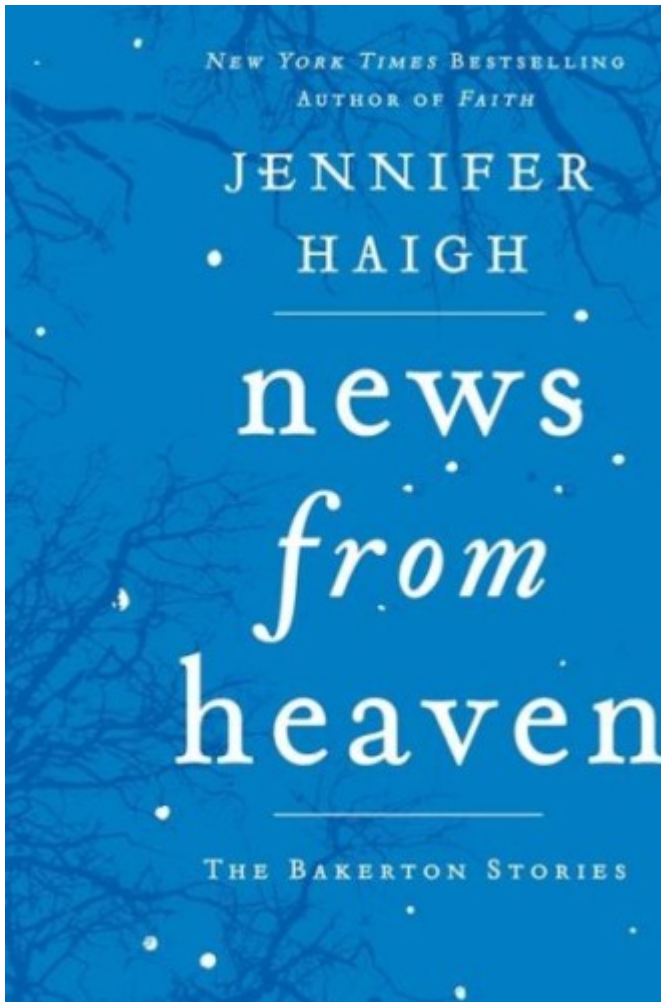


News from Heaven, by Jennifer Haigh

reviewed by [Janet Potter](#) in the [April 17, 2013](#) issue

In Review



News from Heaven

By Jennifer Haigh
Harper

In her 2005 novel *Baker Towers*, Jennifer Haigh introduced readers to Bakerton, Pennsylvania, a town named after the coal mines that sustain it, and to the Novak family's five children, who alternately long to leave and can't help returning to their

hometown in the years following World War II.

In *News from Heaven*, Haigh explores Bakerton again, this time through a book of stories that moves backward and forward in time, showing Bakerton throughout the 20th century and up to the present day. Her cast of characters expands from the Novak siblings to their neighbors, friends, enemies and offspring, all experiencing life in Bakerton at different points in its wartime heyday or its slow, inevitable decline.

Each story centers on whether a character left Bakerton, whether the character should have left and how the decision affected that person. As one character says late in the book, “Bakerton was not generally a town people came back to. You were born in Bakerton and either escaped, as Joyce’s brothers had, or failed to.”

It is interesting, then, that the book’s opening story is the first and only tale in which someone leaves Bakerton against her will. Sixteen-year-old Annie Lubicki is hired as a live-in maid for a family in Manhattan. They are looking for a quiet, dependable Polish girl like their friends employ, and Annie’s parents think the money will come in handy at the Bakerton farm. Everything about Annie’s tenure in the city is confounding to her, especially the challenge of keeping the family’s kitchen kosher, and she longs for an environment where she feels she belongs.

Longing is the word she uses, as others do in *News from Heaven*—not always in regard to Bakerton, but always in regard to belonging. The desire to belong to a place or a person is universal, but belonging to a place as historied, solid and unmoving as Bakerton can also feel inescapable. Some of Bakerton’s residents sink into it, basing their lives solely in and about the town, and others rage against it, trying again and again to sever the tie.

Those who stay long for something more, usually love: Bakerton has its fair share of spinsters. A single schoolteacher reminisces about the summer she spent with her handsome cousins before they went to war and ignores a closeted gay male student who needs her support. A middle-aged woman who devoted years to nursing her sick parents moves in with a handyman 20 years younger than her, overlooking any sign that he might be in the relationship for her money.

And those who leave long to return. Annie Lubicki returns to Bakerton to resume her place on the family farm. Sandy Novak, the youngest of the five siblings, lives on the edge of the law in Las Vegas and California. He can’t get by without the support of

his sisters back in Bakerton and wonders aloud about returning for good.

None of the characters in *News from Heaven* are fully present in their own lives. They're focused on the past, or on what might have been, or on where they might go, but everyday life doesn't hold anyone's full attention, even as Bakerton holds them irrevocably in place. Particularly in the later stories, which take place after the mines have closed and Bakerton is reduced to a purgatory for longtime residents, the inertia that keeps them there seems all the more malicious the more it goes unquestioned. Not that everyone in Bakerton is unhappy—many are very happy and wouldn't want to leave—but the choices they make are constrained by their hometown. Their individual searches for belonging were over before they began because they all belong to Bakerton, whether they want to or not.