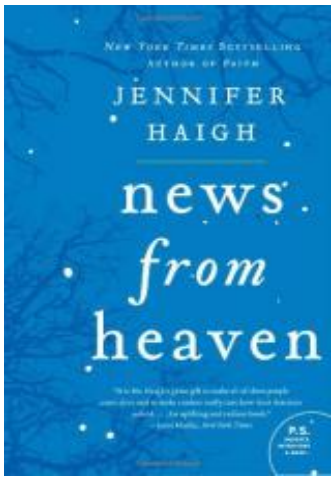
News from Heaven: The Bakerton Stories

by Jennifer Haigh



About the Book

Jennifer Haigh returns to the vividly imagined world of Bakerton, Pennsylvania, a coal-mining town that has been rocked by decades of painful transition. From its heyday during two world wars through its slow decline, Bakerton is a town that refuses to give up gracefully, binding succeeding generations to the place that made them. With a revolving cast of characters, these stories explore how our roots --- the families and places in which we are raised --- shape the people we eventually become.

Discussion Guide

1. What is the significance of the title, NEWS FROM HEAVEN?

2. Describe the Bakerton, Pennsylvania, that is captured in the pages of NEWS FROM HEAVEN. What do these stories tell you about this place and the people who were born and raised there?

3. Do you think Bakerton is a typical American small town? How does it reflect American values and the nation?s development over the course of the 20th century, when these stories are set?

4. In Bakerton?s heyday, the town proudly erected a sign that described its value: ?Bakerton Coal Lights the World.? Yet a half century later, the sign has been vandalized to read ?Bakerton Coal Blights the World.? How does time change the town and the people who live there? Do you think places like Bakerton will rise again?

5. What are the overarching themes that connect the stories and these characters? Choose a particular theme and trace it in an individual character?s experience and throughout each of the stories in the book.

6. Some of the characters are desperate to escape Bakerton while others are content to remain. What drives their choices?

What makes these people so different from each other? What do we gain --- and what do we lose --- by either choice? What are the benefits and the drawbacks of living in a place like Bakerton?

7. What means of escape are available to those characters who do leave town? What about those who may have contemplated leaving but have not? Is life harder on those who go --- or the loved ones they leave behind? Think about Sandy Novak and his sister Joyce Novak Hauser, or Regina Yahner in the story ?Broken Star.? What are the consequences of their choices?

8. How did growing up in Bakerton shape various characters? Talk about one or two and use passages from the book to illustrate your argument. How is Bakerton reflected in the lives of those who choose to go? What does it offer those who remain?

9. What is life like in Bakerton for outsiders like Alan Spangler in ?Something Sweet?? What connects him to his teacher, Miss Peale? Contrast Alan?s experiences with those of Mitch Spanek in ?Favorite Son.? What does it take to fit in a place like Bakerton?

10. In ?A Place in the Sun,? Sandy Novak left Bakerton and its ?bleak small-town life worse than jail,? for the promise of something better out west. Is the grass truly greener elsewhere? Why? Years later, the woman he loves, Vera Gold, tells his sister Joyce, ?Whenever he got into trouble, he figured he?d always have this place to come back to.? Could Sandy have ever gone back? Is it possible to ?go home? again? What happens to those who do, like Ray in ?The Bottom of Things??

11. Ray had always believed that ?there were two kinds of men: men who took advantage of their freedom and men who threw it away; men who lived big lives and men who were content being small.? Can you live a big life in a small town? If you choose to stay in Bakerton, is that the same as being ?content being small?? What does Ray learn about himself when he visits Bakerton for his parents? 50th wedding anniversary? Do you think he can find deliverance embracing the responsibilities he once longed to escape?

12. Talk about your own hometown. If you have revisited, do you hold the same opinions you did when you lived there? How can time and distance alter our outlook? What, ultimately, changes?

13. Did you have a favorite story or character in NEWS FROM HEAVEN? Elaborate on your choices.

14. What do the experiences of the characters in NEWS FROM HEAVEN teach us about ourselves, our home towns, and life itself?

15. The stories in NEWS FROM HEAVEN are set in the same location as Jennifer Haigh's earlier book BAKER TOWERS, and several characters from that novel --- Sandy, Dorothy and George Novak, Viola Peale, Joyce and Ed Hauser --- make appearances in NEWS FROM HEAVEN. If you have read BAKER TOWERS, how do the two books compare? What are some reasons a writer might return to the setting of an earlier book?

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 has a gift for creating believable characters of all kinds and placing them into realistic --- often heartbreaking --- situations. A must read for fans of BAKER TOWERS and a good addition to all short-story collections.

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