Edith and then discussed her story with a reporter, Roscoe presents his version of events and adds: "But I can't say for sure that's how Bud was thinking. What I've suggested is based only on what I know about him after these fifty years of seeing and talking to him about once every week." That fifty years of experience qualifies Roscoe to explain why last month Edith burned down the Goodnough house with herself and Lyman still in it. Roscoe is willing to share what he knows with anyone willing to sit, wait, and listen to the entire story--just as long as he or she is not a reporter from the *Denver Post* wearing yellow pants.

*The Tie That Binds* received qualified but favorable reviews and quite a bit of critical acclaim. One critic for *The Los Angeles Times Book Review* (27 January 1985) referred to the novel as "an impressive, expertly crafted work of sensitivity and detail, absent the hokum that usually accompanies sad tales of simple women and their domineering fathers." A critic for *The New York Times Book Review* (6 January 1985) acknowledged Haruf's work as a "fine novel that dramatically and accurately explores the lives of people who work the land in the stark American Middle West." For Haruf, though, the greatest praise for his fiction came one evening at



a party while he was visiting friends in Colorado. A farmer Haruf knew approached him and read aloud two paragraphs from the novel, about milking a cow whose tail is covered with a grotesque mixture of feces and afterbirth. Completing the passage, the farmer boldly proclaimed it exactly right. *The Tie That Binds* went into three paperback reprints and won the \$25,000 Whiting Writers' Award. The novel was a runner-up for the prestigious PEN/Hemingway Award for first fiction. On the strength of his first effort, Haruf secured a teaching position at Nebraska Wesleyan in 1986; he then began work on his second novel.

*Where You Once Belonged* (1990) began as two short stories published in *Grand Street* magazine in 1986. One of those stories, "Private Debts/Public Holdings," which eventually became chapter 8 of the novel, was reprinted in *Best American Short Stories 1987* and made into a prizewinning motion picture (*Private Debts*, Chanticleer Films, 1989). *Where You Once Belonged* received good reviews but sold poorly. In the *Omaha World Herald* profile Haruf admits ambivalence over his second novel: "I was really in despair when I finished that book. I had three daughters by then, all in school, all hungry. I was teaching a lot, and I was under pressure to get it done. There are good things in it, but I wanted it to be better than it turned out to be." Despite Haruf's feelings about the novel, a reviewer for *The Los Angeles Times* (11 February 1990) regarded the final product positively: "Haruf's writing has a disciplined economy that sets off its power. Each phrase is spare and straightforward, yet out of all of them together . . . an extraordinary poetry emerges."

*Where You Once Belonged* employs the same narrative technique as *The Tie That Binds*. Beginning in the present with the return of a local hero turned thief, Jack Burdette, the novel then retraces Burdette's steps, from his childhood in Holt to his flight from town and his eventual return to terrorize the town once again. Burdette takes advantage of the goodness and vulnerability of others and thus brings out the worst in them. The novel explores the frustration of people whose faith in a hero is shattered and who then have no just outlet for their anger over that loss of faith. For many in Holt, their anger at Burdette festers or finds inappropriate outlet until Burdette returns to town and the story of *Where You Once Belonged* begins.

Everything comes too easily for Jack Burdette. A high-school sports hero, Burdette finds that he can rely on the tolerance and praise of the townspeople and the loyalty and love of a local beauty. All changes when Burdette and the narrator, Pat Arbuckle, go off to the University of Colorado in Boulder. Arbuckle studies journalism to pursue a career in the family business--the local newspaper, the *Holt Mercury*. Burdette, on full athletic scholarship, treats the university much in the way he treated everything in Holt, with callow indifference. Burdette neither shines athletically nor succeeds academically: he is not the largest or fastest athlete on the team, and without his girlfriend, Wanda Jo Evans, to complete his homework, Burdette cannot pass his courses. Eventually, on the verge of failing out of school, Burdette is expelled for stealing, an event that leaves him nonplussed and foreshadows behavior that will alter Holt's perception of the local hero forever.

Like Roscoe, Pat Arbuckle presents the facts of Burdette's easy success and eventual disgrace in a manner that weaves together the stories of many Holt citizens. While Roscoe was preoccupied with telling the story correctly because of his love for Edith Goodnough, Arbuckle is a journalist whose father taught him the value of listening to every version of an event without assuming any one of them is flawlessly accurate. Thus, Arbuckle carefully tells the story of Burdette's betrayal and its impact on the citizens of Holt. Like the story told by Roscoe in *The Tie That Binds*, Arbuckle's large story includes many smaller stories. Like Roscoe, Arbuckle is involved in the story, because Arbuckle loves the woman abused and rejected by Burdette, whose fate he is powerless to alter.

Haruf creates characters in *Where You Once Belonged* who echo characters from *The Tie That Binds* and foreshadow characters in *Plainsong*. Nora, Arbuckle's quiet and distant wife, is a character who psychologically recoils in the isolated and unrefined world of Holt. Like Lyman Goodnough in *The Tie That Binds* and Ella Guthrie in *Plainsong*, Nora finds no life and no story of her own amid the stories of Holt. She, like Lyman and Ella, must leave Holt in order to survive and have any hope of happiness. Their stories lie elsewhere. Conversely, Haruf populates his novels with strong women who persevere even in the most hostile situations, adapting to their circumstances and accommodating others in their lives. For instance, Jessie Burdette suffers her husband's abuse and faces the misdirected hostility of Holt's citizens when Burdette skips

town after embezzling money from the grain elevator. Maggie Jones in *Plainsong* cares for her ailing and senile father, takes in the pregnant Victoria Roubideaux, and waits for Tom Guthrie to recognize her for the good woman she is. In turn, Victoria Roubideaux is a younger version of these women, making mistakes early in her life from which she suffers the consequences, emerging stronger, wiser, and experienced enough to perceive the good in those around her.

The principal male characters in all three novels resemble one another: Roscoe, Arbuckle, and Guthrie struggle to maintain a sense of equilibrium and honesty in the face of dishonesty and ruthlessness in others. Each has a wife or mother from whom he feels estranged; each, in turn, finds companionship and love, if only fleetingly enjoyed, in the arms of another woman. Each knows he does not deserve the good woman he finds; as Guthrie admonishes his own image in the mirror, "'You don't deserve it [Maggie Jones's love],' he said aloud. 'Don't ever even begin to think that you do.'"

In 1991, shortly after publishing his second novel, Haruf accepted a faculty position at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, where he could teach fiction workshops and work with students in a growing M.F.A. program. After his first marriage ended in divorce, Haruf married Catherine S. Dempsey in 1995. The lightened teaching load at Southern Illinois gave Haruf the opportunity to work on the novel that moved him from a solid "mid-list" author to a best-selling one. In 1999 Haruf published *Plainsong*, which won early praise from independent booksellers. Word-of-mouth recommendations spread until Haruf found himself on *The New York Times* best-seller list and shortlisted for the National Book Award. *Plainsong* went on to win the Regional Book Award in fiction from the Mountain and Plains Booksellers Association; a Salon.com Book Award; the American Booksellers Book Award; and awards from *The New Yorker* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

Readers and reviewers responded approvingly to Haruf's direct, plainspoken narrative and his story of people surviving adversity. Haruf eschews quotation marks throughout the novel, which underscores the connection between what the characters think and what they say. While many of the traits reviewers championed in *Plainsong* were present in his earlier novels, *Plainsong* represents a clear departure for Haruf.

In his first two novels, Haruf's first-person narrator begins with an event in the present and explores relevant past events leading back to the present. In contrast, the third-person narrative of *Plainsong* follows a linear development. An impending sense of anticipation and trepidation recurs throughout the early chapters as the central characters begin their daily routines. The novel then charts the lives of its characters over a nine-month period from early fall until late spring. The past is less relevant in *Plainsong* than in Haruf's earlier novels. The reader learns little about the past lives of Tom Guthrie, Victoria Roubideaux, and the McPheron brothers. The reader never learns why Guthrie's wife, Ella, has retreated into an isolated and lonely world, why she moves out of the house, or why she moves to Denver to live with her sister. Rather than explain in detail why a single event occurred, as he does in *The Tie That Binds* and *Where You Once Belonged*, Haruf reveals little more than what happens to each character in *Plainsong*.

The structure of *Plainsong* complements its narrative. The central characters' stories are told in recurring self-titled chapters, intersecting occasionally as characters interact with one another. The novel revolves around the lives of Tom Guthrie; elderly farmers Raymond and Harold McPheron; Victoria Roubideaux; and Guthrie's sons, nine-year-old Bobby and ten-year-old Ike. Guthrie's story is told in eight chapters scattered through the novel, the McPheron brothers' in nine chapters, Victoria's in twelve, and Ike and Bobby's likewise in twelve. These stories constitute forty-one of the forty-four chapters. Of the remaining three chapters, one presents Ella Guthrie's life of lonely detachment from her husband and children. Later in the novel, the chapter titled "Maggie Jones" reveals a strong and determined woman for whom things just may be looking up. The psychologically downward trajectory of Ella's life in contrast to the potentially upward direction of Maggie's life denotes not turning points in a plot but coincidental contrasts in two women's lives. These two women represent recurring types of female characters in Haruf's fiction--one who suffers from a life on the plains and one who perseveres.

In the final chapter, titled simply "Holt," the key characters meet at the McPheron ranch on a peaceful May



evening. In contrast to its beginning, the novel ends with a sense of contentment as the characters watch the setting sun and await dinner. Although the birth of Victoria's baby suggests the joyful prospects of a new life, the novel does not proffer a resolution to all conflicts: Guthrie still faces problems with his student Russell Beckman; Guthrie and Maggie's budding romance is far from guaranteed; and Victoria faces the challenge of being a teenage single mother without a high-school diploma.

Throughout his fiction, but particularly in *Plainsong*, Haruf explores the way communities are formed outside traditional societal institutions. Despite his father's calling as a minister, Haruf does not present the church as the focal point in his characters' lives nor as the place where lasting bonds are formed. Rather, community bonds are formed in Haruf's fiction naturally by people willing to connect with others and give of themselves. At times, this bond is a natural one, such as a father's love for his sons, a mother's love for her unborn child, or the alliance between siblings. Most others, though, occur in unexpected ways among unlikely people. For example, the McPheron brothers are willing to help Victoria, a girl they do not know, and take her in again after she indifferently casts off their friendship. Ike and Bobby find themselves unwittingly attached to Iva Stearns, an elderly woman who becomes something of a surrogate grandmother to them; but her sudden death stuns the boys. Unable to verbalize the inexplicable sense of loss they feel over Stearns's death, the two silently ride their horse to the ranch of their older counterparts, Raymond and Harold McPheron, seeking solace.

The critical praise for Haruf's third novel centered on the author's style of storytelling. A critic for *The New York Times Book Review* (3 October 1999) articulated what most reviewers believed:

It is the triumph of *Plainsong* that here [the final chapter], where the novel turns and the reader might have felt the author's hands clutching his lapels, you feel instead the McPherons' self-knowledge--their plain intent to change without knowing why--passes effortlessly into your own self-knowledge. You are convinced that if there really were a Holt, Colo., this is how things would be in that town, truant and forgiving at the same time. The tide of judgment has washed away here, leaving a world that is only what it is, with lives to be made or squandered as they will.

Despite such praise for the empathic connection between reader and character, Haruf's fiction never presents an idealized vision of the world or a mythic connection between the individual and the land.

Haruf's fiction often involves the sense of community that links people both to each other and to the land; these communal bonds hold despite the many disappointments and accommodations exacted on the individual. Haruf's stories are not the stories of people inspired by a myth of progress and exploration, of the heroic dream of taming a wild frontier. These stories are the offspring and grandchildren of people who dreamed those large dreams. Both an attraction to and a repulsion from the land recur in Haruf's characters. People are transformed by the land they work and the space they occupy rather than the other way around. Any promise of material wealth, social advancement, or spiritual rejuvenation that may have motivated the ancestors of Haruf's characters lingers only as a dimly remembered dream annulled. Many of Haruf's characters oscillate merely between work and rage or work and drink. Even the houses in which Haruf's characters live do not offer a sense of solace or refuge from the world but rather instill a sense of psychological entrapment. At its best, the house is a place where objects of practical use stand ready for service while objects that recall past happiness haunt closed rooms or closets. At times, the house seemingly constricts the lives of its occupants. In contrast to the vast plains and infinite sky, the house, particularly for females, draws its occupants into a sense of isolation from the world outside. In the case of Edith Goodnough, the house eventually becomes the tomb that inters Lyman and nearly inters her.

*Plainsong* was made into a television movie by Hallmark Hall of Fame Productions, with screenplay by Oliver Goldstick; it is scheduled to air on CBS in May 2004 and stars Aidan Quinn and Rachel Griffiths. Haruf's next novel, *Eventide*, is also scheduled for publication by Knopf in 2004. Like *Plainsong*, the novel is set in Holt and shifts among three sets of characters in a third-person narrative that spans nine months. Characters such as Victoria Roubideaux and the McPheron brothers recur in the novel, though the story is darker than that of *Plainsong*.

Like the fiction of Douglas Unger, James Welch, Patricia Henley, Craig Lesley, William Kittredge, Louise Erdrich, and David Quammen, the novels of Kent Haruf do not tell the story of heroic idealism on the American plains but rather reveal the isolated acts of kindness, love, loyalty, betrayal, and desperation defining the lives of those whose ambivalent affection for the land is won at great cost and with even greater labor. This hard-won sense of place that comes to characters in Haruf's fiction is summed up by Sanders Roscoe: "Course it's not fair. There ain't none of it that's fair. Life ain't. And all our thinking it should be don't seem to make one simple damn." Nonetheless, Roscoe stays true to Edith and conceives his life bound up in hers and with the lives of others who live in Holt, Colorado.

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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- John Mark Eberhart, "Simple and *Plainsong*: Kent Haruf Wanted His Celebrated Book to Capture Quiet but Real Lives without the Quote Marks," *Kansas City Star*, 19 August 2000, p. E1.
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**About this Essay:** Michael R. Molino, Southern Illinois University.

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**Source Database:** Dictionary of Literary Biography

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**THOMSON**\*  
**GALE**

**Quiet insight into life in a Colorado town.(PERSPECTIVE).** *The Star-Ledger (Newark, NJ)* (Dec 12, 1999): p004.

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Byline: Reviewed by Dan Cryer

Plainsong Kent Haruf Knopf, 301 pp., \$24.00 One of "Plainsong's" heroes, Tom Guthrie, is a strong-and-silent Gary Cooper of the classroom on Colorado's eastern high plains. The others, the two elderly McPheron brothers, are geezer ranchers with a soft and sensitive side buried beneath layers of barnyard muck.

The opening dilemma is timeworn, if not hackneyed. Victoria Roubideaux, a sophomore at Holt High School, turns up pregnant. Her lout of a boyfriend slinks off to Denver.

Meanwhile, a jock who flunked Guthrie's U.S. history course is physically and legally threatening him just as his wife, Ella, has decided to leave him. Their two little sons, Ike and Bobby, 10 and 9, take in all this drama with wide and increasingly less innocent eyes. A quietly courageous teacher. A couple of lovable old galoots. A town where customers tease newspaper carriers and - aw, shucks - muss up their hair. A town where the good guys really are good, the villains are put in their place and the victims are saved from harm.

Baldly outlined, "Plainsong," Kent Haruf's third novel, might seem like a feel-good movie cranked out for Disney or the Family Channel. Except that Haruf has a lot going on that's not immediately apparent.

For one thing, he makes the victories only temporary and the future uncertain. More to the point, he writes with a plainspoken, hardscrabble edge that saves his story from sentimentality. It's a noun-and-verb-only style that's part Russell Banks, part Raymond Carver, but altogether his own.

Like those predecessors, Haruf knows that bad things too often happen to regular folks. He's equally aware of the stern backbone - call it character - that enables them to overcome bleak circumstances.

Maggie Jones, a colleague of Guthrie's, steps in as Victoria's confidante. After the girl is kicked out of her own home, this kindly teacher takes her in. Then when her father's senility renders this arrangement impossible, Maggie secures a most unlikely refuge for her charge - with the McPheron brothers outside town.

Much of the book's touching likability comes from this odd pairing of young and old, as the baton of decency is passed on from one generation to another. Raymond and Harold McPheron are more comfortable with cows than with people. They've lived in the same house all their lives. They have no more knowledge of teen-age mores than if they inhabited the moon. But their bedrock sense of right and wrong includes the decency to give the kid a second chance.



Significantly, it's the distance and difference between Victoria and her benefactors that allows her to tolerate this makeshift household. When Maggie and the girl first drive up to the farmhouse, Haruf writes that the McPherons get off their tractor and approach "as deliberately as church deacons." Eventually, and to their astonishment, they take such pleasure in the baby's arrival that they insist on buying the local department store's most expensive crib.

If the McPheron brothers are blessed with an unjaded sensibility untouched by contemporary discontents, the Guthrie boys, Ike and Bobby, are genuine innocents. Their introduction to all sorts of scary stuff - their mother's depression and departure, the sight of fornicating teen-agers in an abandoned house, the death of a beloved horse, the death of an old woman on their paper route - lends the book an elemental, almost sacramental, weight.

Though you keep expecting shootouts among various warring parties, there are none in "Plainsong." Several people do come to blows, but more often Haruf prefers to ratchet up the tension and then release it in nonviolent scenes that elucidate character.

Now and then, too, the author adds a dash of humor to leaven his somber tale. The laconic McPherons, for whom females amount to an alien species, for example, try their damndest to open a conversation with young Victoria by probing her opinions on farm commodity prices.

Haruf's first-rate previous novel, "Where You Once Belonged" (1990), was also set in the fictional town of Holt. It set off two former high-school friends who in adulthood find themselves on opposite sides of a community dispute. The man of integrity and principle loses out. The man of philistine arrogance and brute power wins.

By comparison, the writing of "Plainsong" posed a far more formidable task. To portray genuinely good people, especially in their time of triumph, however temporary, is to risk being called sentimental and maudlin. The artist faces no more difficult challenge. Kent Haruf's splendid "Plainsong" succeeds beautifully. Elegant in its simplicity, elemental in its power, it arouses deep and hard-earned emotions.

**Source Citation:**"Quiet insight into life in a Colorado town.(PERSPECTIVE)." *The Star-Ledger (Newark, NJ)* (Dec 12, 1999): 004. *InfoTrac Custom Newspapers*. Thomson Gale. Farmington Community Library. 02 February 2006  
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Newsweek, Oct 4, 1999 v134 i14 p67

**The Heart of the Country: A novel about a small town generates a big buzz.** (BOOKS)(Arts & Entertainment)  
(Review) Giles, Jeff.

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Independent booksellers tend to have good taste and big mouths. They were pressing "Cold Mountain" and "Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood" into customers' hands back when their counterparts at the chain stores were--well, you saw "You've Got Mail," you get the idea. According to a new poll conducted by the American Booksellers Association, indie stores have a new favorite they're eager to sell: Kent Haruf's third novel, "Plainsong." You've never heard of it. Relax. No one has.

"Plainsong," which is only now arriving in stores, takes place in a little town east of Denver. There's a large cast. But the most compelling characters are newspaper boys named Ike and Bobby, whose mom seems to be in the midst of a nervous breakdown, and a high-schooler named Victoria Roubideaux. In short order, Victoria finds out she's pregnant and gets thrown out of her house. The father's name is Dwayne--enough said--and when he disappears, Victoria is taken in by the gruff old McPheron brothers, who never married and who know far more about cattle than they know about womenfolk. Here's one brother trying to think of the word for bathroom: "Why hell. You know. The commode. The indoor outhouse."

Haruf's novel moves slowly at times, and some of the characters are so overly familiar that, even early on, you know the sort of songs the author means to play on your heartstrings. Still, the book is written in a fine, spare prose, and it's generous in spirit. By the end, "Plainsong" is a moving look at our capacity for both pointless cruelty and simple decency, our ability to walk out of the wreckage of one family and build a stronger one where it used to stand. Ike and Bobby see things they are far too young to see--sex, death, etc.--even as their mother drifts away. Victoria and the McPherons construct a life: "Together they made a kind of parade. People on the square... watched them pass, turning to stare as the two old men and the pregnant girl went by."

Haruf himself grew up the son of a Methodist preacher in Colorado. "I've done a whole bunch of different jobs," says the author, 56. "Worked on farms and ranches. Orphanages. Hospitals. All kinds of things. I was simply trying to make a living." For nine years he's been teaching at Southern Illinois University, at Carbondale. Haruf seems pleased, but overwhelmed, by the enthusiasm for his novel: "I had no expectations. I hadn't published a book for, what, eight or nine years. I really had no clue about the quality of the book. I thought it was OK--as good as I could make it."

The conventional wisdom is that authors get only one chance in this world. If your first novel doesn't sell, publishers and bookstores lose interest and your career stalls, barring an act of God or Oprah. But Haruf's early novels are set to come out in paperback next summer, and "Plainsong" has become a priority at Knopf. "The sales reps have been talking about the book nonstop," says Knopf's director of independent bookselling, Ruth Liebmann, "and at a certain point the booksellers started talking to each other. I don't know how to describe it--spontaneous combustion." Now comes the moment when the public weighs in. Watch for fireworks over the plains.

**Document Number:** A55891259

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## Biography Resource Center

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**Publishers Weekly**, Nov 1, 1999 v246 i44 p59

**Kent Haruf: Home on the Plains.** (Interview) BLADES, JOHN.

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WHETHER IT'S THOMAS WOLFE scribbling on top of a refrigerator or Jack Kerouac typing a book on a continuous roll of paper, fiction writers often resort to some curious practices to get the words flowing. For his third novel, *Plainsong*, Kent Haruf devised what may be the most curious yet. Sitting at his typewriter, Haruf would remove his glasses and cover his eyes with a stocking cap. For an hour or so, he would type blind, sometimes but not often running past the bottom of a page, trying to achieve freshness and spontaneity without being distracted by the sight of words on paper.

In the process, Haruf may have come upon the magic m.o. for fiction writing. As the author of two previous (and conventionally composed) novels, Haruf didn't have any high commercial expectations for *Plainsong* (Forecasts, Aug. 2), anticipating the customary respectful reviews and minuscule sales. But Haruf hadn't reckoned on the magnetic power of the book or the marketing clout of his latest publisher, Knopf. By all indications, Haruf's novel may be on its way to becoming the sleeper of the fall season, with a reception akin to that of *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cold Mountain*. Shortly before pub date, *Newsweek* issued this forecast: "Watch for fireworks over the plains."

The fireworks--in the form of glowing reviews, publicity and a National Book Award nomination for fiction--have already started by the time PW connects with Haruf at his modest bungalow in Murphysboro, Ill., a few miles west of the Southern Illinois University campus in Carbondale, where he teaches fiction writing. The author is surprised, humbled and gratified by the attention being showered on his novel, but he's admittedly dismayed by all the personal attention it's bringing him. "I've done what I can in writing the book," Haruf says. "I'm willing to do my small part in promoting it--I don't mind giving readings and I can fumble my way through interviews--but I'd much rather leave myself out of it... I prefer to be anonymous."

As much by circumstance as choice, Haruf got his wish with his first two novels, *The Tie That Binds* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984) and *Where You Once Belonged* (Summit, 1990), which were published with little fanfare or residual fallout. But as he's quickly discovering, *Plainsong* is a dramatically different story. Midway through his interview with PW, he takes a call from an SIU colleague, who congratulates him on the *Newsweek* article and suggests that Haruf is on the brink of becoming a "famous author." The presumption annoys Haruf. "This country's crazy in terms of fame and what people think it means," he complains, after hanging up. "They expect a writer to be something between a Hollywood starlet and the village idiot."

Despite the momentary gruffness, Haruf is affable and forthcoming about his life and work. Sitting in a rocking chair in his family room, dressed in a blue-checked shirt, jeans and running shoes, he seems casually professorial, if somewhat wary and ill at ease. He has a round, friendly face, round glasses, pale eyes, a mustache and grayish sandy hair--perfectly ordinary features, in other words, that under ordinary circumstances would assure him of all the anonymity he wants.

If *Plainsong* does turn out to be his "breakout" novel, Haruf is relieved that it came later in his career rather than sooner, now that he's older and wiser about the capricious ways of publishing and literary celebrity. "I'm 56," says the novelist, "and I've been around long enough to know that this is in part a matter of luck. I don't think it's turned my head. Fame is very seductive and can be very dangerous if you're trying to get your work done."

For Haruf, great literature has proved to be far more seductive, as he found when he was introduced to Hemingway and Faulkner during his sophomore year at Nebraska Wesleyan University. "I was just stunned by the quality and richness of their writing," he recalls. "It changed my life. I fell in love with literature, and with writing, and it became like a religion to me."

Once he started writing fiction himself, Haruf followed Faulkner's example by staking out his own "little postage stamp of native soil." Like his two earlier novels, *Plainsong* takes place in and around Holt, a hamlet in the flatlands of northeastern Colorado, nearer to the Kansas and Nebraska borders than to Denver or the Rockies. Along with its surrounding farms and homesteads, Holt has proved as fertile--and will perhaps be as inexhaustible--a source for

Haruf's fiction as the apocryphal Yoknapatawpha County was for Faulkner's. "I have something like a holy connection to that part of the world," Haruf says of the Great Plains.

That part of the world is where Haruf was born and spent his most impressionable years, through high school, college and beyond. The son of a Methodist preacher, Haruf was a "ministry brat," migrating with his family from one small Colorado town to the next, as his father was assigned to a succession of churches. "Growing up in those little towns was a great advantage for a writer," Haruf says. "You know everybody who lives there--the town mayor, the town drunk.... All this gave me a real sense of the community, its dynamics and its history."

Haruf's feeling for the dynamics of smalltown life is especially evident in *Plainsong*. As the title and introductory note suggest, the novel is a "simple and unadorned melody" for half a dozen or so voices--people whose lives are complicated but enlarged and enriched as they intersect with one other: Guthrie, a high school teacher, is abandoned by his disturbed wife, leaving him to care for two young sons; Victoria, a pregnant and unmarried student in one of Guthrie's classes, is "adopted" by two elderly brothers, bachelor farmers who need Victoria as much as she needs them. "You're going to die someday without ever having had enough trouble in your life," a friend tells them. "Not of the right kind anyway."

"That's a fond notion of mine," Haruf says, talking about how adversity and sacrifice can bring healing, strength and wisdom, "assuming you survive and come through without being maimed in some way. These two old guys know how to deal with cattle and ranch life. But they need trouble of another kind to fully mature."

#### Hard-won Success

Though his ambitions centered on being a writer, Haruf took a slow and circuitous route toward that goal. After graduating from Nebraska Wesleyan in 1965, he joined the Peace Corps and spent two years teaching English in Turkey. He was briefly a grad student at the University of Kansas, dropping out when he found "they were not talking about books the way I wanted to." A conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, he spent another two years working in hospitals and an orphanage, "in lieu of military service."

"All that time I was writing," says Haruf, "or learning how to write." He was so determined to get into the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, he recalls, that he moved his wife and infant daughter to Iowa City. "I kept submitting and resubmitting work, and finally they let me in, on probation, I think. My first stories were meager--autobiographical, derivative of Hemingway, predictable, not distinguished in any way. But I must have made progress pretty fast because they gave me a fellowship my second year, one of only four, and that was a big boost."

At Iowa, Haruf was not only learning to write, he was learning from some eminent writers who were teaching there at the time--John Irving, Seymour Krim, Dan Wakefield and Vance Bourjaily, among them. Haruf's masters thesis at Iowa was a novel, which was optioned by Harper & Row on the basis of four chapters. But Harper rejected the finished book, as did a number of other publishers--and rightly so, says Haruf. "In retrospect, it's pretty clear that it didn't deserve to be published."

After graduating from Iowa, Haruf worked construction and shelved library books in Colorado, then taught high school English, including a four-year sojourn in Madison, Wis. He was 41 before he made his first appearance in print, with a short story in a literary magazine, *Puerto del Sol*, and he finished yet another novel, written during his summer vacations from teaching. When Harper & Row passed on it, Haruf contacted John Irving, who put him in touch with his agent, Peter Matson. "He warned me that he'd sent 50 other writers to Matson, and he'd taken none of the others. But Matson liked the book, and it didn't take him long to sell it" (to what was then Holt, Rinehart & Winston).

The *Tie That Binds* has had a "fortunate life," Haruf says, including two (soon to be three) paperback reprints. More fortunately, it brought him a \$25,000 Whiting Award, a PEN/Hemingway citation, and a job teaching freshman composition at Nebraska Wesleyan. When *Where You Once Belonged* was published six years later, by Summit Books, it got equally good reviews, but sold disappointingly, fewer copies than his first novel. "I was really in despair when I finished that book," Haruf says. "I had three daughters by then, all in school, all hungry. I was teaching a lot, and I was under pressure to get it done. There are good things in it, but I wanted it to be better than it turned out to be."

Largely on the strength of those two novels, Haruf says, he did secure a more prestigious teaching position, eight years ago, at Southern Illinois University, where he became the latest in a distinguished roster of novelists-in-residence, following John Gardner, Richard Russo and Philip Graham. Better yet, it brought him a significantly lighter academic load, which allowed him to teach fiction writing in the afternoons and devote his mornings to his own fiction.



Haruf had early hints that *Plainsong* was going to have a bigger impact, both critically and commercially, than his previous novels. First, it was readily accepted by Knopf's Gary Fisketjon, an editor with an all-star list headed by Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff and Cormac McCarthy, all writers Haruf greatly admires. Next, he learned the first printing was 70,000 copies, "a huge leap from my first books." Once the reviews started appearing--typified by the paean in the *New York Times*, calling it "a novel so foursquare, so delicate and lovely, that it has the power to exalt the reader"--it was obvious that *Plainsong* wasn't simply on its way--it had arrived, with the force of a small meteorite.

As cautious as he is unassuming, Haruf says it's still much too early to tell if *Plainsong* will live up to its blockbuster expectations. To give it a push, the novelist agreed to a 15-city tour, the first he's made on behalf of a book. Once the promotional carousel stops, however, Haruf says he'll gladly hop off and return to the slow lane. The author is building a vacation cabin in Colorado, the southwestern part of the state, rather than the northeastern, he says, because his second wife, Cathy, prefers the mountains.

It seems safe to assume that Haruf will be back in the Great Plains with his next novel, perhaps picking up some of the characters whose lives were still in limbo at the conclusion of *Plainsong*. If that is his plan, Haruf politely declines to discuss it, explaining: "I'm very superstitious about that. Once you begin talking about what you're working on, you define the book in ways that are limiting."

If he refuses to divulge what the book will be about, Haruf doesn't make a secret of how the first draft will be written--with a stocking cap over his face. Judging by the results he got with *Plainsong*, he'd be foolish to abandon the practice. He may be writing fiction with his eyes shut, but his mind's eyes are wide open.

Blades is a former book editor of the *Chicago Tribune* and author of the 1992 novel *Small Game*.

**Document Number:** A57442836

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## Plainsong (Hardcover)

by Kent Haruf

★★★★☆ (425 customer reviews)

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## Editorial Reviews

### Amazon.com

Plainsong, according to Kent Haruf's epigraph, is "any simple and unadorned melody or air." It's a perfect description of this lovely, rough-edged book, set on the very edge of the Colorado plains. Tom Guthrie is a high school teacher whose wife can't--or won't--get out of bed; the McPhérons are two bachelor brothers who know little about the world beyond their farm gate; Victoria Roubideaux is a pregnant 17-year-old with no place to turn. Their lives parallel each other in much the same way any small-town lives would--**until Maggie Jones, another teacher, makes them intersect.** Even as she tries to draw Guthrie out of his black cloud, she sends Victoria to live with the two elderly McPhéron brothers, who know far more about cattle than about teenage girls. Trying to console her when she think she's hurt her baby, the best lie they can come up with is this: "I knew of a heifer we had one time that was carrying a calf, and she got a length of fencewire down her some way and it never hurt her or the calf."

Holt, Colorado, is the kind of small town where everyone knows everyone's business before that business even happens. In a way, that's true of the book, too. There's not a lot of suspense here, plotwise; you can see each narrative twist and turn coming several miles down the pike. What *Plainsong* has instead is note-perfect dialogue, surrounded by prose that's straightforward yet rich in particulars: "a woman walking a white lapdog on a piece of ribbon," glimpsed from a car window; the boys' mother, her face "as pale as schoolhouse chalk"; the smells of hay and manure, the variations of prairie light. Even the novel's larger questions are sized to a domestic scale. Will Guthrie find love? Will Victoria run away with the father of her baby? Will the McPhérons learn to hold a conversation? But in this case, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and *Plainsong* manages to capture nothing less than an entire world--fencing pliers, calf-pullers, and all. Kent Haruf has a gorgeous ear, and a knack for rendering the simple complex. --*Mary Park*

### From Publishers Weekly

In the same way that the plains define the American landscape, small-town life in the heartlands is a quintessentially American experience. Holt, Colo., a tiny prairie community near Denver, is both the setting for and the psychological matrix of Haruf's beautifully executed new novel. Alternating chapters focus on eight compassionately imagined characters whose lives undergo radical change during the course of one year. High school teacher Tom Guthrie's depressed wife moves out of their house, leaving him to care for their young sons. Ike, 10, and Bobby, nine, are polite, sensitive boys who mature as they observe the puzzling behavior of adults they love. At school, Guthrie must deal with a vicious student bully whose violent behavior eventually menaces Ike and Bobby, in a scene that will leave readers with palpating hearts. Meanwhile, pregnant teenager Victoria Roubideaux, evicted by her mother, seeks help from kindhearted, pragmatic teacher Maggie Jones, who convinces the elderly McPhéron brothers, Raymond and Harold, to let Victoria live with them in their old farmhouse. After many decades of bachelor existence, these gruff, unpolished cattle farmers must relearn the art of conversation when Victoria enters their lives. The touching humor of their awkward interaction endows the story with a heartwarming dimensionality. Haruf's (The Tie That Binds) descriptions of rural existence are a richly nuanced mixture of stark details and poetic evocations of the natural world.



Weather and landscape are integral to tone and mood, serving as backdrop to every scene. His plain, Hemingwayesque prose takes flight in lyrical descriptions of sunsets and birdsong, and condenses to the matter-of-fact in describing the routines of animal husbandry. In one scene, a rancher's ungloved hand repeatedly reaches though fecal matter to check cows for pregnancy; in another, readers follow the step-by-step procedure of an autopsy on a horse. Walking a tightrope of restrained design, Haruf steers clear of sentimentality and melodrama while constructing a taut narrative in which revelations of character and rising emotional tensions are held in perfect balance. This is a compelling story of grief, bereavement, loneliness and anger, but also of kindness, benevolence, love and the making of a strange new family. In depicting the stalwart courage of decent, troubled people going on with their lives, Haruf's quietly eloquent account illumines the possibilities of grace. Agent, Peter Matson. 75,000 copy first printing; 12-city author tour.

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### **From School Library Journal**

YA-This saga of seven residents of Holt, CO, details the problems they face and how they come together to solve them. Their divergent stories begin with Tom Guthrie, a high school teacher whose wife suffers a breakdown and abandons him and their two young sons. The Guthrie boys are often on their own while their stressed-out father struggles to keep the family together. Next are Victoria Roubideaux, 17 years old, alone, and pregnant; and Harold and Raymond McPheron, two elderly brothers who know nothing about "real life" outside their farm. It is Maggie Jones, Tom's colleague, who provides him with solace and brings resolution to these many dilemmas. Maggie talks the McPheron brothers into taking the pregnant teenager in, even though they have some reservations about this arrangement. Victoria and the two lonely men adjust to one another and form a family unit that none of them has known before. The characters tell their stories in alternating chapters. All of them are struggling but it is their caring, kindness, and forgiving spirits that help them support one another. There is a keen sense of place here—a place where family and community matter. YAs can learn from this novel about nontraditional families, about small towns where everybody knows everybody else's business, and about the power of love.

*Carol Clark, formerly at Fairfax County Public Schools, VA*

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### **From Library Journal**

Two bachelor farmer brothers, a pregnant high school girl, two young brothers, and two devoted high school teachers—this is the interesting group of people, some related by blood but most not, featured in the award-winning Haruf's touching new novel. Set in the plains of Colorado, east of Denver, the novel comprises several story lines that flow into one. Tom Guthrie, a high school history teacher, is having problems with his wife and with an unruly student at school—problems that affect his young sons, Ike and Bob, as well. Meanwhile, the pregnant Victoria Roubideaux has been abandoned by her family. With the assistance of another teacher, Maggie Jones, she finds refuge with the McPheron brothers—who seem to know more about cows than people. Lyrical and well crafted, the tight narrative about how families can be made between folks who are not necessarily blood relatives makes for enjoyable reading. Highly recommended for public libraries.

*-Robin Nesbitt, Columbus Metropolitan Lib., OH*

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### **The New York Times, Michiko Kakutani**

With *Plainsong*, he has conjured up an entire community, and ineluctably immersed the reader in its dramas. He has written a compelling and compassionate novel.

### **From AudioFile**

Haruf's musical conceit creates a delicate line of atmosphere and a narrative of individual voices blended together to tell a story. A pregnant adolescent; two lonely, old ranchers; a man in marital trouble; his children; and the woman who waits for him make up the various parts. The deliberate pace provides its own drama. Stechschulte tries to enliven things with regional accents, but his strong gender differentiation has unfortunate results. Women do not speak in whispers, and it's disturbing to hear these strong-willed examples so portrayed. This is a work that should be read straight. S.B.S. © AudioFile 2000, Portland, Maine-- Copyright © AudioFile, Portland, Maine --This text refers to the **Audio Cassette** edition.

**From Booklist**

It's a good thing young Ike and Bobby Guthrie are close, because they're in for a spell of loss and radical change. Victoria Roubideaux, 17, is too, but she has no sibling to stand beside her during bouts of morning sickness, or when her mother throws her out of the house. Haruf, author of *The Tie That Binds* (1984), alternates between the Guthrie boys' adventures and Vicky's quest to find a safe place for herself and her baby, but the two story lines soon entwine because all lives converge in the small Colorado town of Holt, which he so adroitly portrays. The Guthrie boys are often on their own after their mother leaves, while their nearly overwhelmed father, Tom, a high-school teacher, is distracted by the threats of a violent student. Vicky goes to Maggie Jones, a colleague of Tom's, for help. Unable to provide her with the sanctuary she needs, Maggie delivers Vicky to the elderly McPheron brothers, farmers as tightly connected as Tom's sons. Vicky revolutionizes their staid lives, and they provide her with her first true home, and the resulting familial love seems to set the entire countryside aglow. Haruf's narrative voice is spare and procedural, and his salt-of-the-earth characters are reticent almost to the point of mannerism until it becomes clear that their terseness is the result of profound shyness and an immensity of feeling. Haruf's unforgettable tale is both emotionally complex and elemental, following, as it so gracefully does, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. *Donna Seaman*

**From Kirkus Reviews**

A stirring meditation on the true nature and necessity of the family. Among the several damaged families in this beautifully cadenced and understated tale is that of Tom Guthrie, a high-school history teacher in small Holt, Colorado, whose left to raise his two young sons, Ike and Bobby, alone when his troubled wife first withdraws from them and then, without explanation, abandons them altogether. Victoria Roubideaux, a high-school senior, is thrown out of her house when her mother discovers she's pregnant. Harold and Raymond McPheron, two aging but self-reliant cattle ranchers, are haunted by their imaginings of what they may have missed in life by electing never to get married, never to strike out on their own. Haruf (*Where You Once Belonged*, 1989, etc.) believably draws these various incomplete or troubled figures together. Victoria, pretty, insecure, uncertain of her own worth, has allowed herself to be seduced by a weak, spoiled lout who quickly disappears. When her bitter mother locks her out, she turns to Maggie Jones, a compassionate teacher and a neighbor, for help. Maggie places Victoria with the McPheron brothers, an arrangement that Guthrie, a friend of both Maggie and the McPherons, supports. Some of Haruf's best passages trace with precision and delicacy the ways in which, gradually, the gentle, the lonely brothers and Victoria begin to adapt to each other and then, over the course of Victoria's pregnancy, to form a resilient family unit. Harold and Raymond's growing affection for Victoria gives her a sense of self-worth, which proves crucial when her vanished (and abusive) boyfriend, comes briefly back into her life. Haruf is equally good at catching the ways in which Tom and his sons must quietly struggle to deal with their differing feelings of loss, guilt, and abandonment. Everyone is struggling here, and it's their decency, and their determination to care for one another, Haruf suggests, that gets them through. A touching work, as honest and precise as the McPheron brothers themselves. -- *Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

**Review**

advance praise for **Plainsong**

"Kent Haruf's new novel **Plainsong** is nothing short of a revelation. I don't expect to read a better novel this year. Or next, for that matter."

--Richard Russo

"I read **Plainsong** in one sitting, unwilling--unable--to look up until I'd finished. Kent Haruf has given us a pure blessing of a book: a novel of such sheer sweet amplitude, grace and humanity."

--Beverly Lowry

"**Plainsong** is the marvelous story of how seven extraordinary members of a tiny prairie community--two dedicated teachers, two young boys wise beyond their years, a pair of wonderfully idiosyncratic rancher brothers and a pregnant high school girl--come together, in the face of great difficulties, to form the most appealing extended family in contemporary fiction. With **Plainsong**, Kent Haruf has written an American masterwork: a profound, witty, warmhearted and tough-minded account of a place where family and community still come first. **Plainsong** is the best new novel I've read since **Cold Mountain**."

--Howard Frank Mosher

"**Plainsong** is a beauty, as spare and heartbreaking as an abandoned homestead cabin, always tough but humane, never sentimental. I loved the prose, as bright and hard as the winter sun sparkling off a sandy snowbank, and the characters, scrubbed to their essentials by the extremes of the Great Plains weather. It's a story that draws the reader like a heat mirage."

--James Crumley

### Review

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### Book Description

A heartstrong story of family and romance, tribulation and tenacity, set on the High Plains east of Denver.

In the small town of Holt, Colorado, a high school teacher is confronted with raising his two boys alone after their mother retreats first to the bedroom, then altogether. A teenage girl -- her father long since disappeared, her mother unwilling to have her in the house -- is pregnant, alone herself, with nowhere to go. And out in the country, two brothers, elderly bachelors, work the family homestead, the only world they've ever known.

From these unsettled lives emerges a vision of life, and of the town and landscape that bind them together -- their fates somehow overcoming the powerful circumstances of place and station, their confusion, curiosity, dignity and humor intact and resonant. As the milieu widens to embrace fully four generations, Kent Haruf displays an emotional and aesthetic authority to rival the past masters of a classic American tradition.

Utterly true to the rhythms and patterns of life, **Plainsong** is a novel to care about, believe in, and learn from.



# Biography Resource Center

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**World Literature Today**, Summer 2000 v74 i3 p606

**Plainsong.** (Review)(Brief Article) LaHood, Marvin J.

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Kent Haruf. *Plainsong*. New York. Knopf. 1999. 301 pages. \$24. ISBN 0-375-40618-2.

*Plainsong* is defined as any simple and unadorned melody or air. Kent Haruf's novel is indeed an example of this, a beautifully written and perfectly modulated song about a small group of people in the town of Holt, Colorado, in the high plains east of Denver.

Kent Haruf was born and raised in the rural Colorado of the novel's setting. Educated at Nebraska Wesleyan and the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, he taught English in Turkey with the Peace Corps and is now novelist-in-residence at Southern Illinois University. His first novel, *The Tie That Binds* (1984), won the \$25,000 Whiting Award and a PEN/Hemingway citation. A second novel, *Lightning Flashed*, was published in 1995, *Plainsong* received a National Book Award nomination and won the Mountains & Plains Regional Book Award for fiction.

Tom Guthrie, a high-school teacher, has just been left by his wife through circumstances he doesn't quite understand. Now he must struggle to save his sons, Ike (ten) and Bobby (nine). Victoria Roubedeaux, a high-school junior, is pregnant by a boy from out of town who does not contact her, and soon her husbandless mother evicts her. The Beckmans are a dysfunctional family whose main concern is keeping their bully of a son on the basketball team. And finally there are two long-orphaned brothers, Harold and Raymond McPherson, living a lonely and laconic existence on the outskirts of town. All of these characters interact: some are redeemed by love, while others, like the Beckmans, find neither enlightenment nor grace.

All the characters in the novel are connected in some way. Haruf's beautifully spare prose is the perfect vehicle for describing the poignancy of their lives, particularly the relationship of Victoria and the McPherson brothers with whom she goes to live. The sharing of these fractured lives in meaningful new family relationships after the old relationships are broken is the heart of this novel. Kent Haruf's sensibility and prose style are perfectly suited to this theme.

Marvin J. LaHood SUNY College, Buffalo

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## Plainsong by Kent Haruf

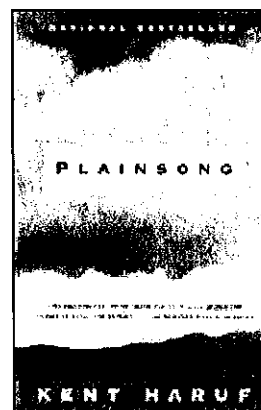
**List Price:** \$13.00

**Pages:** 301

**Format:** Paperback

**ISBN:** 0375705856

**Publisher:** Vintage Books



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## Author Biography

Kent Haruf grew up on the high plains of northeastern Colorado, the son of a Methodist minister. He received a B.A. from Nebraska Wesleyan University in 1965 and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa in 1973. He has worked at a wide variety of jobs, including spending two years with the Peace Corps in Turkey; since 1991 he has taught fiction and fiction writing at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Haruf is also the author of *The Tie That Binds* (1984), the recipient of a Whiting Foundation Award and a special citation from the PEN/Hemingway Foundation, and *Where You Once Belonged* (1990). His short fiction has appeared in *Puerto del Sol*, *Grand Street*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *The Best American Short Stories*. Haruf lives with his wife, Cathy, in Colorado and Illinois. *Plainsong*, his third novel, was a finalist for the 1999 National Book Award.

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# Biography Resource Center

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## Kent Haruf

1943-

**Nationality:** American

**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2004.

Entry Updated : 09/21/2004

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### "Sidelights"

The son of a Methodist minister, Kent Haruf was born and raised in the flatlands of northeastern Colorado, an environment that provides the background for his fiction. Haruf's career path to his long-time ambition of writing was a slow and convoluted one, involving attendance at several universities, a stint in the Peace Corps in Turkey (where he penned his first short stories), and numerous odd jobs, including being a janitor while he waited for the Iowa Writers Workshop to "take pity on him," as he told *Denver Post* interviewer Nancy Lofholm. After graduating from the prestigious University of Iowa Writers Workshop at the age of thirty, Haruf again worked construction and shelved library books in Colorado, then taught high-school English while he slowly developed his writing. He did not make his first appearance in print, a short story in a literary magazine, until eleven years later at the age of forty-one. That same year, 1984, his first novel was published. Speaking with John Blades of *Publishers Weekly*, Haruf described Holt, the fictional town that provides the setting for his novels, as his own "little postage stamp of native soil." Holt is a small Colorado farming community, close to the Kansas and Nebraska borders and more akin to the rural environments of those states than it is to cosmopolitan Denver to the west. Blades noted: "Along with its surrounding farms and homesteads, Holt has proved as fertile--and will perhaps be as inexhaustible--for Haruf's fiction as the apocryphal Yoknapatawpha County was for Faulkner's."

Haruf's first novel, *The Tie That Binds*, chronicles the long, hard life of Edith Goodnough, born near the turn of the twentieth century. Edith's story is told by Sanders Roscoe, the son of the man Edith loved but refused to marry, giving up her chance at happiness to care for a tyrannical crippled father. *The Tie That Binds* garnered Haruf several honors, including the 1986 Whiting Writer's Award. The novel was praised by critics as well; Ruth Doan MacDougall in the *Christian Science Monitor* observed that Haruf's "characters live, and the voice of his narrator reverberates after the last page: humorous, ironic, loving." Chris Wall in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* hailed *The Tie That Binds* as "an impressive, expertly crafted work of sensitivity and detail, absent the hokum that usually accompanies sad tales of simple women and their domineering fathers." Haruf also won accolades from Perry Glasser in the *New York Times Book Review*. The critic declared that the author's "work is rooted in a sense of place; his eye and ear are faithful to his subject." The novel brought him "a \$25,000 Whiting Award, a PEN/Hemingway citation, and a job teaching freshman composition at Nebraska Wesleyan," according to Blades.

Haruf followed *The Tie That Binds* with his 1991 work, *Where You Once Belonged*. This book centers on Jack Burdette, a villainous former high school football hero who manages to ruin many lives in his home town of Holt, Colorado. Narrating Jack's story is a man with a stake in the events, newspaper editor Pat Arbuckle. Richard Eder in the *Los*



*Angeles Times Book Review* offered a laudatory assessment of *Where You Once Belonged*, calling it "taut and deadly," and applauding the "disciplined economy" of "Haruf's writing." The critic concluded that the author's second novel is a "stirring and remarkable book." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called the book a "deeply affecting novel," and noted that "not a word is wasted in [Haruf's] brooding drama." A commentator for *Kirkus Reviews* observed that Haruf "does a beautiful job of capturing small-town life."

Haruf wrote his first two novels by conventional means. With his third he tried a radically different approach. Removing his glasses and placing a stocking cap (not wool) over his eyes, he typed his first draft blind on an old manual typewriter. Haruf's aim, as related by Blades, was "to achieve freshness and spontaneity without being distracted by the sight of words on the page." Haruf also told the *Boston Herald's* Rosemary Herbert, "Unlike the computer, which needs another command to make the work go on paper, the typewriter is more simple, direct. Something about the sound of the keys hitting makes an obvious connection between what you think and the results you get." The result was *Plainsong*, a novel subsequently lauded by critics even more highly than Haruf's earlier books. Even before its publication, *Plainsong* began drawing special attention. According to Daisy Maryles of *Publishers Weekly*, "Knopf's enthusiasm for [the novel] began last spring with the manuscript being passed around in-house; for a while, it was the most photocopied manuscript on Knopf's fall list." On the basis of editorial response to the book, a larger first printing was planned, along with increased publicity that included a twelve-city tour for Haruf.

In the epigraph to *Plainsong*, Haruf states that the title of the book refers to the "simple and unadorned" vocal melodies, sometimes sung by alternating voices, that have been used in Christian churches for centuries. The novel tells the story of six major characters and several subsidiary ones, and like a plainsong, the action is related from alternating perspectives of different characters in different chapters. Once again the setting is Holt, Colorado, and its environs. The plot begins with three separate tales that ultimately intertwine. A pregnant teenager, Victoria Roubideaux, is kicked out of her home by her mother; a local high school history teacher, Tom Guthrie, is abandoned by his wife and left to raise his two young sons alone; and two elderly bachelor brothers, Harold and Raymond McPherson, have consigned themselves to an isolated existence on their cattle ranch miles from town. "Although the intersection of these three sets of lonely lives might normally have all the melodramatic makings of a provincial soap opera," noted Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*, "Mr. Haruf orchestrates their convergence with such authority and grace that their stories materialize before the reader's eyes without a shred of contrivance."

Writing in a lean prose style that several reviewers compared to that of Hemingway, Haruf portrays the lives of his characters from the fall of one year through the spring of the next, often using images from the natural world and the changing seasons to complement the changes they experience. "A fugue upon weather and light plays throughout the novel," observed Verlyn Klinkenborg in a glowing review of the novel for the *New York Times Book Review*, while Donna Seaman of *Booklist* commented: "Haruf's narrative voice is spare and procedural, and his salt-of-the-earth characters are reticent almost to the point of mannerism until it becomes clear that their terseness is the result of profound shyness and an immensity of feeling. Haruf's unforgettable tale is both emotionally complex and elemental, following, as it so gracefully does, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth." London *Observer* critic, Selina Mills remarked, "Many American writers such as Cormac McCarthy have handled the subject of Midwest prairie towns and uncommunicative inhabitants before. Fiction, too, has often relied on musical form for narrative structure. Haruf, however, offers a fresh approach by creating layers, which intensify and deepen as the novel progresses, alternating between each character's life at every chapter. Like the 'unadorned melody' in the book's epigraph, the prose is simple and understated." Christian Stayner for the *Christian Science Monitor* described the characters as "richly-written." Although less overcome with the power of *Plainsong* than most reviewers, Robin Nesbitt of *Library Journal* nevertheless found it to be both "lyrical and well crafted" and a "tight narrative about how families can be made between folks who are not necessarily blood relatives [that] makes for enjoyable reading."

Knopf's confidence in *Plainsong* was justified when the novel became a National Book Award finalist and appeared on the *Publishers Weekly* best-seller lists, prompting further paperback reprints of Haruf's earlier novels. Discussing with Blades his "sudden" success at the age of fifty-six, Haruf noted: "This country's crazy in terms of fame and what people think it means. They expect a writer to be something between a Hollywood starlet and the village idiot. . . . Fame is very seductive and can be very dangerous if you're trying to get your work done." Lofholm quoted him on his success: "Haruf said writing has gotten more difficult: 'Your standards change. You want to do something better than you've done before.' He knows he's succeeded when a *New York Times* review calls *Plainsong* 'a novel foursquare, so delicate and lovely, that it has the power to exalt the reader.' But Haruf said he really knows he's made it when an eastern plains dairy farmer stabs his finger onto the cover of *A Tie That Binds* and says 'now that is exactly right'."

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Surname rhymes with "sheriff"; born February 24, 1943, in Pueblo, CO; son of Louis A. (a Methodist preacher) and Eleanor V. (a teacher and homemaker; maiden name, Shaver) Haruf; married Virginia K. Koon (divorced); married

Cathy Dempsey; children: Sorel, Whitney, Chaney (daughters). Education: Nebraska Wesleyan University, B.A., 1965; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 1973. Addresses: Home: P. O. Box 1580, Salida, CO 81201. Agent: Peter Matson, Sterling Lord Literistic, 65 Bleecker St., New York, NY 10012.

## AWARDS

PEN/Hemingway Foundation Special Citation, 1985; American Library Notable Books Award, 1985; Whiting Writer's Award, Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation, 1986, for *The Tie That Binds*; Maria Thomas Award, 1991; National Book Award finalist in fiction, 1999, Mt. Plains Booksellers Award, 2000, *Salon.com* Award, 2000, Alex Award, 2000, *New Yorker* Fiction Award finalist, 2000, *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Award finalist, 2000, *Book Sense* Award finalist, 2000, 10th Colorado Evil Companions Literary Award, 2002, and OneBook-AZ 2003 award, nominated for the Dublin IMPAC 2001 Literary Award, all for *Plainsong*.

## CAREER

Worked odd jobs, including farm laborer, construction worker, rural paper route carrier, hospital orderly, railroad worker, librarian, and orphanage house parent; served in the Peace Corps in Turkey, 1965-67; taught high school English in Wisconsin and Colorado, 1976-86; Nebraska Wesleyan University, Lincoln, assistant professor, 1986-91; Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, associate professor, 1991-2000.

## WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

### NOVELS

- *The Tie That Binds*, Holt (New York, NY), 1984.
- *Where You Once Belonged*, Summit Books (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Plainsong*, Knopf (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Eventide*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2004.

Also contributor of short stories to periodicals, including *Puerto del Sol*, *Grand Street*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Gettysburg Review*. Stories have appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1987; and *Where Past Meets Present*, University of Colorado Press (Boulder, CO), 1994.

## MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

Haruf's short story "Private Debts/Public Holdings" was adapted into a short film by Nancy Cooperstein for Chanticleer Films, 1987. CBS has acquired an option for TV rights to *Plainsong* and *The Tie That Binds*. *Plainsong* has been adapted for audio.

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

### BOOKS

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- *Denver Post*, October 17, 2001, p. F-01.
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- *Kirkus Reviews*, November 15, 1989, pp. 1618-1619.
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- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, January 27, 1985, p. 4; February 11, 1990, pp. 3, 7.
- *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 15, 1999, p. 1E.
- *News & Record* (Piedmont Triad, NC), November 14, 1999, p. H5.
- *Newsweek*, October 4, 1999, Jeff Giles, "The Heart of the Country, " p. 67.
- *New York Review of Books*, October 21, 1999, Joyce Carol Oates, "Wearing out the West, " p. 30.
- *New York Times*, October 8, 1999, pp. B45, E47; December 1, 1999, pp. B4, E1.
- *New York Times Book Review*, January 6, 1985, Perry Glasser, review of *The Tie That Binds*, p. 16; October 3, 1999, p. 7.
- *Observer* (London, England), May 14, 2000, p. 12.
- *Publishers Weekly*, August 24, 1984, review of *The Tie That Binds*, p. 74; December 1, 1989, Sybil Steinberg, review of *Where You Once Belonged*, p. 47; August 2, 1999, review of *Plainsong*, p. 70; October 25, 1999, Daisy Maryles, "This Novel Just Sings, " p. 19; November 1, 1999, review of *Plainsong*, pp. 46, 59, John Blades, "Kent Haruf: Home on the Plains, " p. 59; February 7, 2000, p. 22; September 4, 2000, p. 24.
- *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, CO), February 27, 2000, p. 2E.
- *School Library Journal*, June, 2000, p. 173.
- *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 8, 1999, p. E2.
- *Star-Ledger* (Newark, NJ), December 12, 1999, p. 004.



- *Time*, October 25, 1999, Elizabeth Gleick, review of *Plainsong*, p. 130.
- *Times* (London, England), April 22, 2000, p. 22; April 28, 2001, p. 16.
- *Wall Street Journal*, October 8, 1999, p. W10; October 11, 1999, p. B1.

## ONLINE

- *January Magazine.com*, <http://www.januarymagazine.com/> (November 1999), review of *Plainsong*.
- *PageOneLit.com*, <http://www.pageonelit.com/> (March 9, 2004), interview with Haruf.
- *PeaceCorpsWriters.com*, <http://www.peacecorpswriters.org/> (March 4, 2004), interview with Haruf,
- *Random House Web site*, <http://www.randomhouse.com/> (March 9, 2004), interview with Haruf.\*

## SOURCE CITATION

*Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2006. Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2006. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>

**Document Number:** H1000043106

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## Kent Haruf

**Birth:** February 24, 1943 in Pueblo, Colorado, United States  
**Nationality:** American  
**Occupation:** Writer, Educator  
**Source:** *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, Volume 44. Gale Group, 2002.

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### BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Like William Faulkner before him, Kent Haruf has created a world out of a single fictionalized geographic region. For Faulkner it was mythical Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi; for Haruf it is Holt County, located on the high plains of northeastern Colorado. There Haruf, son of a Methodist minister and born and raised in the same flatlands, has set three award-winning novels: *The Tie That Binds*, *Where Once You Belonged*, and *Plainsong*. Haruf's novels tell of simple working people, residents of a land where--as with Raymond Carver's fictional characters--things will probably get worse before they get better. Haruf's characters struggle and yearn and face life head-on, but in the end are disappointed as often as they are redeemed.

Haruf's career path to his long-time ambition of writing was a slow and convoluted one, involving attendance at several universities, a stint in the Peace Corps in Turkey, and numerous odd jobs. After graduating from the prestigious University of Iowa Writers' Workshop at the age of thirty, Haruf did not make his first appearance in print, a short story in a literary magazine, until eleven years later at the age of forty-one. That same year, 1984, his first novel was published.

Speaking with John Blades of *Publishers Weekly*, Haruf described Holt, the fictional town that provides the setting for his novels, as his own "little postage stamp of native soil." Holt is a small Colorado farming community, close to the Kansas and Nebraska borders and more akin to the rural environments of those states than it is to cosmopolitan Denver to the west. Blades noted: "Along with its surrounding farms and homesteads, Holt has proved as fertile--and will perhaps be as inexhaustible--for Haruf's fiction as the apocryphal Yoknapatawpha County was for Faulkner's." "I have something like a holy connection to that part of the world," Haruf told Blades.

### A Rural Youth

Born in 1943, in Pueblo, Colorado, Haruf was a self-described "ministry brat," moving with his family from one small Colorado town to the next throughout his youth as his father was assigned to one church after another. He spent most of his youth in small towns, places with a population of a few thousand inhabitants. "I think back on that time as idyllic," Haruf told Michael McGregor in an interview for *Writer's Chronicle*, "because we could go anywhere on our bikes and we knew people all over the town." Haruf also grew up in a family of readers, and not just the Bible. His parents were always reading, and Haruf took after them, enjoying in particular the "Black Stallion" series and *My Friend Flicka*. His was also a great storytelling family, and Haruf would often sit around listening to his father tell tales after the family dinner. "The ones I liked best were of his growing up on a homestead in North Dakota, so far away from the nearest town that my grandfather hired a schoolteacher just for the family," Haruf reported to McGregor. Haruf's father never lost his love for rural folks and ways, and passed this on to his son, as well.

Haruf attended college at Nebraska Wesleyan University, a small liberal arts college, where he discovered some of the writers that would most greatly influence him, including Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. Faulkner's story "The Bear," and novel *The Sound and the Fury* quickly became among Haruf's favorites. From Hemingway the budding writer learned the importance of the well-chosen word, and from Faulkner he learned that he could take his fiction out of the city and place it in a rural setting. Graduating from college in 1965, Haruf decided to join the Peace Corps and was sent to Turkey for two years to teach English as a second language in the village of Felahiye on the Anatolian Plateau. "Like a lot of people," Haruf told Jeff Martin in an interview with *PeaceCorpsWriters*, "I had a notion of doing some good in the world and seeing as much of it as possible." He found his two years in Turkey to be a "wonder, an enormously exhilarating experience," as he explained to Martin. "It basically taught me that, in elemental ways, people are the same all over. It also taught me how to deal with isolation and boredom." More importantly, it was during these Peace Corps years that Haruf really began to write, keeping a journal and composing short stories. Additionally, Haruf's Peace Corps years prepared him for the arduous process of becoming a writer: "It made me less interested in material things and more interested in the qualities of the human spirit," Haruf told Martin. "After the Peace Corps you never see yourself as being poor. There, you see real poverty and you can't feel very sorry for yourself after that."

## Apprentice Writer

Back in the United States, Haruf attended graduate school for a time at the University of Kansas, but he dropped out after discovering, as he told Blades, "they were not talking about books the way I wanted to." This was at the height of the Vietnam War, and Haruf petitioned to become a conscientious objector. He served two years of alternate service in hospitals and an orphanage. Over the years Haruf has worked at a baroque mix of occupations and locations, as he listed on his Web site: "a chicken ranch in Colorado, the Royal Gorge in the Rocky mountains, a construction site in Wyoming, the railroad tracks in southeastern Montana, a pest control company in Kansas, a rehabilitation hospital in Denver, an orphanage in Montana, a surgery wing in a hospital in Phoenix, a presidential library in Iowa, an alternative high school in Wisconsin, a country school in Colorado, and a college in Nebraska."

Haruf continued to write during his alternate service years, and once he was finished with that duty, he became determined to attend the prestigious University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. He and his wife and infant daughter moved out to Iowa City where he submitted and re-submitted his work until finally "they let me in, on probation, I think," he told Blades. Haruf calls his first stories at Iowa "meager" and "derivative"; he admitted that he was largely writing autobiography or aping the styles of writers such as Hemingway, whom he particularly loves. By the second year, however, his work began to show real promise and he received a fellowship, only one for four students to do so. "He was a quiet, reserved, but friendly guy and when he said something it had resonance," recalled fellow novelist Ron Hansen in *USA Today Books* of Haruf's time at the Writers' Workshop. "He was older and seemed more assured about what he wanted to do as a writer. When he turned in manuscripts everybody was impressed and a little awestruck by the quality of the prose. He seemed like a master craftsman already." Haruf's teachers at Iowa included John Irving, Seymour Krim, Dan Wakefield, and Vance Bourjaily. Graduating in 1973, Haruf's master's thesis was optioned by Harper & Row on the basis of a few opening chapters, but once he completed the project, that publisher rejected the finished novel, as did several other houses. "In retrospect, it's pretty clear that it didn't deserve to be published," Haruf told Blades. Nonetheless, the rejections hurt. Returning to his native Colorado, Haruf worked menial jobs and continued writing for several years before teaching high school in an alternative school in Wisconsin. After five years there, Haruf was forced to return to the drier climate of Colorado after one of his daughters developed pneumonia three times in one winter.

Back in Colorado Haruf was reduced once again to laboring work as he did not have a Colorado teaching certificate. He moved near his brother and parents in northeastern Colorado and worked construction for a time. "It was very difficult," the author told McGregor. "Here I was in my mid-30s being bossed around by kids 20 years old, doing work I wasn't especially good at." He had little time for writing and earned barely enough to support his family. When the construction job ended, Haruf milked cows for a time. Finally he studied for his teaching exam and once he had his certificate, he took a job at Lone Star School near Yuma, Colorado. Once again he had summers free to write, and it was one positive effect of these years of economic struggle that Haruf wasted no time in getting to his creative work. "I feel in some ways that I had to become desperate about the need to write so I would write something worth reading, so I would use my time well," Haruf told McGregor. Over the next several summers Haruf created his first published novel, *The Tie That Binds*.

## Early Novels

*The Tie That Binds* chronicles the long, hard life of Edith Goodnough, born near the turn of the twentieth century. Edith's story is told by Sanders Roscoe, the son of the man Edith loved but refused to marry, giving up her chance at happiness to care for a tyrannical but crippled father. The book begins in Holt, Colorado, in 1977 when eighty-eight-year-old Edith

is lying in a hospital bed with an IV taped to the back of her hand. Outside the door, a policeman is on duty, for Edith is charged with murder. The clues are as enigmatic as is the life of Edith: a sack of chicken feed that has been slit with a knife and a milky-eyed dog which was tied outdoors one blustery afternoon. Sanders Roscoe, the narrator and neighbor of Edith, slowly lets the reader experience the tragedies of Edith's life: her childhood filled with predawn chores, her mother's death, and the violence that leaves her father dependent upon his children and permanently full of rage. Indeed Edith has sacrificed her own happiness for the sake of her family, caring for her father as well as her weak brother.

*The Tie That Binds* garnered Haruf several honors, including the 1986 Whiting Writer's Award. The novel was praised by critics as well; Ruth Doan MacDougall in the *Christian Science Monitor* observed that Haruf's "characters live, and the voice of his narrator reverberates after the last page: humorous, ironic, loving." Chris Wall in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* hailed *The Tie That Binds* as "an impressive, expertly crafted work of sensitivity and detail, absent the hokum that usually accompanies sad tales of simple women and their domineering fathers." A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* likened the book to a Midwestern version of Edith Wharton's classic novel *Ethan Frome*, and noted the appearance of "several strong, graphic passages that promise better things as Haruf's talent matures." Haruf also won accolades from Perry Glasser in the *New York Times Book Review*, the critic declaring that the author's "work is rooted in a sense of place; his eye and ear are faithful to his subject."

Haruf's debut novel, with its \$25,000 Whiting Award and PEN/Hemingway citation, was a godsend in that it won its author a position teaching freshman composition at his old alma mater, Nebraska Wesleyan. He remained there for five years, again working summers on a new novel, which was published in 1991.

Haruf's *Where You Once Belonged* centers on Jack Burdette, a villainous former high school football hero who manages to ruin many lives in his hometown of Holt, Colorado. Narrating Jack's story is newspaper editor Pat Arbuckle, a man with a stake in the events recounted. The novel opens with Burdette sneaking back into town after the statute of limitations has run out on the crime for which he abandoned Holt eight years earlier. Richard Eder in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* offered a laudatory assessment of *Where You Once Belonged*, calling it "taut and deadly," and applauding the "disciplined economy" of "Haruf's writing." Eder dubbed the author's second novel a "stirring and remarkable book," echoing the praise of a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer who found *Where You Once Belonged* a "deeply affecting novel" in which "not a word is wasted." A commentator for *Kirkus Reviews* observed that Haruf "does a beautiful job of capturing small-town life."

Despite such positive critical reaction, disappointment followed publication of Haruf's second novel, however, for sales remained low. "I was really in despair when I finished that book," Haruf told Blades. "I had three daughters by then, all in school, all hungry. I was teaching a lot, and I was under pressure to get it done. There are good things in it, but I wanted it to be better than it turned out to be." One positive result of this second publication, however, was that Haruf won a more prestigious teaching post at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale where he became an associate professor. Writer-in-residence initially, Haruf now was given a considerably lighter teaching load, and thus had more time to work on his new novel.

## ***Plainsong***

Haruf wrote his first two novels by conventional means. With his third he tried a radically different approach. Removing his glasses and placing a stocking cap over his eyes, he typed his first draft blind. Haruf's aim, as related by Blades, was "to achieve freshness and spontaneity without being distracted by the sight of words on the page." Later, he would enter these first drafts onto his computer and then rework each scene until satisfied with the language and pacing. For six years he labored on this novel in his basement office, attempting, as he noted in an interview for *Page One*, to tell the story "of decent people who have real problems" and who are "trying to find the solutions to their problems." Haruf further explained to *Page One*: "I was very consciously trying to avoid sentimentalism but wanted the story to be compelling. Every good novel/story should involve the reader. There should be some kind of connection with the characters. I wanted to show rather than tell. Present in compelling ways." To that end, Haruf, whose first two novels were written in the first person, penned *Plainsong* in the third person, allowing his characters' voices and actions to speak for the their interior mental states. "I was conscious of trying to tell the story in a clear-telling way," Haruf went on to explain. "I was trying to deliberately not create the internal type of prose but to show what they are thinking by an external presentation."

When it was published, *Plainsong* was lauded by critics even more highly than Haruf's earlier books, drawing attention even before its publication. According to Daisy Maryles in *Publishers Weekly*: "Knopf's enthusiasm for [the novel] began last spring with the manuscript being passed around in-house; for a while, it was the most photocopied manuscript on Knopf's fall list." On the basis of editorial response to the book, a large first printing was planned, along with increased publicity that included a twelve-city tour for Haruf. As *Newsweek* contributor Jeff Giles forecast, "Watch for fireworks



over the plains."

In the epigraph to *Plainsong*, Haruf states that the title of the book refers to the "simple and unadorned" vocal melodies, sometimes sung by alternating voices, that have been used in Christian churches for centuries. The novel tells the story of six major characters and several subsidiary ones, and like a plainsong, the action is related from alternating perspectives of different characters in different chapters. Once again the setting is Holt, Colorado, and its environs. The plot begins with three separate tales that ultimately intertwine. A pregnant teenager, Victoria Roubideaux, is kicked out of her home by her mother. A local high school history teacher, Tom Guthrie, is abandoned by his wife and left to raise his two young sons, Ike and Bobby, alone. Two elderly bachelor brothers, Harold and Raymond McPheron, have consigned themselves to an isolated existence on their cattle ranch miles from town. Another teacher, Maggie Jones, ultimately brings a level of resolution to these dilemmas, providing solace to Guthrie and talking the McPherons into taking the pregnant teenage in. "Although the intersection of these three sets of lonely lives might normally have all the melodramatic makings of a provincial soap opera," noted Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*, "Mr. Haruf orchestrates their convergence with such authority and grace that their stories materialize before the reader's eyes without a shred of contrivance."

Writing in a lean prose style that several reviewers compared to that of Hemingway's, Haruf portrays the lives of his characters from the fall of one year through the spring of the next, often using images from the natural world and the changing seasons to complement the changes they experience. *Entertainment Weekly* reviewer Megan Harlan praised Haruf's "spare, gracefully cadenced prose" in what she called a "perfectly titled, unaffectedly lyrical novel," while Verlyn Klinkenborg in a glowing review for the *New York Times Book Review* pointed out that a "fugue upon weather and light plays throughout" *Plainsong*. Donna Seaman of *Booklist* commented: "Haruf's narrative voice is spare and procedural, and his salt-of-the-earth characters are reticent almost to the point of mannerism until it becomes clear that their terseness is the result of profound shyness and an immensity of feeling. Haruf's unforgettable tale is both emotionally complex and elemental, following, as it so gracefully does, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth." Writing in *School Library Journal*, Carol Clark found within the novel "a keen sense of place... a place where family and community matter." Clark went on to write, "YAs can learn from this novel about nontraditional families, about small towns where everybody knows everybody else's business, and about the power of love." Although less overcome with the power of *Plainsong* than most reviewers, Robin Nesbitt of *Library Journal* nevertheless found it to be both "[l]yrical and well crafted" and a "tight narrative about how families can be made between folks who are not necessarily blood relatives [that] makes for enjoyable reading." Mario Russo, reviewing *Plainsong* in *Salon.com*, remarked that reading the book "is like being in an expertly piloted small plane, finding yourself flying low and smooth over the suddenly wondrous world below." Russo, though noting that Haruf does not "look away from violence" nor ignore "the devastatingly casual acts of cruelty that punctuate daily life," maintained that Haruf is "simply convinced that decency is ultimately its own reward."

Other reviewers also applauded Haruf's newly optimistic tone. Marvin J. LaHood, reviewing the novel in *World Literature Today*, called *Plainsong* a "beautifully written and perfectly modulated song," while a contributor for *Publishers Weekly* wrote: "In depicting the stalwart courage of decent, troubled people going with their lives, Haruf's quietly eloquent account illumines the possibilities of grace." And *Time's* Elizabeth Gleick concluded that *Plainsong* "is a lovely read, illuminated by sparks of spare beauty."

A much more optimistic novel than were his first two, *Plainsong* struck a receptive chord in the reading public. Knopf's confidence in *Plainsong* was justified when the novel became a National Book Award finalist and appeared on the *Publishers Weekly* bestseller lists, prompting further paperback reprints of Haruf's earlier novels. The hardback edition of *Plainsong* sold 200,000 copies after being reprinted ten times, the paperback edition began with a quarter-million-print run, and the book was quickly optioned for a television dramatization. Haruf had come a long way from milking cows.

Discussing this "sudden" success at the age of fifty-six, Haruf told Blades: "This country's crazy in terms of fame and what people think it means. They expect a writer to be something between a Hollywood starlet and the village idiot.... Fame is very seductive and can be very dangerous if you're trying to get your work done." But that is just what Haruf continues to do--get his work done, as quietly and professionally as possible. As he explained to McGregor, earning any success at being a writer "is a very long haul. And you have to be doing it for its own sake rather than any external reward because those are few and far between. I sometimes say to students that writing is like religion. That doesn't mean I'm solemn about it but I am very serious. I want to enter into it, devote the best I can to it, be the best I can to it. There's no point in doing it in some mediocre or less than totally concentrated way."

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Surname rhymes with "sheriff"; born February 24, 1943, in Pueblo, CO; son of Louis A. (a Methodist preacher) and Eleanor V. (a teacher and homemaker; maiden name, Shaver) Haruf; married Virginia K. Koon (divorced); married

Cathy Dempsey; children: Sorel, Whitney, Chaney (daughters). *Education*: Nebraska Wesleyan University, B.A., 1965; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 1973. **Addresses**: Home: P.O. Box 1580, Salida, CO 81201.; Agent: Peter Matson, Sterling Lord Literistic, 65 Bleeker St., New York, NY 10012.

## AWARDS

PEN/Hemingway Foundation Special Citation, 1985; American Library Association Notable Books Award, 1985; Whiting Writer's Award, Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation, 1986, for *The Tie That Binds*; Maria Thomas Award, 1991; National Book Award finalist in fiction, 1999, and Mt. Plains Booksellers Award, *Salon.com* award, Alex Award, *New Yorker* Fiction Award finalist, *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Award finalist, and *Book Sense* Award finalist, all 2000, all for *Plainsong*.

## CAREER

Worked odd jobs, including farm laborer, construction worker, rural paper route carrier, hospital orderly, railroad worker, librarian, and orphanage house parent; served in the Peace Corps in Turkey, 1965-67; taught high school English in Wisconsin and Colorado, 1976-86; Nebraska Wesleyan University, Lincoln, assistant professor, 1986-91; Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, associate professor, 1991-2000.

## WORKS

### • Writings

### • NOVELS

- **1984:** *The Tie That Binds*, Holt (New York, NY).
- **1991:** *Where You Once Belonged*, Summit Books (New York, NY).
- **1999:** *Plainsong*, Knopf (New York, NY).
- Contributor of short stories to periodicals, including *Puerto del Sol*, *Grand Street*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Gettysburg Review*. Stories have appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1987; and *Where Past Meets Present*, University of Colorado Press, 1994.

## FURTHER READINGS

## Biographical and Critical Sources

### BOOKS

- *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Volume 34, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1985.

### PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, August, 1999, Donna Seaman, review of *Plainsong*, p. 1986; January 1, 2000, p. 819; April 1, 2000, p. 1449.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, December 7, 1984, Ruth Doan McDougall, review of *The Tie That Binds*, p. B12;

- *USA Today Books*, <http://www.usatoday.com/> (December 2, 1999), "Books and Authors: Kent Haruf."\*

## SOURCE CITATION

"Kent Haruf." *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, Volume 44. Gale Group, 2002.  
Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2006.  
<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>

**Document Number:** K1603000870

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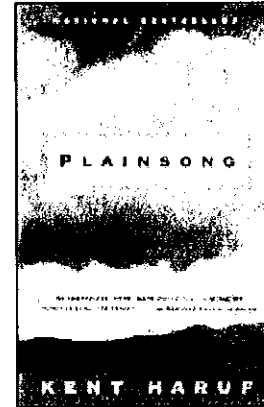


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## Plainsong by Kent Haruf

**List Price:** \$13.00**Pages:** 301**Format:** Paperback**ISBN:** 0375705856**Publisher:** Vintage Books

[Buy this book from Amazon.com](#)

## About this Book

The questions, discussion topics, and suggested reading list that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of Kent Haruf's *Plainsong*. We hope they will provide you with new angles from which to approach and discuss this powerful tale of seven lonely lives set on the stark but beautiful High Plains of Colorado.

In the small town of Holt, Tom Guthrie, a high school teacher, fights to keep his life together and to raise his two boys after their depressed mother first retreats into her bedroom, and then moves away to her sister's house. The boys, not yet adolescents, struggle to make sense of adult behavior and their mother's apparent abandonment. A pregnant teenage girl, kicked out by her mother and rejected by the father of her child, searches for a secure place in the world. And far out in the country, two elderly bachelor brothers work the family farm as they have their entire lives, all but isolated from life beyond their own community.

From these separate strands emerges a vision of life--and of the community and landscape that bind them together--that is both luminous and enduring. *Plainsong* is a story of the abandonment, grief, and stoicism that bring these people together, and it is a story of the kindness, hope, and dignity that redeem their lives. Utterly true to the rhythms and patterns of life, *Plainsong* is an American classic: a novel to care about, believe in, and learn from.

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## Discussion Questions

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1. Why might Kent Haruf have chosen **Plainsong** as the title for this novel? What meaning, or meanings, does the title have in relation to Haruf's story and characters?
2. How does Haruf characterize the landscape of Holt and its surroundings, and how does he use landscape to set the emotional scene? In what ways are his characters shaped and formed by the land around them?
3. Few hints are given in the novel about what life might have been like for the Guthrie family before Ella left. What do you imagine that life to have been like? What sort of a marriage did Tom and Ella have, and what made it go wrong? What might account for Ella's nearly total withdrawal even from the children she seems to love?
4. How do the three teenagers having sex in the abandoned house inform and affect Ike and Bobby? What does this sight tell them about sex? About love? About the relationships and power struggle between men and women?
5. Do you believe there are marked differences between Raymond and Harold McPheron? If so, what are they?
6. Why do you think the McPheron brothers have chosen to spend their lives together rather than start families of their own? Are they lonely or unhappy before Victoria's arrival, or do they feel sufficient in themselves? What does Maggie mean when she tells them, "This is your chance" [p. 110]?
7. What parallels can you draw between the McPheron brothers and the young Guthrie boys? Why is the relationship so close in each case? What sort of a future do you see for the Guthrie boys? Do you think they will marry and have families?
8. The McPheron brothers think they know nothing about young girls. Is that the case? Has their solitary life close to the earth handicapped them so far as human relations go, or has it, in fact, provided them with hidden advantages?
9. What examples of parents abandoning children--either by desertion, emotional withdrawal, or death--can be found in this novel? What do these incidents have in common? How does abandonment affect children, and how does it shape their lives and relationships?

10. It is usually women who are portrayed as nurturers, but in this novel, men--Tom Guthrie and the McPheron brothers--provide shelter and comfort. How do men differ from women in this respect? What do these men offer that a woman might not be able to?
11. "These are crazy times," Maggie Jones says. "I sometimes believe these must be the craziest times ever" [p. 124]. What does she mean by this? In what way are our times "crazier" than earlier eras? How does such "craziness" affect the lives of young people such as Victoria, Ike, and Bobby?
12. What motives and feelings might have driven Tom to sleep with Judy when it was really Maggie he was interested in? Why might Maggie have seemed momentarily frightening or intimidating to him?
13. Why do the Guthrie boys befriend Iva Stearns? What are they looking for in this tentative friendship? Do they find what they are seeking?
14. Why do the Guthrie boys go to the McPheron brothers after Iva's death rather than to someone closer to home, like their father or Maggie? Is there any indication that they connect Iva's death with their mother's abandonment? Why do they place their mother's bracelet on the train tracks, then bury it?
15. The inhabitants of Holt and its surroundings are extremely laconic: they speak only sparingly, as though they mistrust words. What might cause this? In what way does it affect the characters' relationships with one another?
16. How would you describe Holt, Colorado? What are its limitations, its disadvantages, and what are its strengths? In what ways is it typical of any American small town, and in what ways is it different? What help does it provide for people who need healing, like the characters in this book?
17. **Plainsong** depicts some unusual "family" groups. How might Kent Haruf define family?

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## • Critical Praise

"A novel so foursquare, so delicate and lovely . . . it has the power to exalt the reader."

**-*The New York Times Book Review***

"Resonant and meaningful . . . . A song of praise in honor of the lives it chronicles [and] a story about people's ability to adapt and redeem themselves, to heal the wounds of isolation by moving, gropingly and imperfectly, toward community."

**-Richard Tillinghast, *The Washington Post Book World***

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