

1) 'Our Souls at Night,' by Kent Haruf

By JOAN SILBER JUNE 5, 2015 N Y T

5 Photo
Credit Sam Brewster

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



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

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

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

40 "Sometimes you're a pretty nice man.

"I suppose we're going to have to stay like this, divided all night.

45 "I'll think good thoughts across to you.

"Don't make them too racy. It might disturb my rest.

"You never know."

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

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

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

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

80 "But even now I can see it all clearly and feel that kind of otherworldliness, the sense of moving in a dream and making decisions that you didn't know you had to make, or if you were sure of what you were saying. Gene was terribly upset by it. . . . It would have been better if we could have helped each other but that didn't
85 happen. I don't think I tried too hard myself."

Haruf's plots tend to turn on gruff characters evincing tenderness, so a moment like this, when they fail to do so, becomes especially poignant.

90 In this last book, Haruf, a very loved author, seems occasionally to speak to his longtime audience directly, as when Louis offers a wry opinion of the real-life Denver Center for the Performing Arts' theatrical productions of Haruf's books: "He took the physical details from Holt . . . but it's not this town. All that's made up."

95 This is a playful detail in a book that saves its saddest parts for the end. "Our Souls at Night" has less grit than "Eventide," with its Dickensian views of the lives of the poor, or "Plainsong," where favorite characters draw relentless spite; its tone is milder and more melancholy. But the novel runs, like his others, on the dogged insistence that simple elements carry depth, and readers will find much
100 to be grateful for.

2) Our Souls at Night by Kent Haruf review - happiness at the end of life
This posthumously published tale of how a small-town widow cautiously finds happiness is beautifully told. Ursula K Le Guin 27 May 2015 Guardianj

105 Haruf's novel, written as he was dying, is full of the luminous in the everyday.

Writing about the everyday is a tough job. The extraordinary, the thrilling, the transgressive provide automatic glamour, but it takes a brave author to try to describe lives that are so commonplace as not even to be extraordinarily unhappy. And happiness - not sexual satisfaction, not reward of ambition, not ecstasy, not bliss, just day-to-day happiness - has practically vanished from fiction. That may be because we distrust it, seeing it as sentimentality, confusing the real thing with the fake. Indeed, it's not easy to write about. To ring true, description of even the humblest kind of fulfilment and contentment must be written in awareness of human inadequacy and cruelty and the possibility of illness, ruin, death. One false word can make it all incredible.

I don't think there's a false word in Kent Haruf's final novel, Our Souls at Night. Nor, for all the colloquial ease and transparency of the prose and the apparent simplicity of the story, is there a glib word, or a predictable one.

Ordinarily the circumstances of the writing of a novel aren't of much interest to me as a reader, but in this case, I am moved, even awed, to consider that the book was written while the author was dying. It is a report from the edge of darkness, made in the consciousness of responsibility. Haruf is bearing witness. Having gone farther than we have, he wants to tell us what matters there. His knowledge of his situation, and my knowledge of it as I read the book, made me appreciate the rare privilege of being with a person who is past the need to say anything but what needs to be said.

The voice is quiet. All the darkness is there, but we're looking at the light. A lamp in a bedroom in a small town in Colorado.

Haruf's novels are all set in this small town, Holt. The first two were fairly conventional. In the third, Plainsong, he found his own voice: profoundly American in its cadences, western American in its unexpected drollnesses and its calm, dry reticence. Plainsong and the novels that followed it are, like Willa Cather's, eloquent of the lonesomeness of that vast country, the paradoxical constriction of people's lives there, and the fragility. Violence, never gloated over as a spectacle, is brief, inevitable and shocking. Children are always among the characters, drawn with extraordinary realism, compassion and intensity. The young people are restless, nervy, unguided. Older men do their jobs and keep their defences up. Women generally keep things running, though now and then one goes to pieces or suddenly runs off to Denver. But there is joy also, hard joy - the pleasure of risk, the pleasure of responsibility. Among these people tenderness is sheltered, cherished like a seedling tree as it slowly puts down deep roots to reach the water.

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Holt is a long way from New York, farther perhaps than London or Prague. To many eastern Americans, western America means only cactus and Hollywood, a backdrop for westerns, not for literature. Haruf's fidelity to the glamourless and untrendy Holt may have played into the parochiality of urban critics and kept his thoughtful, subtle, skilful work from the attention it deserves. Perhaps he didn't mind. Not playing the hunger games of success, not undergoing the mechanical hoopla of PR, he could go on stubbornly being Kent Haruf, doing his job. He could go on writing about how hard it is to go on doing what you see as right when you aren't sure how to do it, or even whether it is right - how hard we are on one another and ourselves, how hard most of us work, how much we long for and how little we mostly settle for.

This is all solid, satisfying novel-stuff, and in this last book something very rare has been added to it. Many novels have been about the pursuit of happiness, but this one is luminous with its actual presence.

"And then there was the day when Addie Moore made a call on Louis Waters." So the story begins. Addie, a widow, has come to ask her widower neighbour if he'd consider coming over to her house sometimes to sleep with her.

"What?" says Louis, naturally a bit taken aback. "How do you mean?"

And she says: "I mean we're both alone. We've been by ourselves for too long. For years. I'm lonely. I think you might be too. I wonder if you would come and sleep in the night with me. And talk."

So the light comes on in the bedroom on Cedar Street, in Holt, Colorado. And a happiness is very cautiously, courageously, tenderly achieved. Not, however, in the way we might expect, but on complex terms, involving quite a few of the other citizens of Holt. Perhaps happiness is less predictable than misery, since it partakes of freedom. Like freedom, also, it's never secure; it can't be for ever. But it can be real, and in this beautiful novel, we can share it.

3) Interview: Kent Haruf's *Our Souls at Night*:
Kent Haruf's *Our Souls at Night*: "a book about us"

Tuesday, 03 May 2016 PICADOR

Just before Christmas 2014, we received a very special submission: a new novel by Kent Haruf, the author of the Plainsong books. *Our Souls at Night* is an exquisite book made all the more poignant by the fact that Kent very sadly passed away just a week after we received the book, and two days before the final copyedit was finished. We spoke to his wife, Cathy, about Kent's writing and what this book means to her.

What was the inspiration behind Our Souls at Night?

205 Kent said to me at the end of April, 'I am going to write a book about us.' His favorite time of all was when we would lie in bed at night, hold hands and talk about everything - living, dying, our spirits, our lovely children, our dear friends, this story, my hospice work, funny happenings, our great years together, frustrations, resentments, our feelings for each other and whatever went on that day. (It was very important to Kent and me that we stay current with each other about everything.)

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He said he wanted to write about the idea of two old people talking at night. Our Souls at Night is a love story about a man and a woman who decide to live from their truth and authenticity in the face of criticism and judgment.

215 Can you talk a bit about the writing of it?

220 Kent was feeling a little better in the middle of April 2014 and he needed to be doing something. He tried writing a short story and said, 'That didn't go anywhere'. Then he came in one day and said, 'I am going to write a book about us.' On the morning of May 1, he took himself and his oxygen tank out to his writing shed and wrote a chapter a day for 45 days. He felt a great satisfaction. He was so pleased and every day he would come in for lunch and say, 'Another chapter!' It usually took him six years to write a novel and he was utterly astounded that he could write a chapter each day. But he knew he was on a

225 deadline and he was determined to finish it before he died.

230 He typed on an old Royal upright typewriter. When he typed his first draft of each chapter he would pull a stocking cap down over his eyes and write "blind" so he wouldn't be distracted by spelling, syntax or punctuation. He then wrote notes all over that first draft and retyped it double-spaced on his favorite old yellow paper. By the middle of August he said he was ready for me to read it. I read the manuscript, entered it into the computer and for the next month made whatever changes he wanted. And proofread it over and over again. In September 2014, we

235 emailed it to his editor in the USA, Gary Fisketjon, at Knopf, with a note, 'Dear Gary, Here's little surprise for you. Love, Kent.' The manuscript went back and forth for several weeks and three days before he died Kent said that I would have to do the final copyedit. So two days after he died it was finished and sent off.

240 What does the publication of Our Souls at Night mean to you?

245 The most important thing to me was that Kent had such a good time writing this book and that he was able to finish it before he died. He worked on it as long as he could, right up to the last minute. He was passionate about writing and finishing it and sending it off to his editor, Gary Fisketjon - as a surprise. And it certainly was a surprise for Gary.

250 Kent and I had such a good time discussing the story. He didn't want anyone to know he was writing in case he wasn't able to finish it - and he really wanted to be around to see how the book was received. I think Kent probably is aware of all that. Our Souls at Night is a great gift to me.

How would you describe Kent's characters?
As anyone who has read Kent's books knows, his characters come in all varieties.
The protagonists are layered. No character is all good or bad. They are all human,
255 behaving in the ways we all do - with fears, love, meanness, joy, sadness.

Kent himself felt very strongly the hurt and sadness in the world. He was a very
tender, loving and sensitive person, which of course, comes out in his characters.
260 Families are at the heart of Kent's novels. What was his understanding of the
word?

In Plainsong and subsequent books, Kent wrote about family as kindred spirits;
people who love each other, help and support each other - those we choose to
265 include and embrace as family in addition to those we're biologically related to.
That was definitely how he felt and lived.

As well as writing his own books, Kent taught creative writing. What advice did he
give his students?
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Kent would tell his creative writing students, 'There is no lack of talent for
writing. But there is a lack of talent for hard work. Read everything you can get
your hands on. Read, read, read. (Kent himself greatly admired Faulkner,
Hemingway and especially Chekhov.) Write and write and write. Every day. Get
275 black on white. Write what you know. Don't let other people overly influence
your own voice. Listen to instructors or teachers but then let it all go and be true
to your own vision and voice.'

Kent didn't believe in 'inspiration' when it came to writing a novel. It was hard
280 work; showing up every day at his desk whether he felt like it or not; he didn't
want to take the chance that he might miss something important.

- See more at: <http://www.picador.com/blog/may-2015/%E2%80%8Bkent-harufs-our-souls-at-night-a-book-about-us#sthash.nYZLzFnL.dpuf>
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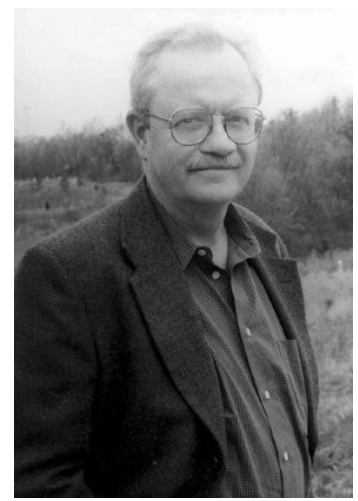
Comments
Dan Anderson
According to one obituary, Haruf rewrote the ending to "Our Souls at Night" at the
urging of his wife. After reading the book twice, I'm still finding the revised
290 ending somewhat unsatisfying and would love to know how the original ending
was handled. Can anyone shed light on this?
Monday, 26 October 2015
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4) Obituary: Kent Haruf dies aged 71

Monday, 01 December 2014



305 Kent Haruf has died at the age of 71.

'This weekend we learnt the very sad news of the death of the remarkable American novelist Kent Haruf.

310 When I came to Picador six years ago there was one writer who seemed to unite all my colleagues in admiration and indeed in a determination to bring his work to readers. This was Kent Haruf, a writer whose beautifully restrained, deeply felt novels reflected a man of integrity, honesty and deep thoughtfulness. Haruf's writing commanded utter devotion from all his readers and there was simply no writer more loved at Pan Macmillan. When he was chosen on the shortlist of the inaugural Folio Prize, there could not have been more delight that wider recognition might come to such a great writer and great man.

320 I believe that in the loose trilogy of Plainsong, Eventide and Benediction he produced one of the masterpieces of contemporary American fiction. These novels, set in the fictional Holt, Colorado, form one of the major achievements of contemporary American fiction, rivalling the great works of Cormac McCarthy, Richard Ford, Jane Smiley and Annie Proulx in creating a mythical modern American landscape. The quiet restraint of his writing belied his extraordinary ability to dissect the minutiae of relationships, no more so than in his heart-breakingly poignant final novel Our Souls at Night. This is a bold, brave and original view of a relationship between a man and a woman in advanced age who defy convention and is a fitting last word from an eloquent and inspiring writer.'

330 - Paul Baggaley, Picador publisher

335 Kent Haruf was the author of the Plainsong trilogy, set in the fictional town of Holt in Colorado. Benediction, the third in the series, was nominated for the Folio Prize earlier this year.

Our thoughts and condolences are with his family at this time.

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340 5) Bookbrowse.com:

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

345 In the familiar setting of Holt, Colorado, home to all of Kent Haruf's inimitable fiction, Addie Moore pays an unexpected visit to a neighbor, Louis Waters. Her husband died years ago, as did his wife, and in such a small town they naturally have known of each other for decades; in fact, Addie was quite fond of Louis's wife. His daughter lives hours away in Colorado Springs, her son even farther away in Grand Junction, and Addie and Louis have long been living alone in

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houses now empty of family, the nights so terribly lonely, especially with no one to talk with.

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

https://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book_number/3323/our-souls-at-night

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6) Kent Haruf's posthumous novel offers a tender look at love in the twilight
By Ron Charles May 19, 2015 Washington Post

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

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

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

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

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

Half-a-century after the sexual revolution, in the shame-free age of Tinder, Blendr, Grindr et al., it's funny how bold Addie's proposal sounds. Decent folk
400 know that old people are supposed to live lives of resolute solitude to protect

their dignity (and our inheritance). When the time comes, we'll move them to an institution where they can be tended by cheery strangers until they pass away in drugged incoherence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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There's a little more action, to be sure, including some unkind gossip and family opposition that these two new old friends must contend with, but, in a sense, Addie is right when she says, "It's just two old people talking in the dark." In Haruf's spare sentences, though, it's a lot more than that. He's working within
455 the tight boundaries of two lives that don't much matter in a small town that has never mattered, but he makes everything seem consequential with his unadorned style. Perhaps more so than any of his previous books, the language of "Our Souls at Night" is distilled to elemental purity. Most of the novel consists of dialogue without quotation marks; the narrator's light descriptions are factual and tone-free. Any particular line may sound flat, even colorless, but the cumulative effect
460 of these Shaker sentences is absorbing and reverent.

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

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7) ft.com > Life&Arts > Books > Fiction June 19, 2015 by Francesca Wade
470 'Our Souls at Night', by Kent Haruf

Drinking their morning coffee at the kitchen table, Addie Moore and Louis Waters see a newspaper advertisement for a forthcoming play: a dramatisation of
475 Benediction, Kent Haruf's Folio Prize-shortlisted 2014 novel, which is set like all his books (including this one) in the prairie community of Holt County, Colorado.

Louis isn't sure he'll attend; he was unconvinced by Haruf's Plainsong (1999), in which two cattle farmers take in a pregnant, homeless girl. Addie acknowledges
480 that that story seems an unlikely one for sleepy Holt but, nonetheless, "it might happen, she said. People can do the unexpected." Perhaps, she muses, Haruf might write about the two of them next. "We're no more improbable," she reminds Louis, "than the story of the two old cattle ranchers."

Addie and Louis are 70 years old, and have been neighbours for almost half a century. Addie's husband and Louis's wife died years ago; their children have
485 moved away and they are lonely: so far, so un-improbable. One hot summer's day, Addie knocks on Louis's door. "I wonder," she asks, "if you would consider coming to my house sometimes to sleep with me." She's not asking for sex, she hastens
490 to add: "I'm talking about getting through the night. And lying warm in bed, companionably . . . The nights are the worst. Don't you think?"

The relationship that follows is a life-affirming demonstration that "people can do the unexpected", and thrive from it. The quietly joyful tone becomes all the
495 more poignant when you know that the novel is published posthumously; it was written while the 71-year-old author was dying from lung disease. (Wade, ft.com)

505 Haruf is at his best when evoking – in beautifully spare language – the cadences of everyday life, and the novel’s bittersweet humour derives from its most understated details: Addie takes her elderly neighbour to the grocery store to get some canned food and bread “and a bag of little Hershey bars in foil”; Louis, unaccustomed to paying attention to his appearance, has to ask the barber if he still does shaves.

510 As their nights go on, Addie and Louis open up about their pasts, their triumphs and sorrows. Addie worked as a secretary and a store clerk; she had hoped to be a teacher, but quit her course when she had her first child, Connie, who died in an accident while playing with her brother. Louis taught for 47 years at the high school in Holt, where he grew up; he would have liked to be a poet, but “I started teaching and Holly came along and I got busy.”

515 Holt has always been a place where any challenge to the status quo signals rumblings of discontent. Some of the most exuberant vignettes involve Addie and Louis’s gleeful rebellion against the “small-town small-minded pissants” – including their own children – who raise eyebrows at their elders behaving like lovestruck teenagers. Haruf is always compassionate towards children, and the couple’s kindness to Addie’s grandson, Jamie – an anxious six-year-old, who comes to stay while his parents negotiate divorce – forms the book’s core. The foreboding cloud of mortality is acknowledged with characteristic matter-of-factness: “I’m going to enjoy our nights together,” smiles Addie. “For as long as they last.” But Haruf is never sentimental, and the ending – multiple twists packed into the last 20 pages – is gritty, painful and utterly human.

530 In Benediction, the preacher Robert Lyle – himself facing Holt’s censure – gazes into people’s windows to watch them in their homes, longing to capture a sense of “the precious ordinary”. This is exactly what Haruf does so well: his novels are imbued with an affection and understanding that transform the most mundane details into poetry. Like the friendly light shining from Addie’s window, Haruf’s final novel is a beacon of hope; he is sorely missed.

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535 8) ‘Our Souls at Night’ by Kent Haruf John Freeman June 12, 2015 The Boston Globe

Writing to a friend in 1896, Willa Cather once explained there was more than prairies in her fiction: “There is no God but one God, and Art is his revealer.”

540 Since Cather died, the plains have been the birthplace of some of the most spiritually engaged fiction in American letters. From Wright Morris and his elegantly constructed novels to the recent Gilead books of Marilynne Robinson, the best work of the region is often engaged with questions of faith.

545 If Robinson’s fiction pursues this inquiry with King James rhythms, the work of her contemporary, Kent Haruf, has quietly explored a more skeptical, earthy form of devotion.

Like Robinson, Haruf has set most of his fiction in one place – Holt, Colo., a small town in the eastern part of the state, where diner talk circles the rise and fall of wheat prices. A recurring group of characters merge and expand with each book.

555 From “The Tie that Binds” (1984) to “Benediction” (2013), we follow the people of Holt through the paces of life – births and deaths, affairs, abandonments. They do not feel like a cast of characters so much as a congregation, tilted toward God but wrestling with the earthly life.

560 “Our Souls at Night” is Haruf’s last book. He died last November, shortly after it was completed, bringing the saga of Holt to a breathtaking close. Lateness – and second chances – have always been a theme for Haruf. But here, in a book about love and the aftermath of grief, in his final hours, he has produced his most intense expression of that yet.

565 As the book begins, Addie Moore walks down the street to her neighbor Louis Waters and makes a surprising proposal. “I wonder if you would consider coming to my house sometimes to sleep with me.”

570 Addie and Louis have reached their seventies solvent, but alone. Their spouses have died; their gardens are tidy, but their nights are lonely. Her proposal is hardly indecent. She merely wants companionship.

575 The scenes depicting Louis’s nervous preparation for their first sleep together shine with a luminous, humble clarity. “He trimmed his fingernails and toenails and at dark he went out the back door and walked up the back alley carrying a paper sack with his pajamas and toothbrush inside.”

580 Addie and Louis share a glass of wine in her kitchen, the air clouded with memories of their former partners. Their lives, held on pause so long, are about to begin again, but first they must get to know each other.

585 And thus night by night, like senior-age Scheherazades, they crawl into bed and tell each other the story of their lives: the missed opportunities, the happinesses, the great and unsolvable griefs, the questions that remain. The children who will never stop being children.

590 In a country where so many people are living so much longer, you almost wonder why a book of this nature has not emerged sooner. Packed into less than 200 pages are all the issues late life provokes.

595 Both Addie and Louis feel guilt at first, but eventually their happiness gently pushes it back, as if a dish refused. They hold hands in public, and then kiss, and then carefully venture back into the world of simple pleasures: lunch with a companion, theatre, talking at night in the dark.

600 Just as their relationship takes flight it confronts the sheering wind of their children’s rebuke. Addie’s son is entering a midlife crack-up, his marriage and career collapsing, and his mother’s choice feels like a betrayal.

For a brief period, Addie and Louis take in Addie's grandchild, Jamie, while his parents undergo a painful separation. Haruf's depiction of Louis's tentative, gentle stewardship of this surrogate grandchild is a set piece of tenderness and beauty.

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With "Benediction," Haruf's novel about a dying man and the community around him, it seemed the Holt series had reached a pinnacle. Here, the book seemed to be saying, is how our lives end, still searching forgiveness, watching for grace.

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"Our Souls at Night," however, provides a startling coda. Talking at night, Addie and Louis relive the departures that have marked their lives and debate whether there is an afterlife.

615

Scene by scene, some chapters but a page long, Haruf's novel provides a kind of answer. We have no idea what awaits us, so we must proceed as if we are living in the afterlife, our actions not small but eternal.