

Plainsong

by Kent Haruf

About the Book

Ambitious, but never seeming so, Kent Haruf reveals a whole community as he interweaves the stories of a pregnant high school girl, a lonely teacher, a pair of boys abandoned by their mother, and a couple of crusty bachelor farmers. From simple elements, Haruf achieves a novel of wisdom and grace — a narrative that builds in strength and feeling until, as in a choral chant, the voices in the book surround, transport, and lift the reader off the ground.

— FROM THE CITATION FOR THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

Praise for the Book

“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

“A compelling and compassionate novel. . . . [With] his sheer assurance as a storyteller, [Mr. Haruf] has conjured up an entire community, and ineluctably immersed the reader in its dramas.”

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

“A work as flawlessly unified as a short story by Poe or Chekhov.”

— **Jon Hassler,**
Chicago Tribune

Courtesy of Vintage Books

About the Author

Kent Haruf

American Novelist (1943–)

Updated : 09/21/2004

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.

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.

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*.

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.

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'."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOOKS

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

PERIODICALS

- *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, AZ), April 2, 2003, p. E1.
- *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 2000, p. D2.
- *Austin American-Statesman*, October 10, 1999, p. K6.
- *Booklist*, August, 1999, Donna Seaman, review of *Plainsong*, p. 1986; January 1, 2000, p. 819; April 1, 2000, p. 1449.
- *Boston Herald*, December 15, 2000, p. 051, interview.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, December 7, 1984, p. B12; October 21, 1999, p. 13.
- *Denver Post*, October 17, 2001, p. F-01.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, November 5, 1999, Megan Harlan, "The Week," p. 76.
- *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, winter, 2003, p. 185.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, November 15, 1989, pp. 1618-1619.
- *Library Journal*, October 1, 1984, review of *The Tie That Binds*, p. 1861; January, 1990, Joseph Levandoski, review of *Where You Once Belonged*, p. 148; September 1, 1999, Robin Nesbitt, review of *Plainsong*, p. 232; July 2000, p. 162.

- *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: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2004.

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Author Interview

Q: This is from your frontispiece: Plainsong — the unisonous vocal music used in the Christian church from the earliest times; any simple and unadorned melody or air.

Kent Haruf: There's an obvious pun that this is kind of a song or an emblem for the Plains or an anthem for the Plains. Sung in a plain style. These are regular, ordinary sort of elemental characters and I think they're presented sort of directly and I wanted the prose to be kind of simple and direct.

Q: Even without elaboration the characters are very strong. They are people we come to know and care about and the pages turn that way. In the shifting source of narrative from chapter to chapter I didn't want to let go of the storyline I'd just been in but I was very happy to get back and find out what's going on elsewhere.

KH: Well, I had some misgivings about whether or not that form would put off readers. It was the only thing I could think of doing regarding these characters and how to tell their stories. In a way, the Plains have no excess. If you think of places where it is rich in vegetation, it seems like there is so much of it that you almost get lost in it. In the Plains, things are stripped down to the essentials and that seems to fit what this story is about and that seemed to be an obvious setting for this story.

Q: It seems to me that the characters with chapter headings in their names are coming of age into the various stages a life will present. Ella is the first character to whom the boys speak of their mother's leaving and Ella herself will soon be gone. The McPherson brothers are old and crusty and set in their ways but also full of joy. They are very young old men and there are yet lessons to be learned and life experiences to be had — they "can't die without a little bit of trouble."

KH: I'm pleased that you see that in them. I certainly mean that to be there. They haven't led a complete life and this is their opportunity.

Q: Tom Guthrie is flexing his character in his roles as father and romantic partner. He doesn't flinch to defend right from wrong. He's very strong.

KH: He is, but he's also numb and it took someone like Maggie Jones to wake him up. He has in some ways gone the path of least resistance. Judy, the high school secretary, is attractive and attracted to him and that's not going to go anywhere. But Maggie insists that if he's going to be with her he's going to have to be straight and responsible in ways that he hasn't been, at least with the school secretary. In other ways he is an ethical man and he's trying to do the right thing.

Q: Would you agree that he matures with the evolution of his relationship to Maggie?

KH: I do. I also think that he's a caring and attentive father but when the boys go out to the McPherson's, he's shocked by their disappearance and that shakes him up, too. He realizes that he's going to have to be an even better father than he's been before because his boys have left home.

Q: Maggie Jones is so important to this story because she carries everybody together and brings these lives to fruition and enables all this growth and seems so wise but we don't know much about her.

KH: We never get her back-story but I hint at her in ways. The other schoolteacher flirts with her physically. When she leaves the room the he turns to Tom and insinuates that she has a reputation in town for attracting men and has had some affairs and connections with men but we don't know anymore but that she's been married before and nothing is made of that.

In my view she's a woman that probably changes the least of any characters in the book. She is a full grown, healthy, mature woman from the beginning; as you say, I think she is a sort of wise woman and that she does serve both as the person to bring these other people together and as a catalyst to bring their changes.

Q: The characters' voices are as fully developed and consistent as the voices one knows from one's own life.

KH: I was conscious of trying to tell the story in a clear-telling way. I was trying to deliberately not create the internal type of prose but to show what they are thinking by an external presentation.

Q: You are able to conjure the voice of children, specifically Ike and Bobby, in a realistic, heartwarming and memory-stirring way. How did you find the access to children's rhythm?

KH: I remember my boyhood in this area and I wanted to portray these little boys accurately without sentimentalism. I think that usually the risk in trying to write children in fiction is the tendency to make them too cute or something. In this case, these little boys are almost two halves of the same whole. They can communicate with very few words there. They're close, always have been, but they're both undergoing the same problems. In my view, what they're trying to do is find some understanding or at least consolation for the first major problem in their lives. Their mother has retreated into a really strong, deep depression and leaves them, leaves the house, and so on. These boys are on an inarticulate search for some kind of comfort or love and in their search they are

thrown up against all kinds of adult experiences. They are not old enough to understand all they see or do, so by the end their only recourse, and again it's intuitive rather than analytical, is to ride out to the McPherson brothers where they had been well-treated once before and sensed that there was some solace there.

Q: At seventeen, Victoria Robideaux is at the other end of childhood facing an adult dilemma. Her life is very different from the boys'. They live just five blocks from her but with their paper route and bicycles and horses and early morning risings, they live a more rural existence. She lives right in town and experiences a more contemporary version of this town's life. Her malaise is presented in very contemporary tones.

KH: I think your right about that. She's gotten herself caught up into events and problems that she's not ready to deal with. She's pretty innocent and has to try to find her way, and she obviously needs help doing that.

Q: She dresses in a racy fashion but doesn't seem to have a lot of vices.

KH: No, she's a fairly moral person within her own constraints. She dresses a little racy in a way many teenage girls do but without really knowing what that implies or means and so she has gotten herself into trouble and now needs help with it.

Q: Ike and Bobby are responding to a situation in their life while she is responding to an endemic aspect of her life, which is a lack of love.

KH: That's right. Her mother kicks her out and her father disappeared long ago and she's kind of a loner in town. She doesn't have many close friends. I had in mind that part of the cause of that is her father is an American Indian and so she's kind of an outcast in town. Her mother is taking out some of her feelings for the father on the girl.

Q: Food is one experience for the boys, such as the hot skillet full of eggs soon to be spilling onto thick crockery plates with toast and jam when their father introduces them to us. The first time we meet Victoria, she is wrenching her guts into the toilet with her mother standing above her in dishabille, smoking a cigarette into her face while threatening to throw her out of the house. That mother is echoed again in the convenience mart where Victoria buys her first meal of the story, a bag of popcorn and a can of pop. She is harassed by the counter lady with many of the same suspicions she faced from her mother, though even this woman and her harsh tones are slightly more sympathetic. This is the cold, hard Holt she knows. It is never safe for Victoria Robideaux until she makes a meal herself and feeds the McPherons.

KH: Thank you very much for noticing that. I did have something in mind in terms of food in the communal use or consuming of it. It always seems to me that one of the ways you show love is to prepare food for somebody. The father is doing that at the beginning of the story. At the end, Victoria feels confident enough and secure enough in her place out there so that she is the one who has begun to do the cooking and she's the one who presents the food to the boys when they come out to the McPheron's. At the very end of the book there is the suggestion that soon they will all go in and eat supper together.

Courtesy of Random House

Discussion Questions

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 the small town of Holt figure as a character in each novel? How are the characters in each of the novels completely believable and different? How does Haruf repeat some character traits in his novels and to what effect? How do the characters and the image of the town change from book to book?
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 McPherson 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?

Courtesy of Vintage Books