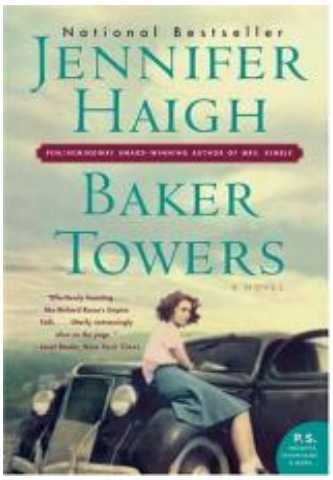
ReadingGroupGuides
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Baker Towers

by Jennifer Haigh



About the Book

One of the literary world's rising stars, Jennifer Haigh earned coast-to-coast raves and the PEN/Hemingway Award for her debut, Mrs. Kimble. In her second novel, Haigh not only meets but surpasses the expectations established by her first book. **Baker Towers** traces the lives of three generations in a community that tenderly echoes the American experience. A family album peopled with vivid characters, this is the story of an America long past, a haunting meditation on the passage of time.

Polish immigrant Stanley Novak worked the night shift in the coal mines of western Pennsylvania, in close-knit Bakerton, a town named for its mines. When he dies suddenly, his widow, Rose, is left to raise their five children. The oldest son, George, becomes a soldier in World War II. Their daughter Joyce will join the military as well, hoping the Air Force can give her opportunities that working-class Bakerton could not. Her sister Dorothy takes a job in Washington, D.C., where her fragile beauty and romantic ideals make her dangerously vulnerable. The two youngest children grow up without a father while seeking their places in a rapidly changing world. But at each turning point in love or fortune or work, the siblings can't forget where they come from. Each, in his own way, feels the inexorable pull of home.

Evoking a long-lost time and place with powerful precision, **Baker Towers** follows the Novak family through three decades of sweeping change. You'll not soon forget their story.

Discussion Guide

1. Do the opening paragraphs depict Bakerton as an oppressive community or a utopia, or a combination of the two? Viewing the town itself as a character, how would you describe its biography?

2. Discuss the social distinctions embodied in the Novak family. What roles did society prescribe for Rose and Stanley,

based on gender and class? Did their children lead more fulfilling lives than their parents?

3. Do you attribute the differences between the siblings to temperament or circumstance? How was each one affected by Stanley's death?

4. How would you characterize the author's narrative style? What is the effect of her choices regarding scenery, storyline, and other aspects of the novel's architecture?

5. Before meeting Rose, Antonio Bernardi had never seen an Italian wife on Polish Hill. In what ways has the American immigrant experience, and the character of immigrant communities, changed over the past century?

6. George's parents named him after George Washington rather than calling him Stanley Novak, Jr. They wanted to emphasize the American, not Polish, aspect of his identity. What freedoms and restrictions are illustrated by George's marriage, and his wistful love of Ev? What enables his son to embrace Bakerton?

7. What keeps Dorothy in Washington, D.C., in a life defined by repetitiveness and sterility for so many years? How does her definition of morality shift throughout the novel? What does her perception of the world reveal about her perception of herself?

8. Joyce's intellectual drive is accompanied by a strong dose of practicality. Do you view her as the family's savior or as a wet blanket? Why do so many of her efforts go unappreciated?

9. Is Sandy the antithesis of George, or a reflection of him? Does either brother remind you of Stanley?

10. What does Lucy convey about the nature of hunger, and the nature of beauty? What is the significance of her eventual role as healer?

11. The tragic mine disaster shapes the novel's conclusion, leading to the image of Amish settlers arriving in Saxon County. What dies along with Eugene Stusick and his co-workers? What allows something new to be reborn in this community?

12. Who are the novel's most prosperous characters? How do you define prosperity in your own life? What family legacies have shaped your dreams?

13. Mrs. Kimble also conveyed a theme of illusion versus reality. Compare the ways in which that theme plays out in both novels.

Author Bio

Jennifer Haigh?s first novel, MRS. KIMBLE, won the PEN Hemingway Award for debut fiction. Her previous novel, MERCY STREET, was named a Best Book of 2022 by *The New Yorker* and won the Mark Twain American Voice in Literature Award. Her short stories have been published widely in the *Atlantic, Granta, The Best American Short Stories* and many other places. Published in 18 languages, her work has been recognized by the Guggenheim Foundation, the Michener Foundation, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in Boston.

Critical Praise

"Haigh creates a real sense of a community and brings her mining town to life through a large cast of minor characters... **Baker Towers** is a novel possessing a rare, quiet power to evoke a time long past and the character of the people who lived then."

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