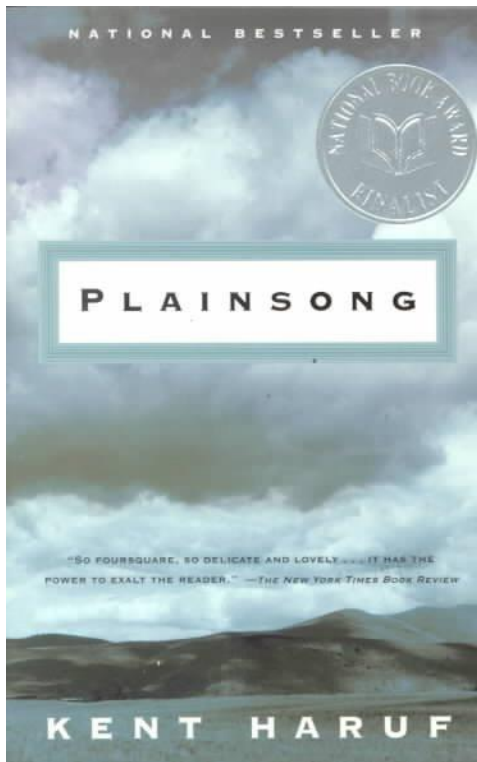


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1380079>

About the Book



Tom Guthrie teaches history at the high school in Holt, Colorado. His wife, Ella, has been disturbed and depressed; as the novel begins she has taken to lying silently in a darkened room, barely managing to stay minimally in touch with her sons Ike (p. 10) and Bobby (p. 9), and her husband. Haruf strings together brief narrative sections that move forward in time, but present the action from a wide variety of perspectives.

The next character we meet is Victoria Roubideaux, a 17-year-old girl who has discovered that a pointless summer romance has left her pregnant. Her mother, unsympathetic, orders her to leave home. Victoria shelters with understanding Maggie Jones, another high school teacher. When friction with Maggie's mentally failing father makes it impossible for Victoria to remain there, Maggie arranges "something improbable;" she places the girl with the two old bachelor brothers, Harold and Raymond McPheron, who operate a ranch miles outside of town.

Meanwhile, Ella Guthrie has moved out, first to a rental house in town, and finally to live with her sister, in Denver. Ella's contacts with her Holt family are painful and unsatisfactory, and it is clear that the marriage and the family are not going to remain intact. Although Tom does his best with his sons, their mother's absence remains a problem. They search out surrogates -- old and ailing Mrs. Stearns (who dies) and the McPheron brothers. Tom has problems at school -- he has resisted pressure to allow the town basketball star undeservedly to pass his history course, and the boy and his family are constant adversaries, with physical violence and threats of law. He uses a night with the young high school secretary to fight his loneliness, but soon graduates to a

more suitable and satisfying connection with Maggie Jones. The two of them fall in love.

Victoria has belatedly gotten together with the boy who made her pregnant; she drives out to Denver with him and keeps house in his two-room apartment. Quickly disillusioned with this approximation of "married" life, she leaves the immature father behind at the bus station, and returns to Holt. She is reconciled with the old McPheron brothers, who had been hurt at her unannounced departure. She moves back to their ranch, and before long successfully delivers a baby girl.

As the novel ends, Maggie and Victoria have been cooking at the ranch; the McPherons, Tom, Ike and Bobby, Maggie's father, and Victoria's baby are all gathered pleasantly together. Not everything is resolved, but there's plenty to signal a new beginning.

About the Author



Kent Haruf (rhymes with sheriff) was born in 1943 in Pueblo, Colorado. His father was a Methodist preacher, and Kent was raised in the succession of small Colorado towns to which his father was assigned. It is a setting that reappears regularly in Haruf's fiction -- "I have something like a holy connection to that part of the world," he explains. His higher education did not take him very far away either. He earned a B.A. at Nebraska Wesleyan University. He was so enamored of the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop that he moved his wife and small daughter to Iowa City in the hope that he could be part of it. Eventually, he was, and he earned an M.F.A. there in 1973. He began, and remains, a creature of the heartland.

His experiences reflect his generation. He was a Vietnam-era conscientious objector, and his resume includes stints in a rehabilitation hospital, a surgical wing, and an orphanage, as well as the more casual jobs he took on construction sites, a chicken ranch, and a presidential library. From 1965-1967 he was a Peace Corps volunteer, teaching English in Anatolian villages in Turkey. He also taught English and writing back in the States, on the high school level in Wisconsin, and, since 1991, as a Southern Illinois University at Carbondale faculty member.

Haruf has published a number of short stories and three novels. *The Tie That Binds* (1984) and *Where You Once Belonged* (1990) laid a foundation for *Plainsong* (1999). All three novels are set in the imaginary small town of Holt, in the flat plains of northeastern Colorado. While he has not yet continued the stories of major characters, he has refined his sense of setting, and turned Holt into the kind of familiar place that spawns novels, much as Yoknapatawpha County functioned for William Faulkner.

Plainsong is far and away the most successful of his novels. Knopf detected enough signs of interest to set up an initial printing of more than 70,000 copies. The confidence proved warranted when *Plainsong* became a finalist for the 1999 National Book Award for Fiction. Haruf is grateful that success came late enough that he was not unduly impressed with himself -- "I've written other books," he points out, "and a lot of this is luck." He remains on Southern Illinois University's faculty, and is working on another novel, while getting ready to retire (to Colorado, of course).

Awards

Plainsong was a finalist for the 1999 National Book Award for Fiction (<http://www.nationalbook.org/>).

Reviews

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.

School Library Journal

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.

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 McPheron 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.

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.

Literary Criticism

"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.

Source: LaHood, Marvin J. "Plainsong." *World Literature Today* 74.3 (2000): 606. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions

Source: <http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides/P/plainsong1.asp>

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 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?

Multimedia

***Plainsong* (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1065941>

A discussion of the novel on NPR.

Further Reading

Where You Once Belonged by Kent Haruf

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1228218>

(Call number: Fiction Haruf)

The red Cadillac pulled down Main Street and sat by the tavern for hours, unnoticed. Then Ralph Bird of the Men's Store recognized the driver as Jack Burdette and bolted to the sheriff's office. The prodigal son of Holt, Colorado, had returned--and he was far from welcome. In *Where You Once Belonged*, acclaimed novelist Kent Haruf tells of a small-town hero who is dealt an enviable hand--and cheats with all of the cards. In prose as lean and supple as

a spring switch, Haruf describes a high school football star who wins the heart of the loveliest girl in the county and the admiration of men twice his age. Fun-loving, independent, Burdette engages in the occasional prank. But when he turns into a man, his high jinks turn into crimes--with unspeakable consequences.

Eventide by Kent Haruf

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1219691>

(Call number: Fiction Haruf)

When the McPheron brothers see Victoria Roubideaux, the single mother they'd taken in, move from their ranch to begin college, an emptiness opens before them--and for many other townspeople it also promises to be a long, hard winter. A young boy living alone with his grandfather helps out a neighbor whose husband, off in Alaska, suddenly isn't coming home, leaving her to raise their two daughters. At school the children of a disabled couple suffer indignities that their parents know all too well in their own lives, with only a social worker to look after them and a violent relative to endanger them further. But in a small town a great many people encounter one another frequently, often surprisingly, and destinies soon become entwined--for good and for ill--as they confront events that sorely test the limits of their resilience and means, with no refuge available except what their own character and that of others afford them.

The Tie That Binds by Kent Haruf

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1031614>

(Call number: Fiction Haruf)

Colorado, January 1977. Eighty-year-old Edith Goodnough lies in a hospital bed, IV taped to the back of her hand, police officer at her door. She is charged with murder. The clues: a sack of chicken feed slit with a knife, a milky-eyed dog tied outdoors one cold afternoon. The motives: the brutal business of farming and a family code of ethics as unforgiving as the winter prairie itself. In his critically acclaimed first novel, Kent Haruf delivers the sweeping tale of a woman of the American High Plains, as told by her neighbor, Sanders Roscoe.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Read-Alikes *Source: Novelist*

Sights Unseen by Kaye Gibbons

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1100250>

(Call number: Fiction Gibbons)

A child learns to cope with a troubled mother -- "the Barnes woman with all the

problems." Her depressive withdrawals are like Ella Guthrie's, and generate some of the same problems.

The Nick Adams Stories by Ernest Hemingway

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1032543>

(Call number: Fiction Hemingway)

A collection that follows Hemingway's alter ego, Nick Adams, from childhood to adulthood. Hemingway was a revelation to Haruf -- "I was just stunned by the quality and the richness" of his writing -- and Haruf uses the older writer's trademark terse dialogue to great advantage in *Plainsong*.

****Book Club To Go** *My Antonia*** by Willa Cather

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1015259>

(Call number: Fiction Cather)

When you've graduated from Laura Ingalls Wilder, Cather's novel is the first that comes to mind when thinking about the prairies and how they shaped the lives of the people who wound up living there. A classic.

Where the Heart Is by Billie Letts

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1103703>

(Call number: Fiction Letts)

A pregnant girl finds an unlikely home in the local Wal-Mart store, with an unexpected cast of helpers and protectors. A selection of Oprah's Book Club, it is reminiscent of *Plainsong* in the way that "something improbable" (p. 109) is memorably made to work.

Extra!

Plainsong is a novel shaped by its setting. As Midwesterners, how would you think the story be different if it were set in an otherwise similar community in Michigan?



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