



## ***Plainsong***

*Kent Haruf, 1999*

### **Summary**

*Plainsong* is set in Holt, Colorado, a rural community well outside Denver; the setting is timeless, with only the occasional, fleeting reference to VCRs or pop culture indicating that the book takes place closer to "now" than "then."

Tom Guthrie is a high—school teacher left raising two young sons after his depressed and disappointed wife moves to the city. His children bake cookies, ride horses, and run a paper route, but at the same time they almost consciously seek out a cool, hardened, cowboy sense of maturity.

Meanwhile, another teacher helps a pregnant teen disowned by her mother find love and acceptance in two hilariously well-intentioned elderly brothers. The two tentatively take the girl on as a boarder on their cattle farm even though they barely know how to communicate with anyone but each other.

These seven characters form the core of *Plainsong*, which switches vantages from chapter to chapter like a more direct Faulkner, though the prose is no less poetic and evocative.

Through this device, Haruf illustrates how relationships are formed and what makes them last, how responsibility and accountability make people good, and how cooperation can make a small town strong in times of conflict.

A fast, encouraging, enlightening read, *Plainsong* is beautiful, real, and wise: a true great American novel. (By Joshua Klein, Barnes & Noble.)

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### Author Bio

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

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

### Life

Haruf was born in Pueblo, Colorado, the son of a Methodist minister. He graduated with a BA from Nebraska Wesleyan University in 1965, where he would later teach, and earned an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1973.

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

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

## **Works**

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

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

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

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

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

## **Recognition**

1986 - Whiting Award for fiction

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

2005 - Colorado Book Award for *Eventide*

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

2009 - Dos Passos Prize for Literature

2012 - Wallace Stegner Award

2014 - Folio Prize shortlist for *Benediction*

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