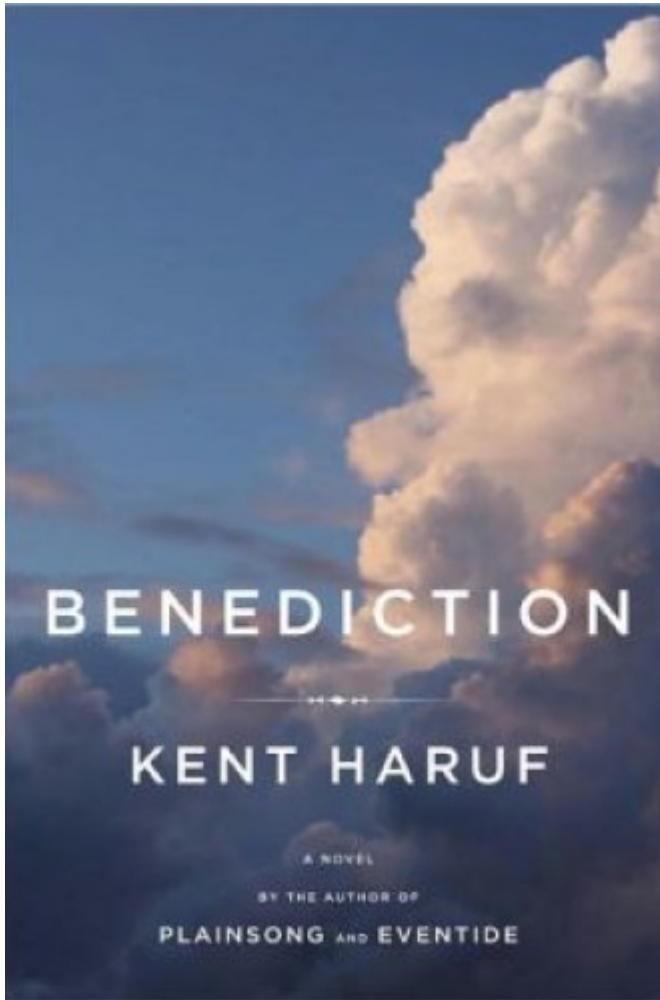


Benediction, by Kent Haruf

reviewed by [Jeffrey L. Johnson](#) in the [May 29, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Benediction

By Kent Haruf
Knopf

All three of Kent Haruf's novels set in the fictional farming town of Holt, Colorado, bear liturgical-sounding titles: *Plainsong* (1999), *Eventide* (2004) and now *Benediction*. Many of their characters are looking for a benediction: a good word of

connection, closure, forgiveness or security. They try to find it by risking neighborly assistance, maintaining shaky vows of faithfulness, or offering sexual favors and long-withheld acts of kindness and friendship. Basic human longings stand out amid the quiet streets and within the broad expanses of impassive prairie and cultivated fields that stretch out like an American eternity: the fruited plain.

Seen from a small town, the city of Denver shines in the distance as a kind of mother ship, offering the cover and comfort of a large and more diverse population. Pilgrims and exiles come to Holt, even as entrapped souls try to flee the spare streets and social exposure of the small town for the comfort and anonymity of the big city.

The social edges of Holt are untrimmed and unraveled. Living simple lives, the citizens of the town hide emotional wounds and physical bruises. Despair blows in on them as if from the plains. Haruf makes us feel their pain.

When Haruf's characters come up against limitations on their prospects and choices, they experience cold consolations, frayed family bonds and weak community support. Dad Lewis, owner of the town's hardware store, is dying of cancer. He gathers the worn and fragile relationships of his life in Holt. Reverend Rob Lyle, preaching an unvarnished version of the pacifist ethics of Jesus, watches members of his congregation bristle and walk out as he speaks.

The minister's teenage son, John Wesley, who is missing his friends in Denver, enjoys a sexual rendezvous in the backseat of Genevieve Larsen's car. After Genevieve announces her decision to end their evening intimacies, she drives recklessly until the car gets stuck in the spring mud of a plowed field. The farmer they enlist to rescue them recognizes the minister's son. He asks whether the teenagers' parents know what they are doing. To their silence he offers a benediction: "No . . . I don't guess so. Well, it's a nice night. A nice cool summer night and all these stars out."

Near the end of his life, Dad Lewis, his wife, Mary, and his daughter, Lorraine, drive around town and out into the country. They stop outside Dad's hardware store and watch, from a distance, a simple transaction at the counter between the manager and a man Dad recognizes but whose name he cannot recall. The scene causes the dying man to weep. Later, out in the country, he explains his tears, reflecting on the ordinary benediction over some purchased item: "It was my life I was watching there. That little bit of commerce between me and another fellow on a summer

morning at the front counter. Exchanging a few words. Just that. And it was nothing at all."

At the top of a hill, with a commanding view of the town below and the country all around, Dad asks his wife and daughter to bury some belonging of his there when he dies. The two women agree to think of something. Looking out across the countryside, with the wind blowing all around them, they depart that western American high place. They have a plan for continued benedictions over their husband and father, in the wind and the weather above an artifact of his life, within sight of that troubled tumble of lives, his old hometown of Holt, Colorado.