

Kent Haruf's little flame

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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This summer, I went to visit novelist Kent Haruf at his house in Salida, Colorado, to talk about writing and life and death. Not quite a year before, Haruf had been diagnosed with a terminal lung disease. He was in hospice care, and I had not known what to expect when he invited me to come.

But on this warm afternoon, he had made guacamole and lemonade, and we sat in the room behind the kitchen in the old mining-era house. We could see outside to the garden and the cabin-studio where he spent mornings reading and writing his last novel, *Our Souls at Night*.

We talked almost entirely about books. He had recently expanded his reading to include what he called “airy-fairy” books about spirituality and death. He was pondering how he wanted to face death, and he was gathering resources to die awake to the experience of it. “I feel good,” he said.

Haruf, who was the author of six novels including *Plainsong*, a finalist for the National Book Award, died on Sunday. He set most of his novels in the fictional town of Holt, Colorado, on the eastern plains, the landscape where he had spent his childhood as the son of a Methodist minister. He translated the starkness of that landscape into an unadorned language and characters of both compassion and humanness. “Everybody has troubles,” he told me. And this was how he constructed his novels: he began with a central character who had a problem. He then noticed how this character was connected to another character who also had some trouble, and so on, weaving together both private and public pain and their antidotes in community and relationship.

Several months before this meeting at Haruf’s house, he and I had met for a conversation that became [this interview](#) in the *Century*, about his Methodist upbringing and how his parents’ faith translated and didn’t translate into his fiction. He talked about the devotional intensity he brought to his work. In [his essay “The Making of a Writer,”](#) Haruf wrote,

I felt as though I had a little flame of talent, not a big talent, but a little pilot-light-sized flame of talent, and I had to tend to it regularly, religiously, with care and discipline, like a kind of monk or acolyte, and not to ever let the little flame go out.

He did that. But if that flame was so small, why do I feel the absence of it so strongly?