



Benediction

Kent Haruf

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When Dad Lewis is diagnosed with terminal cancer, he and his wife must work together, along with their daughter, to make his final days as comfortable as possible, despite the bitter absence of their estranged son. Next door, a young girl moves in with her grandmother and contends with the memories that Dad's condition stirs up of her own mother's death. A newly arrived preacher attempts to mend his strained relationships with his wife and son, and soon faces the disdain of his congregation when he offers more than they are used to getting on Sunday mornings. And throughout, an elderly widow and her middle-aged daughter do all they can to ease the pain of their friends and neighbors.

Benediction Details

Date : Published February 26th 2013 by Knopf

ISBN : 9780307959881

Author : Kent Haruf

Format : Hardcover 258 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literary Fiction, Family



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Gauss74 says

Quando finisco di leggere un romanzo come questo faccio sempre molta fatica a sedermi e scrivere un commento su come è stato: sia per endemica pigrizia (scrivere è comunque molto più faticoso che leggere) sia perchè in effetti materiale da lasciar decantare un po' per rifletterci ne abbiamo più che abbastanza.

Nel caso di "Benedizione" di Kent Haruf credo che sia stata una fortuna, perchè a caldo, appena chiusa l'ultima pagina, il libro non mi era piaciuto, sicuramente molto meno che "Canto della pianura" (che è nei tempi della narrazione il primo libro della trilogia che deve essere letto). Il problema è che mi era sembrata una storia, per così dire, squilibrata. La pesantezza di un vivere strozzato da regole tanto dure quanto poco sentite, la paradossale mancanza di sogni e di opportunità in mondo piccolo circondato da confini troppo vasti, sono esposte quasi con compiacimento, senza che siano comunque temperate da quegli slanci di umanità che in "Canto della pianura" erano invece presenti. Lo stesso protagonista, raffigurato nel lungo e doloroso percorso verso la morte dettato dal tumore neoplastico, sembra indicare che questa volta Haruf non è disposto a fare sconti a costo di scrivere un libro amaro, acerbo, poco credibile.

Poi man mano che passavano i giorni tornando a rifletterci sopra, ho rivalutato questa storia: con grande lucidità emerge da queste pagine quelle che sono le caratteristiche dell' America, che ritroviamo in opere ben più famose come "Pastorale americana" di Philip Roth, ma esposte forse con più chiarezza. Dovendo fare i conti con una morte annunciata, Dad Lewis ripercorre tutta la sua vita nei suoi episodi più cruciali: la rottura e l'abbandono con il figlio omosessuale, il licenziamento del fedele commesso macchiatosi del peccato veniale di sottrarre cifre dalla cassa ed in seguito suicidatosi, i burrascosi rapporti con la figlia del quale non accetta il compagno...

Quello che viene in mente è che ogni volta questo vecchio americano rispettabile ed onorato è stato giusto, ma mai umano.

Giusto e mai umano come tutti i cittadini di Holt, che non riescono ad accettare e cacciano via in malo modo il nuovo pastore, reo di riproporre in tutta la sua scandalosa radicalità il messaggio cristiano originario.

Il vero problema dell'America del Novecento è una soffocante cortezza di vedute. tante volte commentando libri sempre diversi mi è capitato di affermare che l'identità di una persona è definita anche e soprattutto dai NO che riesce ad imporsi. Non può essere tutto lecito, altrimenti niente ha valore e si cade nel nichilismo. tra le pagine di Benedizione si cade nella situazione opposta: l'irrinunciabile rispettabilità della provincia americana impone troppi NO; troppi vincoli, troppi finti imperativi morali. Diventa impossibile realizzare la propria personalità rispettandoli tutti, soprattutto diventa impossibile stringere relazioni umane rimanendo giusti agli occhi della società. Era giusto licenziare il giovane commesso reo di aver rubato, pur sapendo che questo lo avrebbe portato alla rovina? Certo, ma forse sarebbe stato meglio perdonarlo. Era giusto arrivare alla rottura con il proprio figlio rifiutandosi persino di provare ad accettare la sua omosessualità? In un mondo pervaso da un bieco machismo e da un Cristianesimo ipocrita senza dubbio, ma a che prezzo?

Questo sembra essere il significato del Cristianesimo protestante, che sostiene una nazione che di cristiano non ha assolutamente nulla. Gli americani non stanno vivendo una fede. Gli americani vogliono essere rassicurati: rassicurati che la pesantissima cappa di doveri e tradizioni che i sono tirati addosso sia qualcosa di giusto, disegni una vita che sia quella che debba essere vissuta, poco importa che in realtà sia una pesantissima catena.

E' il messaggio che la lenta e consapevole agonia di Dad Lewis mi lascia. Bisogna stare attenti a non arrivare

a decidere che tutto sia lecito, perchè senza imperativi morali non si costruisce un'identità; ma bisogna anche stare attenti ad accettare (ancor meno ad imporre ai nostri cari) dei NO che non siano i nostri, che ci costringano a piegare il nostro essere noi stessi a cliché di uomini che di umano hanno solo il simulacro. Ogni persona definisce il proprio essere con le proprie aspirazioni e la propria morale, ma ha anche il compito di contribuire a costruire una comunità in cui ogni persona sia libera di fare altrettanto.

Orsodimondo says

AMERICAN GOTHIC

Colorado: il canto della pianura

Non credevo esistessero periodi adatti e periodi non adatti alla lettura di un libro.

Ho sempre pensato che l'Arte è preziosa anche quando parla di morte e di dolore, la Bellezza ha sempre un effetto tonificante, non esiste Bellezza deprimente. Non c'è Bellezza che possa fare male, mi sono sempre detto.

Mi sa che devo ricredermi.

Questo romanzo di Haruf è molto bello e contiene così tanta infelicità che in questo periodo della mia vita non riesco a sostenerla.

Non basta che sia bello: dopo 273 pagine di lacrime, sono stremato, non ce la faccio più, sono davvero troppe per uno come me che non ha nulla di Gary Cooper, the strong silent type
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SQkL...>

Vilhelm Hammershøi: Quattro stanze, 1914, Ordrupgaard Museum di Jægersborg Dyrehave, Copenhagen

Haruf colpisce subito e ancora per la sua scrittura semplice, asciutta, essenziale, in grado di evocare la musica del silenzio senza sprecare un aggettivo o un complemento, che sembra centrare l'anima delle cose con la normalità del tono.

Una scrittura che trasmette rigore (morale), onestà, verità, autenticità, sincerità.

Una scrittura che sembra la più adatta ai suoi paesaggi geografici e umani fuori dal tempo (anche se questa volta è più facile individuare l'epoca del racconto): la pianura aperta, tanta e così vasta da apparire sconfinata, le lontane colline, spazio, cielo (il cielo sembra essere più incombente sopra un immenso spazio piano) – uomini che si sforzano di rispettare una legge morale anche quando non ci riescono, anche quando sono persone rette che sembrano non conoscere pietà come il protagonista Dad Lewis.

Colorado: la strada per Holt

Ritorna Holt, il paese immaginario del Colorado nel quale Haruf ambienta le sue storie.

E anche questa volta la narrazione gira intorno a una decina di personaggi, che tessono un racconto intriso di dolore, in un'America che sembra immutabile, sembra non cambiare mai.

Proprio come le pianure.

Epica del quotidiano, aggraziata ballata della semplicità, the precious ordinary.

In questo episodio della sua sciolta e slegata trilogia (sarei contento di capire perché la bella impresa editoriale di NN, casa editrice nata proprio con le traduzioni di Haruf, sia iniziata da questo romanzo, che viene considerato l'ultimo della cosiddetta trilogia, invece che dal primo, peraltro già edito in Italia da Rizzoli nel 2003: solo perché era il più recente in ordine di pubblicazione? Sarebbe una spiegazione un po' deludente), Haruf ricorre al dialogo molto più che in Plainsong, il capitolo iniziale.

Vilhelm Hammershøi: Interno con Ida su una sedia bianca, 1900

Io sono rimasto un po' spiazzato: perché non ero pronto, perché mi è sembrato tanto, perfino troppo, perché qui e là mi è suonato più artefatto delle sue descrizioni in prosa che conosco.

Ciò nonostante, nonostante il così massiccio ricorso al dialogo, ho parlato prima di musica del silenzio: che mi sembra forse essere il cuore dell'arte di Haruf, la sua essenza.

Altro elemento che mi ha fatto preferire Plainsong è che qui i personaggi appaiono più sopravvivere che vivere, gente che tira avanti, gente per cui il futuro non è più di moda, gente che vivrebbe la felicità come una colpa, gente dallo sguardo basso, come se l'orizzonte incombesse e fosse troppo vasto (ancora una volta la pianura?).

Vilhelm Hammershøi: Quattro stanze, 1914, Ordrupgaard Museum di Jægersborg Dyrehave, Copenhagen

Gente che dice:

Dopo un po' dimentichi. Inizi a far caso ai tuoi acciacchi e ai tuoi mali. Pensi a una protesi all'anca. La vista si indebolisce. Inizi a pensare alla morte. La vita si fa più limitata. Smetti di preoccuparti del mese che viene. Speri di non tirare avanti troppo a lungo.

Oppure dice:

Tutta la vita trascorre nell'infelicità per un motivo o per l'altro, no?

Non so. Un tempo non la pensavo così.

Però c'è anche del buono, disse Willa. Ci tengo a sottolinearlo.

Ci sono brevi momenti, disse Alene. Questo è uno.

Gente che rifiuta i diversi di ogni genere, siano essi gli adolescenti inquieti, gli omosessuali, i ladri per necessità, i reverendi esiliati.

Vite ordinarie, vite insignificanti, piene di ferite, cicatrici, perdite, morti, alle quali Haruf regala dignità letteraria e posto nella memoria.

Andrew Wieth: Marsh Hawk, 1964.

Sin dal titolo in Benedizione è più marcato una spiritualità che non esito a definire sentimento religioso: ho notato più forte la mano e il cuore del figlio di un pastore, quale Haruf era.

Non certo solo perché uno dei personaggi principali, forse il più vitale, è un reverendo.

È proprio il romanzo intero a essere immerso in un'aurea che a me rimanda alla fede.

Questi personaggi sembrano quasi tutti portare il peso di una colpa, che mi viene da pensare sia quella connessa al peccato originale – sembrano esseri umani che chiedono scusa di esistere.

La mia sensazione è che Haruf fosse già ammalato e sentisse la sua fine avvicinarsi.

Un'opera comunque magnifica, che sento partecipe del cuore pulsante della cultura americana (US), classica anche se contemporanea.

Andrew Wyeth, pittore del silenzio: Turkey Pond, 1944.

Anziana coppia di protagonisti, da sempre legati in matrimonio, molto innamorati, lui è malato terminale di cancro, gli resta un mese di vita.

La figlia è tornata a vivere in famiglia per le ultime settimane di vita del padre, ma forse resterà per sempre per farsi carico dell'attività paterna, il negozio di ferramenta del paese. Ha un amore, non ricordo chi dove e perché. Ha perso una figlia investita da un'auto.

L'uomo malato di cancro, suo padre, ha scheletri nell'armadio: ha beccato un suo dipendente a rubare incasso, lo ha licenziato e costretto a lasciare il paese, quello si è suicidato – il figlio se ne è andato di casa molto lontano appena finite le scuole perché il padre non accettava la sua omosessualità.

Una donna anziana vedova da trent'anni (decisamente troppi) che vive con la figlia il cui unico amore era un uomo sposato, padre di famiglia, che la lasciò dall'oggi al domani senza una parola. La donna insegnava, ora non più.

Un'anziana rimasta vedova da una vita, ha perso la figlia, vive con la nipotina di otto anni.

No, non è un quadro di Andrew Wyeth, ma un fotogramma dal capolavoro di Terrence Malick “Days of Heaven”, del 1978, col quale vinse l'Oscar per la miglior fotografia e il premio per la miglior regia a Cannes.

Betsy Robinson says

Sitting on a comfortable straight-backed chair, hearing the solitary tick of an ancient kitchen wall clock, in a sun-drenched room in a 150-year-old clapboard house on a dead-end street in a town where everybody's known you since you were born. That's what Kent Haruf's work feels like to me. Spare, haunting, dense with feeling. “The precious ordinary,” he calls it. I love his books. I love his writing. I think I love him.

Jaline says

Benediction is a book I experienced as tender, gentle, and like a deeply moving ballad resonating in the key of life.

The lives depicted are ordinary lives expressed with extraordinary compassion and understanding in how people think, feel, and experience their shared existence.

The key families in the story, whose lives intertwine and overlap, include a family with one member in the last stages of life, a family with a grandmother doing her best to care for her orphaned young grand-daughter, a family where the father, a preacher, is ostracized by many townspeople and alienated from his wife and son, and another family of two older women – a mother and daughter – who have a solid enough relationship that they can reach out and do everything possible to support others in the town.

The interplay between all of these characters is so real and immediate and the descriptions of the town and countryside surrounding them so pure that I felt I was there and experiencing it all with them.

Kent Haruf's writing is like a beautifully crafted piece of music – all our senses are sharpened and enlivened by it in a way that evokes not only deeper thoughts and feelings, but also a glorious sense of what it means to be part of the human condition.

Cosimo says

La guancia del nemico

“Poi si accorse che non poteva disfare il cappio che aveva dietro la testa senza spostare la cassa, la quale al minimo movimento si sarebbe ribaltata. Paralizzato, si mise a piangere, mentre nella stanza diventava buio. Le lacrime tracciavano dei rigagnoli nella fuliggine che aveva in faccia”.

Ambientata nella pianura arida del Colorado, in una provincia sobria e ordinaria, la storia raccontata nel libro assume una credibilità tanto desolata e tradizionale da apparire incorporata e passeggera, come il vento che muove la polvere o la pioggia che bagna la terra di questi paesaggi sconfinati. Haruf riesce a infondere grazia e verità alle vicende quotidiane così come ai momenti irripetibili, con una voce elegante e delicata, che non vuole essere protagonista ma testimone sincera e imprevedibile. C'è un evento centrale nella trama del testo ed è la fine della vita, la morte di un uomo per ciò che significa e comporta in sé e nella vita delle persone che lo amano. Poi ci sono altri episodi, cronache complici e eloquenti dell'interrogativo esistenziale che si infrange sul limite della narrazione: un uomo che nel passato si è tolto la vita, un adulterio, un ragazzo che pensa di uccidersi, un uomo di chiesa che si trova fuori gioco. Questo romanzo assomiglia alla vita e descrive il dolore e la sua inattendibilità insieme al senso di perdita: il dolore che si ferma al nostro fianco e quello che si insedia dentro di noi, con un realismo essenziale e semplice, al punto da apparire brutale nella sua familiarità. Vicinanza e affinità che diventano rivelazione, nell'amore senza fine di chi sopravvive, orfani di un tempo malinconico e silenzioso, di un'assenza indispensabile e potente.

“Lo baciò di nuovo sulle labbra screpolate e si sdraiò al suo fianco e rimase in silenzio, fissando nel buio dove la luce del granaio formava sagome scure e ombre e strane figure, e all'improvviso scoppiò a piangere”.

Cecily says

Lost, Estranged, Adopted, Reconciled?

“You don't get over it... when a child goes. You never do.”

The greatest pain is not from one's own inevitable death, or even the loss of a beloved partner (both of which feature), but from separation of children and parents.

Most of these characters are coping with such loss, whether through death, estrangement, or missing the opportunity to have a child. A few regain or attain some sort of parent/child relationship. Generally mothers and daughters fare better than fathers and sons. Nevertheless, this is primarily a story of coming to terms with loss. Loss balanced by kindness.

There's only one actual child: 8-year old Alice, who lives next door to the Lewises, with her grandmother, Berta May. She is loved and raised by several elderly and middle-aged women.

*"But Grandma I don't need new clothes.
Yes, but they need to give you some...
You said it was better to give than receive...
You're giving by letting them."*

Love in Action, Not Love Inaction

What is love if it remains private and theoretical?

This is not a sentimental book, but its firmest message is of practical love entwined with acceptance and forgiveness.

There is the lifelong love, devotion, and endurance of wife and daughter. They care for their dying husband/father at home, easing the pain of his imminent passing. Not shying from intimate ablutions, or wincing at his weakening limbs, papery skin, and the lengthening gaps between rattly breaths, as his body slowly decays.

There is also a teenager shedding blood to defend their first love, but really needing rescue themselves.

It's perfectly balanced between quiet tragedy, bravely borne, and selfless love and generosity. There is heartbreak for individuals, but hope for family, community, humanity.

Love Thine Enemy

"It's always this way in time of war, Willa said... This mix of nationalism and hate."

Rev Lyle shocks many in his congregation by insisting that Jesus' exhortation to love thine enemies is not a metaphor. It's literal - even applying to terrorists.

He walks the streets to observe "the precious ordinary", expecting to see people being hurtful, but is thrilled by the repeated "sweet kindness of one person to another". Separately, there's a charming scene where a gas station attendant is immensely helpful to Mary (old and lost), and she finds a way to reciprocate.

People's everyday kindness, and Lyle's conviction that it's better to suffer the painful consequences of love than never to have loved, provide the hope of the story.

Spoiler-Free Sections, hidden for easier scrolling

Click this single spoiler tag to read sections titled: It's Personal, Plot, Last Rites - A Benediction?, and Progressive Disclosure. Click here: (view spoiler)

Language and Quotes

There are strings of short, simple sentences, with short, simple words. They could almost be from a Janet and John reading primer. It might be described as plodding. It should be banal, but isn't. Somehow it works. Even the minimal punctuation fits so well that I really only noticed it when copying quotes.

Plain language powerfully evokes the small town on the plains. A sparse style with no room for sentimentality. It is especially effective in describing the landscape and the texture and sensations of a failing body.

But lines plucked from the page and quoted alone, don't do it justice. The effect is cumulative. Hence, the fact I include only a few quotes does not reflect the high quality of the writing. It is an example of the "the precious ordinary" that Rev Lyle admires.

- "Grandma has lots of friends... But she doesn't do anything with them."
- "His chest was white and bony and almost hairless, his ribs jutted out."
- "I've learned not to think about it. You have to... It gets better... You forget after a while... You live more narrowly." That's intended as helpful and sympathetic advice on coping with loneliness!
- "The dust boiling up behind them on the country roads."
- "You're lucky. Not many have had what you've had. Or we don't recognise it. Most of us just settle for some imitation of it so we don't have to live alone."
- "She was marked and known. It was how you paid for love. But over time that was lost too. She became part of the history of the town, like wallpaper in the old houses... living out her days among other people's children."

A Standalone Novel, Not Plainsong #3

Despite GR labelling, this is not part of a trilogy. All Haruf's novels are set in the small fictional town of Holt, 2.5 hours from Denver, with "blue sandhills in the hazy distance". There are some common themes (fractured or forged relationships between parents and children, for example). The only specific link is a brief and trivial mention of the McPheron brothers, and Victoria, the central characters of Plainsong/Eventide.

See my reviews of Plainsong #1 and Eventide (Plainsong #2):

- Plainsong 5*
- Eventide 5*

One or two characters were briefly important, but not mentioned again. I wonder if they feature more strongly in other Haruf books. Lovestruck Laurie Wheeler and Ronnie Walker, for instance, and old Rose Tyler, who never got over the loss of an unspecified male (husband, son?). The answer is to read more Haruf. I look forward to it.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Benediction is a pensive novel about the dailiness of life in a small town, the neighborly kindnesses as well as the regrets and missed chances that haunt its residents. At times it's more a lament than a benediction.

"Dad" Lewis is the central character. He only has a few weeks left to live. Knowing this makes him treasure events and places that once seemed ordinary and unspecial. As his life draws to a close, he allows himself to revert to a childlike authenticity. He finally tells people what he really thinks of them, and he gives in to emotions we learn to suppress and deny as we grow into adulthood. He lets himself weep as he contemplates the loss of life's most basic contentments -- the rhythms of our days that seem commonplace, but become dear as the end approaches.

This is not a novel you read for plot. There's not much action or conflict or conquest. I enjoyed it for the simple genius of the writing and the author's ability to excavate the human heart and mind. The approach is somewhat similar to Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio*, although Haruf's prose is more restrained and pleasurable to read. Both books examine the secret longings and regrets of small-town folk, and the narrowing of opportunities imposed by small-town attitudes.

I recommend *Benediction* for readers seeking the most realistic fiction you're likely to find. Kent Haruf is peerless in his ability to observe the poignancy and pathos of human experience and commit it to paper in its barest essence.

NOTE: Kent Haruf does not use quotation marks in his dialogue. Usually this is something that would bother me quite a bit. However, Haruf's style is so clean and simple that it wasn't a problem for me with this particular book.

Chrissie says

A book about a father dying of terminal cancer. He is dying at home, in our times and in the author's fictional town of Holt, Colorado. A hospital milieu is not part of this book.

The book is about the process of dying and how this affects all involved. How do you **think** I am feeling as I complete this book? It doesn't take much to imagine. Sad, and there are tears in my eyes. A man has died, and I am grieving. That says all you really need to know.

Obviously, the characters have become real to me. Otherwise I would not be so upset.

The dialogs are utterly genuine.

Guilt, regret and absolution. All three are present. The book does not conclude with all problems solved neat and sweet. I am very glad it didn't.

One life has ended, but life goes on. This is beautifully conveyed, with just a minimum of words.

When you start the book, about ten different characters are thrown at you. Each one has a side-story, told through flashbacks. Their stories are tied to Dad Lewis' life and now his death, and it is only natural that he should think back. Each of these side characters are there for a purpose; each one plays a significant role in the events. Through them, Haruf has captured not one personality type but many. I wouldn't have wanted any of them to be removed from the story.

This puts me in mind to mention one scene that stands out for me above others--four naked women lying serenely in the grass on a hot summer's day. Aged from eight to about eighty, what they are sharing with

each other is an afternoon together and a memory they will not soon forget. Then they are swimming in sparkling cold water. Haruf captures women, both the young and the elderly, how they think and feel and talk, extremely well.

The audiobook I listened to was narrated by Mark Bramhall. I would have liked to tweak a few of his female character intonations. It is read at a good speed and is easy to follow. The narration I have given three stars.

I do not regret reading this, although it was certainly not a happy read. The story is well told.

The Tie That Binds 5 stars

Our Souls at Night 4 stars

Where You Once Belonged 4 stars

Plainsong 4 stars

Eventide 4 stars

Benediction 4 stars

The last three titles make up the author's Plainsong series. They are stand-alones; they do not have to be read together.

Julie Christine says

ETA 11/30/14: RIP to Kent Haruf. Your wisdom, gentleness, and wit will be dearly missed. "And death shall have no dominion . . ."

Holt, Colorado – a blunt-edged town on the eastern edge of Colorado's high and dry plains – where time ticks like the cooling engine of car. Storms build in billowing clouds on the horizon, summers grind through with breathless heat, winters drive ice and snow from across the flat middle of the country. It is as it has always been. It seems so little changes in this quiet, gently ticking community, but one moment it's the 1960s, the next it's the new millennium, and you find yourself at the edges of your life.

So it must seem to Dad Lewis, an octogenarian who has just been told his future can be measured in weeks. When he wipes a shirtsleeve across the Holt's dusty surface and peers in, he sees a world so very different from the one he shaped when he was a young husband, growing a new business, a daughter and a son. The new preacher, banished from Denver for speaking out on behalf of a gay colleague, is hardly the model for atonement he expected as he waits to be ushered into the next life; the daughter of his neighbor, once a fresh and bright teacher, has returned a retired spinster; "the War" refers not to sandy beaches on France's Atlantic coast or even jungles in Southeast Asia, but to barren mountains in Afghanistan and vast deserts in the Middle East. His children moved on long ago. His wife is an old woman.

But in this brief interlude between learning his long life is ending and taking his final breath, Dad Lewis has an opportunity to make one last impression before he returns as he came: from nothing into nothing. What will his Benediction be?

This is less a story than a series of vignettes about regret and compassion. Kent Haruf rarely grants redemption to his characters, just as life itself doles out redemption in meager dribs, offering only enough

grace to keep us going until our time is played out.

Kent Haruf is a master of the understatement. He is a sublime observer, less a storyteller than a whispering carney offering glimpses into the circus of life. His narratives are quiet, moving to a gentle rhythm. At first glance, they can seem as dry and simple as the flat, square towns on Colorado's eastern border where his stories are set. You think you have taken it all in, standing there on the edge by the feed store, looking straight down 6th avenue to the water tower that rises like a sentinel on the other end of town. But as Lyle, the preacher-turned-pariah, learns during his midnight rambles down silent streets, what is really there is rarely what you see.

Zoeytron says

Life and death. Simply and beautifully penned. May you rest in peace, Mr. Haruf. We've loved your stories well.

The wind still blows. That doesn't change.

Diane Yannick says

I will read anything this man writes. He can capture our universal humanity way down at a soul level. His eloquent, unobtrusive, sparse prose leads the reader from one carefully drawn scene to the next. He just lays out his story and lets the reader come along for the ride. No words, phrases, or concepts are tortured in this process.

The Lewis family faces the death of their patriarch with as much dignity as they can. Their regrets and accomplishments mix together into an acceptance of a life lived the best way they knew how. There are no reconciliations and mellowing as the end nears, just an attitude of matter of fact acceptance. I just loved this dad for his simplicity and underlying belief that the world owed him nothing. He'd written his story and now it was over.

Pastor Lyle Wesley was another intriguing character. His congregations always turned against him when he veered from the expected doctrine and expressed his heartfelt views. It made me think about how little leeway we generally give those representing specific religious sects. Both the pastor and the father could find no meaningful way to connect to their sons. This disconnect complicates their relationships with the women in their lives.

Mesmerizing book which captures the feel of small town Holt and invites you into a few lives. When it's over, it's hard to let go.

Jim says

The entire time I was reading this book I could not get a line from Max Ehrmann's *Desiderata* out of my head: "Speak your truth quietly and clearly, and listen to others; even the dull and ignorant, they too have their story." *Benediction* is the story of a nobody, really. Just a fellow who labored at the same job for half a century, raised a small semi-dysfunctional family, and then became ill. We all know someone like Dad Lewis: most of us will know several people like him. Entire city blocks are populated by people like Dad. They live out their brief lives in comfortable obscurity and when they go, their departure is barely noticed.

The beauty of *Benediction* is that Kent Haruf has taken the humdrum and made it interesting. It made me remember the fact that everyone has a story, and it's a pity we don't all have a skilled storyteller to put each of us forth in a sympathetic light.

Dolors says

What is it that really matters when the light of our lives gradually fades out to complete and utter darkness? When we face loss and inevitable extinguishment?

Using the fictional town of Holt in the high plains of Colorado as a setting, Kent Haruf builds a finely threaded fabric of stories that place emphasis on the courage and the compassion of ordinary people when confronted with everyday tragedies of daily life.

An old man is diagnosed with terminal cancer and is forced to face certain aspects of his past that have haunted him for years before he is ready to exit this world.

An orphaned girl moves in with her grandmother and her sole presence, totally unbeknown to her, sheds light into the lives of two childless women in this small community.

The town's newly arrived preacher struggles to mend the strained relationship with his wife and teenaged son without giving up his principles, which costs him the respect of the conservative cluster in his congregation.

An ex-teacher past her prime regrets having wasted her youth on a love affair that was doomed from the start and instead of allowing her grief to turn bitter, she decides to spread her bountiful love among friends and neighbors.

All the characters come together in their particular quest to overcome loss and fear only to discover that they are not alone, that the generosity of those who live next door might be the lantern they need to navigate the obscure uncertainties that momentarily fog their path.

Nevertheless, as much as I basked in the paused pace of the narration, it's not the alternating plotlines that marked the difference in this book. What I found most disarming is the sober finesse of Kent Haruf's approach. With a style completely bare of flourishes and uncomplicated dialogues without transition that naturally blend with the unpretentious voice of the narrator, Haruf captivates the reader by presenting depth with plain simplicity. The concision of his words can only be reached through years of close observation and accumulated wisdom and experience. The intimacy that is dispelled from the stark prose is restrained but so meaningful, so moving, that it demands taking breaks from reading to fully absorb the intensity of the feelings of these almost flesh and blood characters as if they were our own.

Haruf manages the ultimate goal in this small gem of a book; to capture the quintessence of all the stages of

life, including death, as well as the hopes and fears, dreams and disillusionments, light and darkness, heartache and immense love that sustain his characters, that sustain all of us along the way. With unmatched humility, grace and an insightful glance that overflows with humanity, Haruf utters a blessing so that we don't lose our sense of direction in the treacherous maze of routine, dissatisfaction and mediocrity and he reminds us of the few truly precious things that should rule our lives. Listen to his whisper, ablaze with love and empathy, and reconcile yourself with whatever lays ahead, knowing that you can meet it with a full blessing in your lips. It's possible; I have witnessed it. And I am blessed to be a witness.

Will Byrnes says

Kent Haruf takes his time. His first novel, *The Ties That Bind*, was published in 1984, winning a Whiting Foundation Award and a Hemingway Foundation/PEN citation. His second novel, *Where You Once Belonged* was published in 1990. *Plainsong*, which became a best-seller and was a National Book Award finalist, was published in 1999. Its sequel, *Eventide*, was published in 2004. Nine years later we have Haruf's fifth novel, *Benediction*. All his novels are set in the fictional town of Holt, Colorado, (a stand-in for Yuma where Haruf once lived) nearer to Kansas and Nebraska than to that suspect center of the scary urban, Denver. *Benediction* is not a sequel, but a stand-alone, although there are a few nods to characters from prior tales. All Haruf's novels are top-notch, written at a very high plane of craft, observation and insight, and *Benediction* fits in very nicely with his existing, outstanding body of work.

Dad Lewis gets the bad news straight away, cancer, terminal. Get your affairs in order. Over the remaining few months of his life Dad (we never learn his proper first name) does just that. We visit with him as he tries to come to terms with his life, recalling how he came to be on his own as a teen, how he met the love of his life, how he treated those around him, his son, daughter, employees, neighbors. This being a Kent Haruf novel, it takes a village to tell a tale. Eight-year-old Alice has arrived next door, at her grandmother's, her father long gone and her mother recently deceased. How the people of Holt cope with her presence will feel very familiar for return readers of Haruf's work, but still both startling in some of the details and incredibly moving in its execution. Reverend Lyle, late of Denver, makes the crucial mistake of actually preaching the gospel, not what most of the parishioners want to hear. His wife and son wish he would keep such things to himself. Haruf was the son of a minister, and his depiction of the politics of town religious institutions has the ring of seen rather than revealed truth. There is an older mother-daughter pair who figure into the story, most particularly in a wonderful scene that is simultaneously baptismal and pagan, and a few more characters who matter beside. There are no saints here, no demons. (well, ok, a few very minor characters are purely awful) Forgiveness is a major element for many of the relationships here. It is tougher to create an image with fine lines than to paint with broad strokes. Haruf takes his time and makes his characters breathe.

All the lonely people. Where do they all come from? Holt apparently. There is enough quiet desperation in Holt that I was reminded at times of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*. Love does not seem to last often enough, but there are some exceptions that keep hope alive. We are invited to look at relationships between parents and children, between present, past, potential and real lovers, and between people and the places in which they live. Communities definitely affect one's options, for good and ill.

One might wonder how the author goes about constructing his novels. Fortunately he has told us

When I think of a story, I always begin with the characters. I daydream and brood and imagine that character for nearly a year and, of course, they all have to have problems, so I think about their problems. Then I begin to imagine and daydream about the people that would be in their lives, and their problems. It's my biggest effort to figure out how to bring them together in a

way that would move the story forward — not necessarily predictably but certainly inevitably.

The atmospherics of Holt figure significantly in how we are handled as readers. After Dad gets the news and returns home, the sun is down. An assault is accompanied by rain. A parent hitting a child is lit by *The wind cried and whistled in the leafless trees*. During a significant sermon, *The sanctuary was hot. The windows were open but it was a hot day and hot inside*. It gets hotter and you get the idea. The use of weather throughout is ever-present, but tempered, never intrusive, there to add a highlight, reinforce a mood, never to direct traffic. Characters relate a fair bit around food as well, feeding each other or not. The flatness of the terrain adds exposure. ...*on the plains, everything is visible, nothing is isolated. That appeals to me a great deal, these people being so visible, as if they're seen in a spotlight*. There is a scene that grabbed me, in which a character is walking the town at night and is stopped by the police:

Is there something wrong with you? What are you doing out here?
I'm just walking. Having a look around town.
Your family knows where you are?
They know I'm taking a walk.
It doesn't bother you to look in other people's houses? You think that's all right.
I don't think I'm doing any harm. I didn't mean to.
Well, these people don't like it. This man called you in.
What did he say?
That you were looking in his house.
Did he say what he was doing in his house?
Why would he say that?
People in their houses at night. These ordinary lives. Passing without their knowing. I'd hoped to recapture something.
The officer stared at him.
The precious ordinary.
I don't know what you're talking about, but you'd better keep moving.
I thought I'd see people being hurtful. Cruel. A man hitting his wife. But I haven't seen that.
Maybe all that's behind the curtains. If you're going to hit somebody maybe you pull the curtain first.
Not necessarily.
What I've seen is the sweet kindness of one person to another. Just time passing on a summer's night. This ordinary life.

That passage seems to epitomize the writing and sensibility of Kent Haruf. His literary doppelganger, wandering through a town of people, seeing decency and finding meaning and joy in "this ordinary life." It's not hard to say something nice about *Benediction*. Haruf writes of real human concerns, real human problems, engagingly and effectively. You will come to care about someone in Haruf's Holt, maybe more than one someone. Take your time with this one. Read it slowly. As we have come to expect, whenever Kent Haruf produces a new book, it is always a blessing.

=====EXTRA STUFF

I found many interviews with the author, and have included links to a few here, in case you get the urge. The author quotes I used are from the first one listed.

Benediction was chosen as the #1 Indie Next List Pick for March 2013. Here is the interview from *Bookselling This Week*, a publication of the American Bookseller's Association, by Elizabeth Knapp

From *Telluride Inside and Out* - interview by Mark Stephens

This Barnes and Noble profile was written by Christina Nunez

This interview is from November 2012, in Publishers Weekly on-line, by Claire Kirch

The book was published by Picador in the UK. On their site, there is a nice photo essay about what Haruf's landscape looks like, *Benediction* in Pictures

Also, it is worth your time to check out Michael Edwards' lovely review

P.S. - I suspect that Kent Haruf has a secret first name, Clark.

A stage adaptation of *Benediction* is planned to open in January, 2015 at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts

Carol says

12/01/2014 – Kent Haruf...you chronicled my eastern Colorado roots so brilliantly that I personally knew those folks from "Holt". May you rest in peace.

Kent Haruf's writing style is so eloquent, spare and beautiful. As with *Plainsong*, this novel's setting is in Holt, an imaginary small town on the High Plains of eastern Colorado. I'm a native of this part of Colorado so I'm very familiar with these folks and their quiet but compelling stories. It starts slowly as Haruf introduces the reader to some of the residents of this small, farming community. The main character is Dad Lewis, an elderly man dying of cancer. It is poignant, sometimes sad and always life-affirming. I loved this book!

Kim says

When stopped one night on a dark outside street, a character in Haruf's haunting, beautiful novel is asked: "What are you doing out here?" And he replies, after some confusion about what it is he's doing, that he is simply looking at "The precious ordinary."

This moment leapt out to me as the heart of this novel, as its entire message distilled down to one simple line. The precious ordinary. This is what Haruf writes. In all his novels he shines his own brand of lamplight on the beautiful edges of the average life. One of my students once asked me why Haruf is one of my favorite authors, why I've read all of his novels with such devotion, because, he said, "Nothing much happens in them." I told him I disagreed. Everything happens in them - he's like Richard Russo in the way he's able to capture how wide and challenging and full of heartbreak a normal life is...how each specific life is shaped by sadness and joy and love and loss.

Benediction is a triumph of the precious ordinary. A blessing, indeed.

Michael says

This one made for a very satisfying return for me to the fictional rural community of Holt in the high plains of Colorado. As in his other books, we are treated to the stories of ordinary people struggling to make the most of their lives in the face of the unfulfilled dreams or lost people, all rendered in a spare prose and understated but rich dialog. People who try to rectify their past mistakes. And take the time to rejoice at the simple pleasures from the company of family and friends and the rhythms of the seasons.

For the story here a number of lives intersect over the impending death of “Dad” Lewis from cancer while he makes efforts to put his life and hardware business in order. His wife Mary can’t handle it all, and so accepts her daughter Lorraine’s offer to move in to help. The first of many benedictions. The one benediction Dad needs is the acceptance of love from him by his estranged son Frank, so some desperate efforts are made to reconnect with him. The one benediction he feels a special need to complete is for the wife of a man he fired for theft, which had a tough impact.

In the meantime, friendships between the Lewis family and people in their community take on a life of their own. Visits with the neighbor Berta May and her grand-daughter Alice, age 8, brings out the sympathies of many to make life better Alice, who has lost her parents. In this, Lorraine teams up with her mother’s friend Willa and her middle-aged daughter, Arlene, who is a loveless teacher after an unfortunate affair achieved notoriety many years back.

Another family to be graced by Haruf’s omniscient observer is that of the new church pastor, Reverend Lyle. The gossip machine tries to figure out why he lost his church in Denver and was assigned to the boonies. There is a point where he presses in a sermon on the contrast between Christ’s message of love and forgiveness and that evident in American commitment to its wars. There are some moving scenes where the congregation reacts badly, adding to Lyle’s awkward position with a wife and son unhappy with their displacement. Some in Dad Lewis’ circle take a shine to the brave pastor, and some of their forms of their support for him came the closest in the book to moving me to righteous tears.

Yes, Haruf plucks on your heartstrings, but it never feels like a gratuitous emotional wrenching. You end up feeling a better human from reading him, if not a bit wiser and stronger. I feel there are similarities with Marilynne Robinson’s “Gilead” and Wendell Berry’s “Jayber Crow”, notably in how luminous points of reflection transform human connections to a balm for the dark parts of the human condition. There are a lot of great reviews from my Goodreads friends, but the lovely review by Will Byrnes had the most impact on moving me to read this gem.

piperitapitta says

Il dondolo sulla veranda.

Se in "Canto della pianura" la scrittura di Haruf mi era sembrata minimale(ista), quasi scarna, qui si fa essenziale e abbandona ogni eccesso fino a lavorare per sottrazione, quasi noncurante delle possibili asperità, che risultano invece come levigate, naturalmente, come un sasso dall'acqua. Siamo sempre nella cittadina immaginaria di Holt, in Colorado, da qualche parte lassù, sugli altipiani, ma

molto tempo dopo che la pianura ha intonato il suo canto (Playsong, il canto piano della pianura), molto tempo dopo che i fratelli McPherson hanno calcato la stessa terra e lasciato tracce e impronte che adesso appaiono, semi cancellate, solo nella memoria antica di qualcuno dei nuovi abitanti.

È estate, un'estate calda e umida, ma è anche l'ultima stagione della vita di Dad Lewis, il suo "inverno", il ruvido proprietario della ferramenta di Holt che sta morendo per colpa di un un cancro che non gli dà più scampo.

Benedizione è il suo addio alla vita.

Benedizione è il suo prendere commiato dalle persone che ha amato e che lo amano.

Benedizione è cercare di riempire i vuoti, permettere alle persone che gli stanno vicino di cercare di capire e di accompagnarlo, di accettare che la compiutezza della sua esistenza chiuda il suo ciclo terreno.

Benedizione è accettazione e nodi da sciogliere.

Benedizione, forse, è avere incontrato questo libro, questa storia, e averla fatta mia in un momento in cui la vita tutto mi sembra tranne che benedizione; aver trovato parole e stati d'animo così vivi da averli sentiti fluire e distillare dentro di me.

"Benedizione", però, è anche una casa, e un dondolo sulla veranda, che vede entrare, passare e sostare, persone amiche, conoscenti, nuovi amici, nuovi inizi.

Benedizione è il ciclo della vita: tutto si crea e nulla si distrugge, tutto passa, ma qualcosa resta, soprattutto l'amore: qualcosa per cui ringraziare, sempre.

Ancora un'altra stagione prima che arrivi in libreria l'ultimo romanzo della Trilogia della Pianura di Kent Haruf, "Crepuscolo", dopo resterà solo l'attesa per l'ultimo romanzo scritto poco prima della morte.

Ed è un peccato, penso, aver scoperto un autore così intenso e così avvolgente e allo stesso sapere che ha scritto così poco, che non solo la sua scrittura è stata concentrata, ma anche la sua opera.

Qui la bella lettera di NNE ai lettori che spiega il perché di un ordine di pubblicazione che non rispetta quello naturale della scrittura.

È una "loose trilogy", scrive Haruf, *una trilogia larga, sciolta, slegata*, e in fondo lo credo anche io, credo anche io che si sarebbe potuta fare una scelta logica, ma che vada benissimo anche la scelta di cuore operata dall'editore.

<http://www.nneditore.it/lettera-apert...>

«Sei proprio carina, disse Berta May. E ora sii gentile con loro. Come lo sei stata quando ti hanno portato fuori a pranzo. Lo sai perché?

No.

Perché sono sole. Vogliono fare qualcosa con qualcuno di più giovane. Hanno scelto te.

Ma perché?

Non lo so. Magari non conoscono altre ragazzine. Devi essergliene grata.

Ma nonna, non mi servono dei vestiti nuovi.

Sì, ma per loro è importante regalarteli. Pensa a loro. Hanno bisogno di un motivo per stare con te e hanno trovato questo. E a te va bene riceverli.

Hai sempre detto che è meglio dare che ricevere.

In questo momento le stai aiutando a dare. E in questo modo stai dando anche tu.»

Liz says

Benediction is the third story set in the town of Holt Colorado and does not directly involve any characters

from the two previous books. Nonetheless, Haruf continues to enchant and haunt me with this chronicle of family, love and loss. A woman believing she will be forever alone as penance for past sins, a dying man ruminating on his life and how he might have done better by his family, a good man stigmatized for his moral beliefs. In his trademark economical fashion, Haruf slices right to the heart of each matter being faced by his characters and, once again, the power of human empathy and kindness shines from the pages.

Natalie Richards says

Another absorbing read. Such a deceptively simple story, filled with meaning and love. I will miss never having another Kent Haruf book to read.
