

BOOK CLUB TO GO!

Eventide

By Kent Haruf

Introduction

Set in the cattle country of the high plains, in and just outside of Holt, Colorado, *Eventide* tells the story of the McPheron brothers, Harold and Raymond, two elderly bachelor-ranchers, and the rich cast of characters who surround them.

In many ways, *Eventide* is about the pain of separation. As the novel opens, Victoria Roubideaux is preparing to move away from the McPherons' ranch to attend college in Fort Collins. Harold and Raymond had taken her in back when she was three months pregnant and turned out of her home. Victoria and her daughter, Katie, now more than a year old, have come to occupy a central place in the McPherons' lives. Running parallel to this narrative are several other stories of loss and separation. Betty and Luther Wallace, poor and ill-equipped to raise their children, face losing them to foster care. Mary Wells is raising her two young girls alone, while her husband works in Alaska. DJ Kephart has lost his mother and has never known his father. And all of these characters face even greater losses to come. How they respond to those losses – with sadness, outrage, bitter anguish, or hard-won stoicism – reveals the full depth and range of human emotion. But *Eventide* tells of connection as well as separation, of community as well as loneliness, of compassion as well as cruelty. Of all the characters, Raymond McPheron may suffer the most devastating loss, but his spirit of self-effacing generosity survives, and he meets someone who offers him a happiness he has never before experienced.

In writing that is as moving as any in contemporary fiction today, Kent Haruf offers an unforgettable portrait not only of the small town of Holt, Colorado, and the fascinating people who live there, but of the human condition itself, in all its brilliance and frailty.

(BookBrowse.com)

About the Author

Kent Haruf's first two novels garnered critical attention, but little in the way of sales, so the massive success of *Plainsong* (1999) caught him by surprise. The book became a bestseller and was nominated for the National Book Award and the New Yorker Book Award, among others. Its success enabled Haruf to retire from the teaching that he had done for decades and take up writing full time.

Haruf came late to writing — his first published piece was a short story that appeared when he was 41 years old. Haruf, the son of a Methodist preacher, grew up in eastern Colorado where much of his work is set, but earned his B.A. at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln. He also pursued writing at the University of Iowa, one of the finest

programs in the country, and earned his M.F.A. there, but did not publish anything for years after leaving the program.

Instead he worked a series of jobs, traveling across the Midwest to teach in Colorado, Nebraska, Illinois, and Wisconsin, among other places. He also served for two years in the Peace Corps, teaching English in Turkey, and has worked at a chicken farm, a pest control company, and a presidential library. He wrote during this time and published his first novel, *The Tie That Binds* (1984), the same year that he published his first short story. *The Tie That Binds* first introduced Holt, the small eastern Colorado town that would provide the setting for his later books, but the novel did not sell particularly well.

Haruf continued to teach and write, not publishing another book until 1991, when *Where You Once Belonged* appeared. The book sold fewer copies than his last. This same year, Haruf took a job at Southern Illinois University and taught writing there. He also made a change in his own writing habits and decided to write his next book in an unorthodox fashion: he would type the first draft with a stocking cap on his head.

This book became *Plainsong*, and Haruf drafted it “blind” in order to get away from the sight of the words on the page. Whether it was the stocking cap or not, *Plainsong* became a major hit and allowed Haruf to retire from teaching and return to Colorado with his wife. He was able to pursue writing full-time after *Plainsong*, which tells the story of the McPheron brothers and the young and pregnant Victoria Roubideaux, who becomes a part of their household. After completing the book, Haruf felt he had more to say about the McPherons, and the result was *Eventide* (2004), a bleaker novel that explores crisis moments in several different Holt families.

(*NoveList*)

Reviews

“But if a sense of déjà vu dogs the reader of this book, the novel also showcases the qualities that made *Plainsong* such a seductive performance. It’s not just that readers of *Plainsong* will want to find out what has happened to Raymond and Harold McPheron and their neighbors. It’s that Mr. Haruf makes us care about these plain-spoken, small town folks without ever resorting to sentimentality or clichés. Instead, he uses their own language – simple laconic and uninflected with irony or contemporary slang – to capture the mood and mores of the town.” —*New York Times*

“What about those who never read *Plainsong*? It’s certainly possible to pick up *Eventide* and follow along; Haruf injects background intermittently, as when, in Part Three, Raymond McPheron reflects on how, ‘after a series of peculiar circumstances had transpired,’ Victoria had come to live with them, ‘and her coming had changed matters for them forever.’ But to appreciate the new book to the fullest, reading (or rereading) *Plainsong* will double the pleasure.” —*The St. Louis Post Dispatch*

YOUR KIRKWOOD PUBLIC LIBRARY

314-821-5770 www.kpl.lib.mo.us

Further Reading

Peace Like a River by Leif Enger

The Art of Mending by Elizabeth Berg

The Corrections by Jonathan Franzen

Cowboys Are My Weakness by Pam Houston

If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things by Jon McGregor

BOOK CLUB TO GO!

Eventide

By Kent Haruf

Possible Discussion Questions

1. Two elderly bachelors living on an isolated ranch in eastern Colorado – not what one would immediately consider an exciting premise for a work of fiction. How does Kent Haruf transform the mundane materials of his characters and setting into such an emotionally compelling story?
2. In what ways does *Eventide* deepen readers' relationships with those characters who also inhabit Haruf's previous novel *Plainsong*? How are the two novels alike? In what ways are they significantly different?
3. What kind of men are Harold and Raymond McPheron? What are their most distinctive and appealing characteristics? What makes them so likable?
4. Why does Haruf interweave, in alternating chapters, the stories of the McPheron brothers and Victoria Roubideaux, Luther and Betty Wallace and Rose Tyler, Hoyt Raines, DJ Kephart and his grandfather, and Mary Wells and her daughters? How are their lives interconnected? In what ways do they represent a wide spectrum of American society?
5. When Tom Guthrie and his sons finish separating the cows and their calves, Ike Guthrie says, "They make an awful lot of noise. . . . They don't seem to like it much." To which Tom replies, "They never do like it. . . . I can't imagine anything or anybody that would like it. But every living thing in this world gets weaned eventually" [p. 155]. How does this statement illuminate the central themes of *Eventide*? In what ways is the novel about the pain of separation, of getting "weaned"?
6. Haruf's writing, like the speech of the characters he writes about, is restrained, as when Raymond calls Victoria to tell her of Harold's death:
"Honey, I got something to tell you."
"Oh, no", she said. "Oh no. No."
"I'm just afraid I do", he said. And then he told her [p. 80].
Why does Haruf end the conversation there? Why is it more moving to let the reader imagine the rest of the conversation than to describe it more completely? Where else in the novel does Haruf show this kind of reserve?

7. When Del Gutierrez tells Raymond that he can't see how just one man can run the ranch – “It seems like too much for one person to do”—Raymond responds, “What else you going to do?” [p. 233]. How does this response typify Raymond's attitude about life and his own predicament?
8. When Raymond worries that they might have to wait until seven-thirty to have dinner, Rose says, “You wouldn't do very well in New York or Paris, would you,” and Raymond replies: “I wouldn't even do very good in Fort Morgan” [p. 255]. Why wouldn't Raymond do well in a big city? In what ways is he suited to, and a product of, the rural life of the high plains?
9. Why has Haruf included a character like Hoyt Raines in the novel? What does he add to the emotional texture of the book?
10. Parent-child relationships are important in *Eventide*. What kinds of behavior does the novel dramatize between parents (or grandparents or surrogate parents) and children? How are children seen and treated by their elders in the book? What are the best and worst examples of parent-child relationships in *Eventide*?
11. Near the end of the novel, Luther and Betty Wallace's children are placed in a foster home. Why does the court make this decision? Is it the right one? Does Haruf intend for readers to regard Luther and Betty critically, sympathetically, or with some mixture of feelings?
12. Why is the budding romance between Rose and Raymond so appealing? Why must Raymond be tricked into meeting her? Why are they so drawn to each other?
13. *Eventide* ends with Raymond and Rose sitting together quietly, “the old man with his arm around this kind woman, waiting for what would come” [p. 300]. Why is this a satisfying way to end the novel? What is likely to come for them? Literary works often imply, if only implicitly, a set of values to live by. What attitudes and values does *Eventide* seem to hold up for emulation?

(*BookBrowse.com*)