

Oceanside reading

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 2, 2015](#) issue



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Something about being close to the ocean is conducive to reading. I experienced it again this year when my wife and I vacationed on a barrier island off the coast of North Carolina. The only necessary activity is biking to Captain Pete's Seafood Market, studying the day's catch, making a choice, and selecting fresh vegetables from a nearby farm stand. Then it's back to a comfortable chair with a good book.

The critics aren't sure what to make of Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*, with a narrative that occurs two decades after the story in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. *New York Times* columnist Joe Nocera suggests that Rupert Murdoch's decision to publish the book now is an effort to fatten the HarperCollins bottom line with an inferior novel by a beloved author. Nevertheless, after wading through the first 100 pages of stilted prose, I liked the book. I appreciated Lee's enlightening exegesis of polite, socially

accepted racism and the complex thinking of people torn between their better impulses and their loyalty to community.

I was stunned and moved by Kent Haruf's elegant *Our Souls at Night*. Two elderly people, a widow and a widower, find each other in their loneliness, defy conventional mores, and discover a sweet intimacy until traditional morality interrupts. How did Haruf create such winsome characters? How did he so gracefully address so many complicated human issues: grief, isolation, loneliness, hunger, and happiness? *Our Souls at Night* is not overtly theological, but Haruf's characters are almost icons of Christian spirituality: humble, honest, vulnerable, self-effacing, courageous, and loving. This is the capstone to Haruf's literary career; he died last year at the age of 71.

Lutheran pastor Granger Westberg developed a new approach to ministry and theological education that focuses on the pastoral care of people. I studied with Westberg at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. I learned a valuable lesson: when a parishioner makes an appointment to see a minister, what he or she wants and needs is not advice, but someone to listen. Westberg's daughters have written *Gentle Rebel: The Life and Work of Granger Westberg, Pioneer in Whole Person Care*. It includes an interview with Martin Marty and a foreword by physician and pastor Timothy Johnson.