

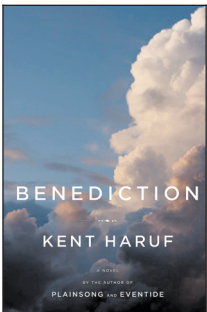
An intensely moral writer

Kent Haruf reminds us that even good people sometimes do bad things

BENEDICTION
by Kent Haruf
(Knopf, 258 pages, \$30 hardcover, \$13.99 Kindle)

Robert Reid, Record staff

Kent Haruf is to the high plains of Colorado what Alice Munro is to southwestern Ontario or what David Adams Richards is to the Miramichi in New Brunswick. Haruf not only lives in his native Colorado, he imaginatively and creatively inhabits its climate and geography, history and culture. Landscape and language are symbiotic. *Benediction* is Haruf’s fifth novel (including *Plainsong* (1999) and *Eventide* (2004)) set in Holt, a fictional Colorado town like most small towns in the American midwest. It is quintessential without forfeiting any of its particularizing detail. Haruf writes of the residents of Holt with the kind of empathetic understanding that comes from the inside — piercing in its insightfulness, but deeply sympathetic. These are his people and he is meticulously careful to get it right. This doesn’t mean he views the town and

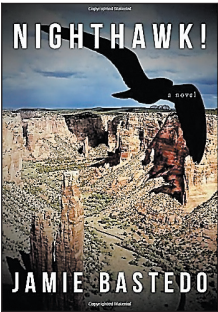


its inhabitants through sentimental, rose-coloured glasses. He does not whitewash, but paints the town in its myriad hues, attractive and gaudy alike. Haruf describes the lives of ordinary people in an unaffected prose which, although pedestrian, is both graceful and eloquent. Language artfully embodies and reflects that which it describes. At the heart of *Benediction* is Dad Lewis, a man staring death in the eye with courage and humour. We watch Dad in the final stages of terminal cancer as he looks back on his life, struggling to make sense of what he did right and what he did wrong. Haruf ensures that we feel Dad’s regrets as if they were our own. It makes for some heartbreaking reading, although we never slip into despondency or despair. As a young man, Dad was tough and uncompromising, confident in his ways, even if circumstances sometimes evaded his un-

derstanding and made him unsympathetic. It cost him a wayward employee and an estranged son. We also watch Dad’s devoted wife, Mary, and daughter, Lorraine, struggle with the inevitable loss of a husband and a father. He is a man who remains loved despite the mistakes he committed in the name of decency and honour. If only we were able to learn from our mistakes and had sufficient time to put right that which goes so terribly wrong. But such is the human predicament, according to Haruf. There is an abundance of life in *Benediction* to balance Dad’s impending demise. Next door is an elderly widow and her middle-aged daughter. They take in a young girl, not as charity, but as an act of profound generosity. The daughter’s story is touchingly bittersweet. Then we have the new preacher whose tenuous bond to wife and son snaps because his moral compass fails to help him negotiate the murky waters of political prejudice. Haruf is an intensely moral writer. Rather than point a judgmental finger at human frailty and folly, he bears witness to its causes and effects. *Benediction* reminds us that good people sometimes do bad things. This doesn’t make people bad, but in need of, and deserving of, blessing. Were we all so fortunate?

Robert Reid is a Record arts reporter.

YOUNG ADULT



Nighthawk’s goal is to fly to the Arctic

NIGHTHAWK!
by Jamie Bastedo
(Red Deer Press, 204 pages, \$12.95 softcover)
Cindy Matthews

Author Jamie Bastedo lives in Yellowknife and is a prolific writer of fiction for young people. His latest book is a fantasy novel about Wisp, a migrating nighthawk with poor navigational skills. Wisp is exhibiting the usual behaviour of adolescence: rebellion, stubbornness and impulsiveness. After his father dies in a fire, he is held in a bird colony in South America, along with his sister, Willo, and their mother. But Wisp escapes and sets off to cross two continents in search of the Arctic. Eventually, Willo tags along, which slows him down. The two of them meet Gonzo, a comical raven from Panama. Spanish phrases abound and in some cases translations would have been helpful. *Nighthawk!* has short chapters, each of which leave the reader yearning for the next adventure. For young readers who like to learn about birds and geography, this book offers references to places such as the Andes Mountains, Mexico’s Popocatepetl volcano, Calgary, the Alberta tar sands and the Arctic tundra. By the end, you will have a greater understanding of bird migration in general and of nighthawk birds in particular. While *Nighthawk!* is a work of fiction, Bastedo’s background in biology and his work as an Arctic naturalist and outdoor educator are evident in the narrative. The book includes an interview with the author, who has won the Michael Smith Award for Science Promotion, presented by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada.

Cindy Matthews is a Bruce County writer.

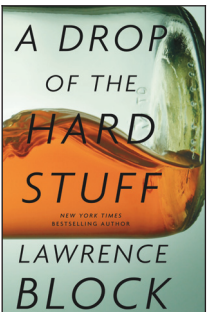
CRIME FICTION

Five writers and their gumshoes

Alastair Rickard

The late French novelist Jean-Patrick Manchette argued that the crime novel is the great moral literature of our time. Perhaps. I do know that one of the great pleasures for a reader of fiction is to discover a novelist who has created a continuing character whose life and activities are interesting, a writer who regularly produces a new chapter in the character’s life and one who writes well. Five U.S. novelists with continuing characters are among those I have followed for years. Most of their books are still readily available in softcover: • **Robert Crais** had his first Elvis Cole novel, *The Monkey’s Raincoat*, published in 1987. Cole is a smart-mouthed Los Angeles private detective who gets involved in a variety of well-plotted stories, along with his lethal, monosyllabic partner, the ex-cop Joe Pike. There have been 14 novels involving Cole. They are always entertaining reading, but they are not written in a fashion that reminds me of, say, Elmore Leonard, the American master of the crime fiction genre. *The Monkey’s Raincoat* is a good representative of the Cole series. The latest is *Taken* (2012), which is as entertaining a Crais novel as ever.

• **Lawrence Block** has been writing interesting stories for decades. He has been a prolific novelist, but a few years ago indicated that he would no longer write fiction. Not quite, apparently. Block is the author of five series, one of which features a stamp-collecting hit man named Keller, who is deadly when on the job, but is otherwise a fairly benign personality. The latest Keller novel, the fifth, is *Hit Me* (2011), an absorbing tale in which the tone is less dark than one might expect. Block’s most successful continuing character is Matthew Scudder; an alcoholic ex-cop who left the New York force after accidentally killing a child during a shootout. Scudder is now, by his own choice, an unlicensed private detective who does “favours,” for which he accepts “gifts.” He has aged and evolved through 17 novels, not frozen in time as some lead characters are. First-time readers should start with the first Scudder novel *The Sins of the Fathers* (1976). The most recent novel, *A Drop of the Hard Stuff* (2011), is a flashback to Scudder’s earlier life. Along the way there have also been short stories featuring Scudder, 10 of which (along with a new story) were collected in *The Night And The Music: the Matthew Scudder Stories* (2011). If these last two volumes turn out to be the final appearance of Matthew Scudder, they provide him with a fine send-off. Another of Block’s continuing characters is Bernie Rhodenbarr, a professional burglar. Like Scudder (and like Block himself), Rhodenbarr lives and “works” in New York. These novels are not as dark as those featuring Scudder. Try the first Rhodenbarr novel *Burglars Can’t Be Choosers* (1977). The most recent was *Burglars on The Prowl* (2004). The Scudder novels are superior to the Rhodenbarr series, but the latter are enjoyable reading.



• **Michael Connelly**, a former newspaper reporter, 20 years ago created an especially memorable character named Hieronymus (Harry) Bosch, so named by his mother after the 15th-century Dutch painter. Bosch is a Los Angeles Police Department homicide detective. In his virtues and faults, demeanour and attitudes, Bosch most reminds me (among the many continuing characters in crime/detective fiction) of author Ian Rankin’s wonderfully sour John Rebus, the non-team-playing Edinburgh detective inspector who recently has been brought back from retirement by Rankin in a great novel, *Standing in Another Man’s Grave* (2012). Try the Bosch novel *The Narrows* (2004). It marks an important stage in Bosch’s life, both professional and personal. The first novel in the series was *The Black Echo* (1992). The most recent is *The Black Box* (2012), which is well up to Connelly’s customary high standard. The Bosch novels move chronologically and lately have been intersecting with other Connelly novels about a lawyer named Mickey Haller. The first Haller book was *The Lincoln Lawyer* (2005). • **James Lee Burke** has been writing successful novels for a long time and some critics regard him as the best American “mystery/crime” writer working today. In my view, that title still belongs to Elmore Leonard, but Burke is indeed prolific and an accomplished writer. His best known continuing character is a Louisiana Cajun police detective named Dave Robicheau, who has a seriously dysfunctional former police partner named Clete Purcel. The Robicheau novels began with *The Neon Rain* (1987) and there have been 18 more in the series so far. The most recent was *Creole Belle* (2012) and it is very good.

• **Joseph Wambaugh** is perhaps the most successful American ex-cop to become a police/crime novelist — and there have been many of them since he appeared on the scene four decades ago. He hit it big with *The Blue Knight* (1971) which was written while he was still a Los Angeles cop, then followed it to great success with *The New Centurions* (1972). In recent years he has written several novels featuring beat cops working out of the Hollywood Station in Los Angeles. Wambaugh obviously spends much time talking to cops and listening to their stories, both humorous and dark. His most recent novel, which has some overlap with the Hollywood Station series, is *Harbor Nocturne* (2012). It is enjoyable, but not quite up to the standard of his previous works in the series. Successful crime series novelists have loyal readers who can scarcely wait for the next novel to appear. I do wonder, given their ages, how long Burke (born in 1936), Block (born in 1938) and Wambaugh (born in 1937) will continue writing. Still, if they were to stop writing tomorrow, it seems likely that readers would continue to discover and enjoy their books for many years to come.

Alastair Rickard of Elmira is a former editor and retired insurance executive who blogs at www.RickardsRead.com



AT THE LIBRARY



Heather Woodley is a collection development librarian with the Region of Waterloo Library. She recommends:

THE SPACE BETWEEN US
by Thrity Umrigar
(Harper Perennial, 352 pages, \$18.99 softcover, \$11.99 Kindle)

This beautifully written novel follows the story of Bhima, a poor domestic servant who lives in the slums of Mumbai and spends her days cooking and cleaning for an upper-middle class family. Bhima has led a difficult life riddled with tragedy and sorrow, but she is a strong woman and is bolstered by the support of Sera, the woman she serves. Although this novel clearly illustrates the segregated class system of Bhima’s Mumbai, it also exemplifies how our common human experience can unite us across boundaries. Bhima’s story is at once heart-breaking and uplifting and the author’s use of language made me feel immersed in the Indian culture. I would recommend this book to anyone, but fans of *Secret Daughter* (2010) by Shilpi Somaya Gowda may find it especially appealing.

Bookmarks

- **Thursday, April 4:** 4:30 p.m. at Room STJ3013, St. Jerome’s University, Waterloo. The **Reading Series at St. Jerome’s** presents poet **Adam Dickinson**. Free. All welcome.
- **Saturday, April 6:** Noon to 2 p.m. at Chapters Kitchener. Book signing with **Virginia Johnston-Dodds** of Cambridge, author of **A Cathedral of Cedars**, a memoir of her childhood.
- **Looking ahead: An Evening With Robert Sawyer**, 7 p.m. on April 30 at the Kitchener Public Library’s Country Hills Community Library. Sawyer will read from his new novel, **Red Planet Blues**. Register now at www.kpl.com or 519-743-0271, ext. 255.

Bestsellers

Based on sales reported by more than 260 independent Canadian booksellers for the week ending March 23. Bracketed figures indicate number of weeks on list.

- Hardcover fiction**
- 1 (4) **The Storyteller** - Jodi Picoult
 - 2 (29) **Gone Girl** - Gillian Flynn
 - 3 (89) **A Dance with Dragons** - George R.R. Martin
 - 4 (8) **Speaking from Among the Bones** - Alan Bradley
 - 5 (3) **The Demonologist** - Andrew Pyper
 - 6 (9) **Tenth of December: Stories** - George Saunders
 - 7 (11) **A Memory of Light** - Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson
 - 8 (34) **The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry** - Rachel Joyce
 - 9 (21) **419** - Will Ferguson
 - 10 (5) **The Dinner** - Herman Koch
- Hardcover non-fiction**
- 1 (19) **The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America** - Thomas King
 - 2 (22) **I Could Pee on This and Other Poems By Cats** - Francesco Marciuliano
 - 3 (3) **Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us** - Michael Moss
 - 4 (3) **Ascent of Women** - Sally Armstrong
 - 5 (2) **Wave** - Sonali Deraniyagala
 - 6 (3) **The Big Shift** - Darrell J. Bricker and John Ibbitson
 - 7 (11) **The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?** - Jared Diamond
 - 8 (20) **Into the Abyss** - Carol Shaben
 - 9 (39) **Darth Vader and Son** - Jeffrey Brown
 - 10 (42) **Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail** - Cheryl Strayed
- @TBM Bookmanager

CHILDREN

FOLLOW YOUR MONEY: WHO GETS IT, WHO SPENDS IT, WHERE DOES IT GO?
by Kevin Sylvester and Michael Hlinka
(Annick Press, \$14.95 softcover)

Brenda Hoerle, Record staff

We give very little thought to money once it leaves our wallets.

Kevin Sylvester and Michael Hlinka, both of Toronto, offer an eye-opening look at the route it follows when used to buy everything from raw materials and salaries, to transportation, packaging and advertising. Take bacon. If a package sells for \$3, the farmer gets \$1, which in turn must help pay for the pigs, their feed and other farm costs. In the end, the

farmer earns 10 cents profit. Yikes! Youngsters can also follow the route money takes when they buy a baseball hat, designer jeans, a movie, shoes, gasoline and cellphones. Also explained are banks and credit cards, and why things go on sale. Recommended for ages nine to 12.

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