

Suggestions for Discussion Questions

From the Kansas City Metropolitan Library and Information Network (KCMLIN), United We Read program.

1. Focus on the main aspects of the book such as the characterizations, settings, themes, time period, etc.
2. What did you like or dislike about the book in particular?
3. How did you feel about how the author portrayed the characters? Were they well developed or did you want to know more about them? Did you identify with any particular character and why?
4. What did you think about how the story was told? Did you feel like you were a part of the characters' lives? Are there any particular passages that made you feel this way?
5. What are the main themes of the book? Love? Hatred? Mistrust? Coming of age? What were the major conflicts in the book? How were they resolved?
6. What did you think about the author's use of symbolism? Did they add or detract from the book?
7. How did you feel about the author's lack of quotation marks? Why do you think he wrote in this manner? Did you find it distracting?
8. Why might Kent Haruf have chosen "Plainsong" as the title for this novel? What meaning, or meanings, does the title have in relation to Haruf's story and characters?
9. How does Haruf characterize the landscape of Holt and its surroundings, and how does he use landscape to set the emotional scene? In what ways are his characters shaped and formed by the land around them?
10. Few hints are given in the novel about what life might have been like for the Guthrie family before Ella left. What do you imagine that life to have been like? What sort of a marriage did Tom and Ella have, and what made it go wrong? What might account for Ella's nearly total withdrawal even from the children she seems to love?
11. What is it about Victoria's life that has made her chose Dwayne, an outsider to the community, to fall in love with? What lack or emptiness in her own life is she trying to fill with this romance? How does her relationship with him echo her parents' relationship?
12. How do the three teenagers having sex in the abandoned house inform and affect Ike and Bobby? What does this sight tell them about sex? About love? About the relationships and power struggle between men and women?

13. Do you believe there are marked differences between Raymond and Harold McPheron? If so, what are they?
14. Why do you think the McPheron Brothers have chosen to spend their lives together rather than start families of their own? Are they lonely or unhappy before Victoria's arrival, or do they feel sufficient in themselves? What does Maggie mean when she tells them, "This is your chance" [p. 110]?
15. What parallels can you draw between the McPheron brothers and the young Guthrie boys? Why is the relationship so close in each case? What sort of a future do you see for the Guthrie boys? Do you think they will marry and have families?
16. The McPheron brothers think they know nothing about young girls. Is that the case? Has their solitary life close to the earth handicapped them so far as human relations go, or has it, in fact, provided them with hidden advantages?
17. What examples of parents abandoning children - either by desertion, emotional withdrawal, or death - can be found in this novel? What do these incidents have in common? How does abandonment affect children, and how does it shape their lives and relationships?
18. It is usually women who are portrayed as nurturers, but in this novel, men - Tom Guthrie and the McPheron brothers - provide shelter and comfort. How do men differ from women in this respect? What do these men offer that a woman might not be able to?
19. "These are crazy times," Maggie Jones says. "I sometimes believe these must be the craziest times ever" [p. 124]. What does she mean by this? In what way are our times "crazier" than earlier eras? How does such "craziness" affect the lives of young people such as Victoria, Ike, and Bobby?
20. What motives and feelings might have driven Tom to sleep with Judy when it was really Maggie he was interested in? Why might Maggie have seemed momentarily frightening or intimidating to him?
21. Why do the Guthrie boys befriend Iva Stearns? What are they looking for in this tentative friendship? Do they find what they are seeking?
22. Why do the Guthrie boys go to the McPheron brothers after Iva's death rather than to someone closer to home, like their father or Maggie? Is there any indication that they connect Iva's death with their mother's abandonment? Why do they place their mother's bracelet on the train tracks, then bury it?
23. The inhabitants of Holt and its surroundings are extremely laconic: they speak only sparingly, as though they mistrust words. What might cause this? In what way does it affect the characters' relationships with one another?

24. How would you describe Holt, Colorado? What are its limitations, its disadvantages, and what are its strengths? In what ways is it typical of any American small town, and in what ways is it different? What help does it provide for people who need healing, like the characters in this book?

25. "Plainsong" depicts some unusual "family" groups. How might Kent Haruf define family?

A Conversation With Kent Haruf

From Random House

Why did you entitle this book "Plainsong"?

As the dictionary definition of "plainsong" indicates, I mean this to be a story about centuries-old matters and told in a plain unadorned manner. And of course I'm also having an obvious pun on the flat land of America, the high plains, so in the same sense it's also a simple direct song about the plains and plain matters.

The landscape is as much a presence in this novel as the human characters. What are the most significant ways in which our physical surroundings shape our lives?

This is the familiar notion, that landscape and setting are like characters in fiction, and there's a lot of non-sense written about it, and it's become a kind of cliché to think this way. It is very important to me to get the place of a story right, to be true to the place. The stories that matter the most to me occur in places with real texture and dimension and not in anonymous suburbs. So all my stories occur in the part of the world that I love most, the high plains of Colorado. I grew up there and it is that place in the world that I have a holy response to. It is not pretty. But it is beautiful. You have to know how to look at it. It forces you to slow way down and look, really look. If a story is written well enough, it will be universal whether it's written about Holt, Colorado or Frenchman's Bend, Mississippi---or that most provincial of places, New York City.

Many of the characters in this novel find themselves, at one time or another, in danger--either of sexual or physical assault or emotional abandonment. Why does this idea of being on the brink of danger keep recurring?

One reason is that a novel is a series of causes and effects, so there has to be a chain of events to drive the novel forward and you have to make succeeding events more compelling than the previous one so there's an increasing tension and rising expectation in the story. Also, risk and danger are a part of life, and these people have to experience all these to make them seem real. Other years of their lives might not be so dramatic, but these years wouldn't make as interesting a story. A novel is a crystallization of people's lives--in this case, eight lives.

The relationship between the McPheron brothers and Victoria Roubideaux is so compelling. What was your inspiration for this unusual combination of two old bachelors and a young pregnant teen?

I don't think of writing stories as somehow being an act of inspiration. Writing, in my experience, is more a matter of writing out of deep emotion and trying to focus on people and conditions that are significant. Stories come out of hurt and brooding about these hurts and pondering people and the conditions of their lives. And in the case of the McPherons and Victoria Roubideaux, I want to believe that it is possible for people to respond generously and affectionately to one another even in the strangest and most unusual of circumstances. In the current state of human affairs, the idea of family has to be expanded to include old men and pregnant teenage girls, who are initially strange to one another, who are not united by blood but by mutual good will.

When his wife moves out, Tom is left with the job of caring for his two young sons. When Victoria's mother throws her out, she is taken in by the McPheron brothers. What made you want to explore the role that men (fathers and father figures) play in raising children and also explore this idea of mothers who in one way or another leave their children?

I had nothing doctrinaire in mind. I could also point out that Iva Stearns and Victoria Roubideaux (both mothers, both women) are the sole caregivers of their own children. Instead of polemics, I'm more interested in the opportunities for emotional and spiritual growth among these characters regardless of age, sex, or condition. For example, I'm interested in the way the McPheron brothers, at their age, will react to the opportunity of being fathers and grandfathers.

You have worked at a wide variety of jobs all across the country and even in Turkey with the Peace Corps. How has that helped you in your writing?

It's very essential for somebody who is trying to write good fiction to know as much as he or she can know about all kinds of people and places. The variety of jobs I've had and the many places I've lived in have been useful to me as a writer, but I didn't set out that way; all that experience was gained in the effort to support my family and myself while still trying to find enough time around the edges to learn my craft.

Writings by Kent Haruf

"The Tie That Binds," Holt (New York City), 1984.

"Where You Once Belonged," Summit Books (New York City), 1991.

"Plainsong," Knopf (New York City), 1999.

"Eventide," Knopf (New York City), 2004.

Also contributor of short stories to periodicals, including Puerto del Sol, Grand Street, Prairie Schooner, and Gettysburg Review. Stories have appeared in Best American Short Stories, Houghton, 1987; and Where Past Meets Present, University of Colorado Press, 1994.

DBRL Interview With Kent Haruf

On September 25, 2002, during the Daniel Boone Regional Library's inaugural One Read community-wide reading program, Kent spoke with Eric Schmeck, a former student of his and a library associate at the Columbia Public Library. Mary Furness recorded their conversation at the studios of One Read partner KBIA and Columbia library administrative assistant Meta Lackland transcribed the interview.

DBRL: Is it true that when you pass through Columbia for our community reading program, we will be one of five cities with similar programs you will be visiting on that trip and there will be even more later this year?

Kent Haruf: It is true. There are a total of six cities, I believe, who are reading "Plainsong" as cities, and I have recently been informed that the state of Arizona is going to read "Plainsong."

DBRL: Wow, as a whole state?

Kent: The whole state. I don't know what that means.

DBRL: (laughs) That's pretty impressive. Why do you think your book has been selected for so many of these programs?

Kent: Well I don't know. I think the people would be better to answer that question than I am. I would like to think it has something to do with the quality of the writing, and the characters that the story includes; the fact that I am writing about ordinary people with problems who try to find non-sensational ways of dealing with them.

DBRL: I guess what I've heard is that your book and "To Kill a Mockingbird" are the two most common books selected for these. How does it feel to be put in the company of that book?

Kent: Well, it feels embarrassing, really, because that book is such a brilliant novel and has had such a large influence on the American way of thinking about things. I don't know that it's exactly so that my book has been chosen among those two. I think that there are a number of other books, but, yeah, actually it feels very flattering and I feel somewhat embarrassed by it.

DBRL: Does it make you feel an added sense of pressure or responsibility knowing that all these communities are organizing, or having an organized effort to read your book? Like you're supposed to be a representative of good literature now, or something like that?

Kent: Well, I suppose that I should have a long gray beard and speak with a quaver, and carry a cane, yeah. No, I don't feel any more responsibility than I ever felt in the sense that what I am attempting to do is to write as well as I can and to say something that seems true to me, and if I can do that then that's all I can do. I don't feel like I am a spokesman for the United States in any sense, or for anything else.

DBRL: The original idea for these programs is credited to a librarian at the Washington Center for the Book named Nancy Pearl. This is what she said of her idea: "It's based on the idea of community. My idea was that people would come together, who would never come together in any other way. Literature brings them together because a book touches them." Do you think that literature really has the power to draw these communities together like this?

Kent: Well, it's possible. Certainly a great variety of people will read the same book, and those people may not agree on anything else but perhaps on the quality of that book, or the value of it. More than that I can't say. I think it's valuable that people get together and talk about any book, whether it's mine or somebody else's, and that seems useful. There have been a number of book clubs that have sprung up all over the country in the last several years. That seems like an interesting and useful phenomenon.

DBRL: In addition to all the current attention, when "Plainsong" was first published it spent several weeks on the New York Times Bestseller List and received a lot of critical praise and award nominations. It seems unusual these days for a book to achieve this great level of commercial success and critical success. Why do think that is so rare?

Kent: Well, most people want to be entertained, and that's the primary reason for reading fiction. If you think of what are called "beach books" most of those books are written primarily for entertainment. Of course, any writer wants his readers to feel compelled to turn pages and we want to find out how a book or how a story ends, but beyond that, in terms of literary quality, in literary fiction what we are trying to do is to write books that have something lasting about them. I don't want to be so presumptuous as to say that's true of my books, but that's the effort anyway. In recent years there have been several literary books that have succeeded commercially, "Cold Mountain" would be one prime example. "Angela's Ashes" would be another one. Those kinds of books have succeeded in both ways. So perhaps there is a growing interest among thousands of readers in literary fiction. I don't know.

DBRL: What advantages or disadvantages do you think novels have over what seems like more popular, visual media, like television or film, for telling a story?

Kent: Well, they are very obviously different media. What happens on the page, it seems to me, is a kind of magic that has to do with language, and also if a book works in some ways it has to be visual as well. What you hope to do is to write it in such a way that characters are visual, but also that they, in Faulkner's words, that they are substantial enough to cast a shadow. I don't know, I can't think of any pleasure greater than sitting down and reading a good book. That seems to me to be the best thing possible to do.

DBRL: Do story ideas for you tend to come as an image in your head and you try to describe it, or do you usually have some phrases or descriptions, you know, the words, first?

Kent: What usually happens with me is I have some emotion about something, and I begin to ponder over that feeling and often characters will begin to attach themselves to that emotion. I don't want to name the emotion. I don't even want to define it in any way, but I have this sort of amorphous feeling and once I begin to think about that and some people begin to come into my mind an image of them comes to me clearly. And then a story begins to coalesce around these figures. Of course, fiction is trouble. Fiction is a kind of series of problems. So these characters that you imagine have to have trouble, have to have problems, and I always know the ending of my books before I begin. By the time I begin writing I have thought about the characters and stories for a good long time. Maybe a year before I put anything down. It's a combination of things, really.

DBRL: Who do you write your books for? Do you have a particular audience in mind as you're writing?

Kent: Well, when I'm writing them I don't think of an audience at all. I'm thinking about myself in terms of what would interest me and what seems to me to be true, and what seems to be said in an engaging way. But beyond that, I suppose I would hope that my books would appeal to an intelligent, literate audience. Some group of people who have read before and who are willing to work a little bit at what they read.

DBRL: It seems to appeal to a lot of people, with this book at least. This sort of touches on that, because some people have voiced objections to some of the language or the situations in "Plainsong." Some of them don't feel it is suitable to promote to such a wide group, and for other people it's just something that bothers them personally. I was wondering what your response was to that.

Kent: Well that seems kind of strange and a little bit silly to me. I would also say that if a book in some way doesn't stir you up, then there is something wrong with the book. It should engage you and stir you in some ways, and what I'm trying to write about, as I said earlier, is a realistic kind of fiction about real people doing real things, and that does include some things that are not pleasant. Of course it does. And further I would say, as I've also just mentioned, fiction is about trouble; fiction is about problems. People have troubles and have problems. It may be wonderful to live an equanimous life, but it would make very dull fiction. And so, as I have already said, I am trying to write about realistic people who have real problems. Some of their problems are not pretty... let me say one other thing. The other thing I would say about that is if you want to read something really shocking, read the Old Testament. There is plenty in the Old Testament to shock anybody. So, I find what I've written is somewhat pale by comparison.

DBRL: (chuckle) That's true. This next question sort of ties into some of the other stuff you mentioned. You may not have much of an answer for it. Why do you write about the kind of characters and the place you do, specifically Holt?

Kent: Well, for a number of reasons. First of all, I grew up in northeastern Colorado where the fictitious county of Holt lies, and that's the part of the world, the way it looks, which is most appealing to me. It is not pretty, but it's beautiful, I usually say, and I still feel that way. Also I'm writing about small towns because I grew up in small towns, but I'm not writing simply about small town people. What I think occurs in "Plainsong," for example, occurs everywhere. Surely there are pregnant teen-age girls in Columbia, Missouri, and surely there are lonely old men living outside of town or in town, lonely old women living in apartments upstairs over the street. These kinds of situations are true of every place. This book has been published in eight or nine different languages, and there must be something universal about the story. So I'm not simply writing about little towns. I'm writing about what I think is universal in the human condition.

DBRL: So is Holt an amalgam of different communities, or is it based on a specific town you grew up in?

Kent: It's sort of an amalgam of what I know about little towns. As I said, I grew up in three little towns out in eastern Colorado, and Holt has some resemblance to those little towns, although I've

invented the streets and the courthouse, and that sort of thing for my little town because it suits my purposes.

DBRL: Have you ever drawn a map of the town?

Kent: Well I do have a map. Certainly I have a map clearly in my mind. I know exactly the names of the streets on both sides of Main Street. Main Street runs north and south. As I say US Highway 34 runs east-west through the town, intersecting Main Street. I know what is on both sides of Main. I know exactly how many miles out south of town the McPheron brothers live and so on. Those kinds of things are very clear to me. So yeah, I feel very specific about this place that I have made my own.

DBRL: Who are some writers that have influenced you?

Kent: Well, Faulkner preeminently, and Hemingway. Those two, I first discovered them when I was an undergraduate and was shocked by what they could do on the page, and have never gotten over the shock and don't want to. I re-read them really almost daily. I have both of them on my desk and read a little bit of them in the morning before I start work. Other writers I would include would be, well this won't be a complete list, but people that occur to me at the moment are Cormac McCarthy, Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, James Welch, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, John Steinbeck, Bobbie Ann Mason. All those writers, Larry Brown, Mark Spragg, a new Wyoming writer, all those people are very important to me. They're all realistic writers. I'm not much interested in metafiction, but those writers I named are all writers that are very important to me. I re-read them over and over.

DBRL: I heard another interview where you mentioned that you read Faulkner every day. Do you partly do that for inspiration, or like a ritual to get in your head to write?

Kent: It's more like a ritual. In the morning, before I begin work, I read. Right now I'm reading a part of "The Hamlet" every morning, Faulkner's great novel about the Snopes. I read a little bit of Hemingway, like I said, a little bit of McCarthy, and a little bit of Steinbeck. So I'm reading a little bit of all four of those people, but I'm reading people whom I have read many, many times before. I don't know how many times I have read "The Hamlet," but I'm doing that as a ritual to get my mind off bills, and off my kids, and off my problems, whatever they may be; to get my mind into literary channels again, and also just to begin to remind myself of words, of language. All of that becomes a kind of ritual. I read it like scripture every morning, and it's a part of my process. That's when, really I'm not writing anything yet, but that's when my writing begins, when I start reading that.

DBRL: As a writer and also someone who has taught English to high school and college students, what role would you like to see literature play in individual's lives, in our communities, and maybe in society as a whole? It is kind of a big question.

Kent: Well it is, and I'm not sure what to say about it except that I know in the '60s that there was some notion that writers and artists should be participating in the political discussion in the country, and maybe that's so, but I've never felt compelled to do that. I've done what little I can do and wanted to do in terms of political issues. So I don't think that my particular role, individually, is to be a polemicist. I don't feel as if I have any sermon I want to deliver myself of in any way, and

in terms of the general politic I would like to just be a good citizen and do what I can in a private way. But what a writer is supposed to do, I think, is to get his work, or her work done to the best to his or her ability. If he or she will do that, that is more than enough.

DBRL: Did you spend much time at the library when you were a kid in any of the three towns that you grew up in?

Kent: Yeah, libraries were very important to me when I was a kid. I don't know if I actually sat in libraries that much, but I certainly went to libraries and checked out books a great deal. When I was a little kid I read a great many western stories that I checked out of the library. Later, I read all of the "Black Stallion" series and "My Friend Flicka," and "Thunderhead," and "Green Grass in Wyoming." Those books were important to me growing up. So as a child I went to libraries a lot. I grew up in a family of readers and we all read a great deal. So libraries and reading have always been important to me. I don't think you can be a writer without being a serious and concentrated reader.

DBRL: That's true. What were they like? Were they fairly small?

Kent: Yeah, they were fairly small Carnegie libraries. They were the sort of classic stone structure and usually the librarians were middle to old-age women, and at that era they were somewhat rigid I suppose, but dear, nevertheless, and well meaning. But they were a place to...a kind of sanctuary, I thought.

DBRL: Have you ever given any thought to what the library is like in Holt?

Kent: That's a good question. I have not had anybody go to the library in Holt. That's a serious omission. I'll have to think about that. But my immediate assumption would be that it would be very much like the libraries that I knew when I was a kid; Carnegie libraries, foursquare, solid stone buildings with kind of a foursquare arrangement inside.

DBRL: Okay, at what point in your life did books become important? Was it just as long as you can remember?

Kent: Well nearly as long as I can remember. I remember the thrill of learning how to read when I was a first grader. And I remember a specific image of myself standing out in the kitchen reading something to my mom while she was getting supper on and it was a kind of mystery, and something almost sacred about being able to read what was on the page. That kind of thrill I've never gotten over. There is something religious almost about words on a page it seems to me. I'm not sure I'm answering your question.

DBRL: No, I think that that was a pretty good answer. What's the difference in the way you read books now as compared to when you decided that you wanted to become a writer?

Kent: Well, I think you and I have talked about this, and we have talked about it in classes both you and I have been in. If you're trying to write what you have to learn to do is read like a writer reads; and that is that you're no longer reading for entertainment, but what you are trying to do is trying to figure out how someone succeeds in doing something on the page or doesn't; that you're trying to learn the craft by reading down the page and seeing what the writer manages to do. So

you're always paying attention to craft. Also, what you do now in terms of reading that you might not have done earlier is that you read things over, and over, and over, because you are trying to learn all the time, or because you are so taken by the skill of the writer. All those things are true, and in a way you maybe lose some of the former pleasure that you might have had when you read simply for entertainment but you gain a new, I would like to think, different, and maybe even a more profound pleasure in that you're reading now because you are trying to delve into the art of what's going on on the page.

DBRL: Is there anything that you do read just as a distraction, for pleasure, or is that somewhat impossible at this point?

Kent: Well, I do read some things sometimes for entertainment, but even then, I'm paying attention to what's being done successfully on the page. Mysteries for example, right now I have been reading Michael Connelly, some of his mysteries. I think he is very good. Ed McBain is somebody I read a lot, and Jean Le Carré I think is very good. Those kinds of mystery and spy writers are very skillful and I enjoy them a lot.

DBRL: I just have one last question. Your first two books also received critical attention but not commercial success. Now that you have experienced both, if you had to pick between the two, is there one type of success you'd prefer over the other?

Kent: (laughs) Well, if you want to be, if what you are thinking about really is art, and trying to create something that is permanent, then yes, what most matters to you is the literary judgment of people whose opinions you trust and believe in. But, I have to say, it's also very satisfying to have had some promotional success, because if for no other reason, it allows me for the first time in my life time to write full time. I tell people that after thirty-some years I am an overnight success and I can do what I have been trying to do for all my adult life. So without some commercial success I wouldn't be doing this. I'd still be teaching. I like teaching a lot, but it's still distracting or detracting from the amount of time you can spend to write.

DBRL: Do you feel like you are more productive now? That you can pretty much devote eight hours a day writing like you would a job?

Kent: Whether I am more productive or not, I don't know. I know I write every day. Whether it's any good or not, I can't tell you. But in terms of having time to write, energy to write, and the inclination to write, all that is there now in ways that were not always there. As you probably know, while you and I were in the classroom together I was working on "Plainsong." I worked for over six years on that book. Now, the current book I'm working on should be done in a year and a half from the time I started on it. I don't know if that's a virtue necessarily, or whether it's going to make it a better book, but it certainly means I am completing a book quicker than I did before.

DBRL: Well, you worked long and hard to become an overnight success. You deserve it.

Kent: Well, thank you.