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Friends KENT HARUF and MARK SPRAGG discuss the writing life and more

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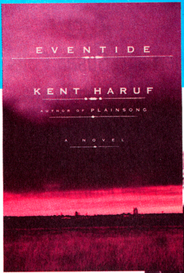
KENT HARUF and MARK SPRAGG, Authors of a FRIENDSHIP



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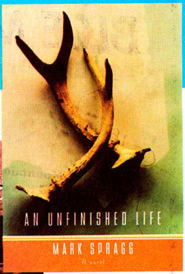

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In the spring of 2000, Kent Haruf and Mark Spragg met at the Mountains & Plains Booksellers Awards ceremony in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where each was being recognized for their extraordinary talent. Haruf accepted the fiction award for his bestselling and critically acclaimed novel *Plainsong*, and Spragg went home with the award for best nonfiction for his outstanding memoir, *Where Rivers Change Direction*.

In the four years since, these two writers have become the closest of friends, talking on the phone weekly and visiting as often as their busy lives permit. Their unique friendship was born not only out of shared similarities in their work and interests, but also out of a mutual admiration for each other. Spragg even jokingly confesses to a likeness that goes beyond the page, to fashion, explaining, “Our wives kid us all the time [because] we kind of even dress alike sometimes. We show up like we’d called ahead to find out whether we were going to wear the same color sweater vest or something.”

Despite his hectic book and media tour for *Eventide*, the sequel to *Plainsong*, Haruf agreed to interview his comrade Spragg about his upcoming book, *An Unfinished Life*, which is due out in September, with the release of a film version from Miramax later this year. Spragg’s second novel chronicles a difficult homecoming in which a young, widowed mother must seek refuge from an abusive relationship in the only place available—a town in Wyoming where her loved ones are dead and her father-in-law wishes she was, too.

Kent Haruf: *Where Rivers Change Direction* was published in 1999, then *The Fruit of Stone* came out in 2002. Now this year *An Unfinished Life* is coming out at the end of August, early September, and at the end of this year your film *An Unfinished Life* will be coming out. That’s an astonishing amount of work in a very short time. Can you say something about that kind of productivity?

Mark Spragg: As my wife characterizes it: I have become an exceedingly dull boy.

I was heartened with the reception that the memoir had, which I frankly had written as a gift to my mother—while my wife and I were caring for her and she was a hospice patient—to give her some sort of tangible report of my perception of having grown up under her tutelage, in an almost 19th-century way on a national forest without television or radio and 25 miles to a one-room schoolhouse. I was not a young man when that book was published; I was 47. I found it so heartening that people might actually want to read my work and, in fact, that people wanted to publish it, that I just simply put my head down and worked seven days a week for the past six years and wrote the other two books. My wife and I wrote the film congruently. I think I’m slowing down on the other end of that, and I’m going to try to maintain more of a pace of a marathoner and not a sprinter for the next couple of years.

KH: Everybody has to serve an apprenticeship—every writer does. The great Mississippi writer Larry Brown wrote four or five complete novels before he published anything. What do you think about the apprenticeship you had to serve?

MS: In the ’70s, I would occasionally publish a short story, but very occasionally, and I wrote like crazy. I think there’s two parts of a writer: there’s this wonderful creative child that should be turned loose to make whatever his or her's soul directs them to make, and then there's this sort of editorial parent that comes in and cleans up the mess and finds, in fact, if the child's made anything worth hanging on the refrigerator. I had a very active child that made a mess all the time, and it took me a long time to develop that editorial parent. So, in my 20s and 30s, while I would occasionally publish a short story, and I might write a pretty good line now and then and less often a pretty good paragraph and rarely a good short story and get it published, I couldn't tell the difference of why something was publishable and why something was not. I didn't develop that, unfortunately, until I was in my 40s, and then the parent came in.

KH: Do you think of yourself as pretty much self-taught? I think I know that you never went to any MFA program.

MS: I didn't. I have just a bachelor's degree in comparative literature. I've read voraciously my whole life. I indicated before [about] growing up without the distractions of radio or television on a national forest. It was just my little brother and myself, and my father, very luckily, had an extensive library and demanded that we read. We were also addicted to reading. We read for travel, for adventure, for illumination, for a sort of voyeurism into the other centuries, other men's and women's minds, hopes, desires. I think I read by the time I was 16 every book that I was required to read in an undergraduate program in English.

I still try to read at least 100 books a year. While I may not be all that self-conscious about what I'm reading, I simply don't think a person can read that much and not come to at least some subconscious assumptions about what makes a story work, what makes a character believable.

KH: Are there some fiction writers that are especially important in your education and apprenticeship?

MS: Probably as a whole—and I didn't come to them until later [in my] teens—but the Latin writers: García Márquez, Neruda, Fuentes, Lorca. I found their sensibilities and how their stories expanded into the areas that weren't very obvious to be striking. Also Lawrence Durrell, when I read his *Alexandria Quartet*, I found that startling. As a boy [I] started out reading Hemingway and felt a true kinship to him, especially with his [Nick] Adams stories . . . Then, like most young writers my age, when I read Faulkner, the world exploded for me—his use of language, his expansion of character . . .

And I must say—and this will seem as though it's a set up in this interview—there've been two novels published in the West that have been absolutely fundamental in my understanding of the legitimacy of writing from place. [Your book] *The Tie That Binds* came out in '84. It's a startlingly fine book, I think, truly a masterwork. . . . It gave me a direction that I don't think I'd had before. Another book is James Galvin's *The Meadow*. It has a starkness that is yet poetic. It had an honesty that I recognized. Both books have been profound for me.

KH: Faulkner and Hemingway, the skill that they had on the page, was absolutely shocking to me, and I've never gotten over that shock and don't want to. But in 1974 James Welch published that first novel of his, *Winter in the Blood*, and that was an absolutely seminal book for me.

Let's move into some discussion about your new book that's coming out early this fall. Can you talk about the origins of this story?

MS: When I was working on *The Fruit of Stone*, sometimes I would be sitting and sort of letting my mind drift and a couple of times while I was dreaming and I would awaken in the middle of the night, I saw the image of this older man, a man who I assumed was approaching 70, sitting on a porch. He seemed very upset and sort of tight and gnarled by something. It was clear to me, in that clarity that you get in dreams, that he wasn't forgiving. It was an outdoor, rural setting surrounded by this sort of mob of half-feral cats. And he kept insisting himself—I mean for months and months while I was writing *The Fruit of Stone*, I would still sort of dream and daydream about this man and inevitably started to ask myself questions: Why was he so mad? What had he lost in his life that he yearned for? What couldn't he forgive? Was there a chance of redemption for him?

Living in the West, anytime you go anywhere, you're likely to be in the car for seven or nine hours. [During these road trips] my wife, Virginia, and I would talk about this man and even come up with little scenes for him and scraps of dialogue and what might his problems be, and a lot of the ancillary people in his life sort of evolved from these trips. After a year of sporadic trips, my wife had participated so much in talking with me about this man and what his narrative might be that we both went to work. She was interested in trying to represent the problems of his life and his narrative in the screenplay, and I was very interested in trying to represent it in the novel. The unusual part of this is I don't believe it's been done before, and it became utterly fascinating, like this wonderful holographic puzzle in how you would present a narrative through the medium of film and how you would also present it through the prose devices in a novel. The novel will be out about five months before the film and, oddly, we don't feel at all that one is derivative of the other. They evolved on sort of parallel universes; the stories have some marked differences and yet are remarkably the same story about forgiveness, the inability to embrace the faults of other people, and the wonderings of "are our dead aware of our transgressions and do they forgive us?"

KH: That must have been very interesting to try to do. I've read the novel twice, and it's wonderful, and you've shown us an early cut of the film. Both seem to work in their own ways just the way you want them to.

Talking about the novel, one of the most difficult things in writing a novel is to figure out where it starts. It's usually easier to tell where it ends because you want to end with a kind of a bang or at least something that seems like closure. Your novel starts with Einar in a sauna. It's a dramatic way of getting into the book, but it's also evocative and allows you to get into his memory and his thoughts about his son, and that's crucial to the story. Did you have to fumble around awhile to find that opening scene or did you know that from the beginning?

MS: I fumbled around within the opening scene. It seemed significant and unusual to me. Basically this is the man we were going to explore, Einar Gilkyson, and I wanted him naked to my reader, to the world. So he's in a little outdoor sauna on his ranch with a wood stove, yet it's a homey place. It's a place he built with his son, who is the root of his longing [because of] the early death of his son. We have the artifacts of his son: his son's six favorite books, hawk feathers, pieces of petrified wood and agate. We have the namesake of the son's dog on the porch, staring through a little window.
The sauna has a window in the roof where he watched the stars with his son. In an attempt to present to my reader this flawed man in a very naked way, and a way that was ultimately uncomfortable, in a place he would have to leave, the sauna, and remembering his son, it allowed me as a writer to put a sharper edge on what the relationship was between father and son.

KH: So you knew those two people were connected in part of this story from the outset, I understand. How did you arrive at the other characters?

MS: The Mitch character was always in my mind, too. I saw Einar as a man that had ruined a good deal of his life. He'd lost not only his son, but the efficacy of his ranch, his wife, and all he had left was a man that was very like him. They served together in the Korean War. They had worked together for 50 years, and yet this other man Mitch, although physically damaged, he's a very good man. He's probably the most whole character in the entire book, so he is sort of an example of what Einar can become. It seemed ironical to me that he would be damaged and Einar would have to care for him.

KH: That makes a really nice conflicting parallel in some sense. Einar is whole physically but he's less than whole spiritually and emotionally, while Mitch is just the opposite. That makes a very interesting distorted mirror image of one another.

MS: It was also important to me to show these two working men. We make assumptions there, and I think anytime a writer can explore assumptions that people have to see how accurate they are, something interesting might come out in the work. We always imagine that working men are rather gruff with one another, and that's not been my experience. I've worked on oil rigs, and I've shod horses; I've built fences, guided in the mountains; I've bent sheet metal in a factory, and I've always found a real closeness with the men I work with—the way we joke with one another, the camaraderie, the sense of fellowship that we have. It was important to me that I show these two old cowboys that love one another. They truly love one another, and yet they're both firmly heterosexual.

KH: That's true, and yet Einar's white and Mitch is black. One of the things I like best about this book is it does not seem to be any kind of a polemic about race. These two men, despite their differences in race, are absolutely brothers. Any thoughts about how you avoided that particular polemical issue?

MS: It's not important to Einar what color Mitch is, and it's not important to Mitch what color Einar is. They fought a war together; they've worked together. They don't even see each other's skin anymore. I hardly mention it at all in the book other than to determine for my reader what color they are. It's not an issue with these men; it should *not* be an issue in any of our societies.

KH: So is there a sense in which you're maybe saying something about race by not saying something

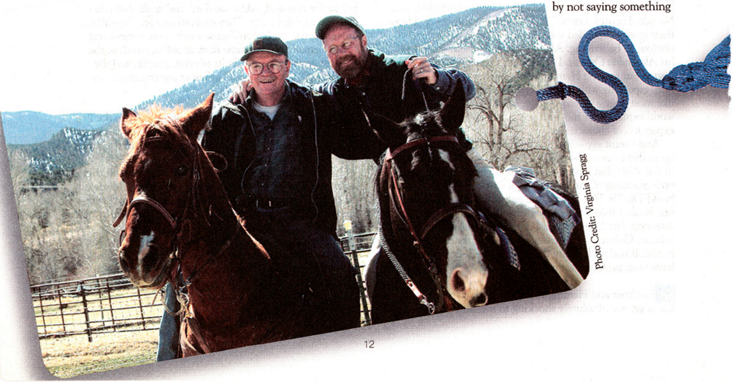

Photo Credit: Virginia Spragg

about race?

MS: Yeah, there purposefully is. Race, religion, sexual preference, all of it—man, woman, lean, fat—those are non-issues for human beings. That we make them issues ever is just indicative of how truly choked our spirits are.

KH: Did you ever feel any uneasiness about writing about a black man? I know there are sometimes constraints on writers, at least from people who don't know better, that male writers should not write about female characters, that whites should not write about blacks, and vice versa.

MS: This book is written in close third from six different people's points of view, and I am none of them. I'm not a 70-year-old white man, nor am I am 70-year-old black man. I'm not a ten-year-old girl, nor that girl's 30-year-old mother or her 30-year-old lover or her 30-year-old abusive boyfriend, but they are all part of me. I am part of all of them if I've rendered them at all honestly, and I can't be the judge of that.

I'm sure there may be factions from each of those characters that say I have represented them inappropriately or inaccurately, and, if so, I have. But I don't believe it's the job of the writer to balk away from the voices he or she hears simply because you feel that you might be criticized for it. I think that at the root of all of us we have the same dreams, we have the same fears, we have the same opportunities for our everyday braveries and cowadices. Is a Native American's reality of life on a reservation very different than mine? Of course, in profound ways that I'm sure I will never understand, and yet what I know I do understand is that we have more similarities than we have differences.

KH: I want to believe that, too. In connecting with what you've just said, the little girl Griff is especially successful. She's a terrific character, and if there were two hearts in this story or two primary characters, Einar and someone else, the someone else has to be the little girl. She really wins you over with her bravery and her courage and her honesty. Any thoughts about the creation of that character?

MS: I specifically made her pre-sexual, a 10 year old, and she's a tomboy. She's a child that is mothered by a mother with very obvious weaknesses and a series of abusive uncles, as it were, with whom her mother lives. She's had to be an adult very early on or mature enough to make decisions not only for herself but for her mother. I think when children are still pre-sexual and yet very astute and aware of what it means to be alive and what they have to do, they're very interesting characters. They aren't much distracted by whether they're a little boy or a little girl yet. It made me feel a bit braver to write about Griff with my remembrances of having been a 10-year-old boy. Also, I've been the legal godfather to nine kids in my life, some of them are in their 30s now, and over half of them were girls with whom I had very close relationships. They shared their lives with me very honestly, and I thought that might give me a mild insight into the thoughts and fears of Griff.

KH: In contrast to her, of course, there's Jean's boyfriend Roy. It always seems interesting to me when people ask the value of somebody like Roy or someone who is an antagonist, somebody who's evil in a book. From a writer's point of view it's clear that we need those kinds of characters to propel other people into action and to make them respond to what these bad people do. How about the creation of Roy in this book—some thoughts about him?

MS: He was by far and away the hardest character for me to write. I literally, not figuratively, would go out and walk on the prairie sometimes for three, four, five, six hours with a bottle of water, muttering and trying to reach that manic place in myself, this character that is physically abusive, mentally abusive. Most people who display horrible behavior feel in some way victimized by their relationships or a job or their relationship with the divine or lack of it, and that's Roy. I would try to work myself up to find that part of me that could render him so that he wasn't just simply black and white, so that there were gray areas.

KH: That's the challenge, isn't it? To create a character who is more than one-dimensional or who, in Faulkner's terms, "casts a shadow."

MS: It's relatively simple to represent that character as only being all evil, but in fact he's not. He's got sympathetic parts of himself.

KH: I know you and I both have strong feelings about the label of "regionalism" as sometimes is applied to your work and mine. Would you care to deliver yourself of anything about that?

MS: I find "regionalism" or the labeling of writers from a specific area to be regrettable. I think it's a way of diminishing the writer; it's a way of reducing the writer. Any time that you would call a woman a woman writer or [a Southerner] a Southern writer . . . it takes them out of the wholeness of what it means to be writing. It's unkind to our fellows. You know a South African writer, when he looks at the United States does not label us as Western or Eastern or Southeastern. For instance, [you] talked about Jim Welch earlier—to label Jim Welch as a Blackfoot writer or Scott Momaday as a Kiowa [writer] is ridiculous. They are extraordinary writers. I know personally I'd rather be labeled, if my work is unlikable, as just a bad writer than a Western writer. I think, frankly, that some of the best writing we have on this planet is from writers that can be called "regionalists." Someone like Faulkner, so firmly grounded in his region, but because of the beauty of his language and the encompassing universality of his thought, he's a planetary writer. García Márquez is a regional writer that is a planetary writer. So, I just find it tiresome, like any bad behavior, when we try to diminish the people that work in the same field that we do [and] struggle under the same limitations, that we further try to limit them in that way.