



## One Great Book: Volume III, Episode 3 *Our Souls at Night* by Kent Haruf

[Show Notes](#)

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume III, Book 3: *Our Souls at Night*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next?*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

Some great books hit you with a fantastic premise: what if a chance encounter in Manhattan on New Years Eve, 1938 changes the course of a woman's entire life? Or what if after 99.9% of the population is wiped out by a pandemic, a small band of actors travels the state formerly known as Michigan staging Shakespeare plays?

I love a book with a flashy premise. But some of my favorite books begin quietly, so quietly as to almost sound boring. Take this opening line from Kent Haruf's novel *Our Souls at Night*: "And then there was the day when Addie Moore made a call on Louis Waters." These two small town residents don't know each other well. In this first scene, they just have a conversation. Not even a *long* conversation, but an unexpected one. Addie calls on Louis with a proposal: an unusual proposal, to be sure, but Haruf relates the conversation in such a way that it still feels almost ordinary, it's like he insists on its being so. Four pages into the book, Addie walks away, leaving Louis standing on his front porch. All he can say is, What in the hell.



[01:45]

It's a quiet beginning to a friendship, to be sure, but one that leaves Louis wanting to know what might happen next—and the reader feels the same. The prose is simple and straightforward, almost deceptively so. Kent Haruf wrote about ordinary people in the fictional small town of Holt on the quiet plains of eastern Colorado; its citizens teach school, sell insurance, tend livestock, they drink coffee at the Holt Cafe. For a special occasion, they may drive all the way to Denver to see a show. Fancy prose would undermine the feeling he sought to craft. *Our Souls at Night* is understated, but it sings—and that's the mark of One. Great. Book.

[MUSIC]

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*Readers, every time I sit down to write a new script for One Great Book, I'm flooded with memories and moments associated with the featured title. Great books stay with us long after we turn the last page. My book, I'd Rather Be Reading: The Delights and Dilemmas of the Reading Life, celebrates the staying power of such books: how they shape us and form our identities as readers and as people. It also celebrates reading under the covers with a flashlight, organizing your bookshelves, and finding your book people. This perfectly giftable essay collection makes a great teacher gift, stocking stuffer, or hostess thank-you. I'd Rather Be Reading is available on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, or an independent bookstore near you.*

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Kent Haruf began writing later in life—well, that's not entirely true; by the time his first novel was published at age 41, he'd been "writing as hard as he could" for twenty years. And to the reader, all that time he spent honing his craft is evident in his work. It was pure joy to discover his work for myself in the past decade—well, joy and heartbreak, because of the tragedies his characters suffer, but readers, you know what I mean. Even after he began publishing, he typically labored long over each novel. But the writing of his sixth and final book, *Our Souls at Night*, was anything but typical for Haruf.



[03:48]

When he began writing this last book at age 71, he already knew he was dying. He was ill, but restless, in need of something to do, and he told his wife, “I’m going to write a book about us.” She said, okay. And he went to his writing shed and started writing.

Haruf was a slow writer; it typically took him six years to finish a book. But, to his astonishment, he came out of that shed that day with his first chapter in hand. He typed out his chapters on an actual typewriter—even as late as 2014, when he wrote *Our Souls at Night*—and he liked to write those first drafts with a stocking cap over his eyes, so that he wouldn’t be distracted by his typos. That process helped him capture the story as it came, and *Our Souls at Night* just kept coming. Every day for the next month and a half, he went into his shed and wrote a draft of a chapter. He started on May 1, and by summer’s end, he had a manuscript. In his final interview, just days before he died, Haruf said of the book, “I’ve never had that experience before. I don’t want to get too fancy about it, but it was like something else was working to help me get this done.”

[MUSIC]

*Our Souls at Night* tells the story of Addie and Louis. Addie is 70, her husband died years before, her son is a disappointment, she’s alone. And so she handpicks an acquaintance in her small town and seeks to make him her friend. She’s lonely, and she thinks he might be, too. They’ve both been by themselves for too long. Addie’s looking for a way to get through the night, because, as she tells Louis, “the nights are the worst.” She knows her behavior may raise a few eyebrows around town, but she’s made up her mind she’s not going to pay attention to what people think. And so she seeks him out, and shocks him a bit with her question. (Have I taken your breath away?” she asks, when she makes her suggestion. “I guess you have,” Louis says.) But her frankness is so disarming—he’s so *curious* about her—that he can’t help but be drawn into her world. And she soon finds she was right about him, too: he *does* make a good friend. It’s an unlikely relationship, yet it blooms, for a while.

*Our Souls at Night* is a story about growing older, modeled on Haruf’s relationship with his own wife. The details of the plot don’t hue to facts, but the core of it—the importance of holding



hands and talking about the day gone by, the *years* gone by, with someone who cares, and cares for you—is rooted in his longtime marriage to Cathy Haruf. It's achingly poignant to read a story from a dying man about simple conversations between two friends—conversations that they need to have, that they wish will never end, but that may have to end anyway.

[06:32]

This is the story Haruf wanted to leave us with. It was published in 2015, six months after his death.

In telling this story about an aging man and woman in small-town Colorado, who seek to find happiness on their own terms, Haruf gives us a glimpse into what really matters to a man about to leave it all behind. It sounds like a sad book—and it is—but there's also so much joy here: the joy of being past the point of caring about appearances, of finally asking for what you need, and of finding something sweet that you may not even have realized you were missing. These themes might be heavy under another's hand, but Haruf's touch is light, and full of grace. We don't just see Addie and Louis seek happiness; we see them *experience* it—and, this being a story set in Holt, Colorado, we also see how seemingly everyone in this small town feels its their right to weigh in with their opinion.

In short, if you're looking for a bittersweet and absorbing tale of unlikely friendship, growing old, and losing—and finding—love, at *any* age, *Our Souls at Night* may be the next great book you're looking for.

[MUSIC]

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If one book a week isn't enough, sign up to become a patron of the show. Patrons have access to an additional podcast feed with exclusive content including bonus episodes of *One Great Book* where I tell you all about at an upcoming release. This is a book that isn't even out yet so you can get your preorder in or importantly be the first on your library holds list. We also share behind the scenes content and outtakes, and fun and informative bookish events like the Fall Book Preview we did this week, in which I shared THIRTY FIVE highly anticipated titles for this reading season.

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I'd love to hear what you think about *Our Souls at Night* on Twitter or Instagram. You can find me there @AnneBogel that's Anne with an E, B as in books, O-G-E-L. You can also find me on Instagram @WhatShouldIReadNext.

That's the title of my long form book podcast, where each week a reader tells me three books they love, one book they don't, and what they're reading now, and I recommend three titles they should read next. If *Our Souls at Night* sounds like a great book to you I'd suggest you start with episode 59 where I recommend a different Kent Haruf book to my guest D.L. Mayfield. That episode is called "Prescribing books for what ails you" and you can find it wherever you get your podcasts.

Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on *One Great Book*.

Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.