



Olive Kitteridge: a novel **By Elizabeth Strout**

New York: Random House, c2008.

286 pages

Includes reader's guide

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Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and a finalist
for a National Book Critics Circle Award.

NAMED A BEST BOOK OF 2008 BY:

People, USA Today, The Atlantic

The Washington Post Book World

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Entertainment Weekly

The Christian Science Monitor

San Francisco Chronicle

Salon, San Antonio Express-News

Chicago Tribune, The Wall Street Journal

Summary

At times stern, at other times patient, at times perceptive, at other times in sad denial, Olive Kitteridge, a retired schoolteacher, deplores the changes in her little town of Crosby, Maine, and in the world at large, but she doesn't always recognize the changes in those around her: a lounge musician haunted by a past romance; a former student who has lost the will to live; Olive's own adult child, who feels tyrannized by her irrational sensitivities; and her husband, Henry, who finds his loyalty to his marriage both a blessing and a curse.

As the townspeople grapple with their problems, mild and dire, Olive is brought to a deeper understanding of herself and her life—sometimes painfully, but always with ruthless honesty. Olive Kitteridge offers profound insights into the human condition—its conflicts, its tragedies and joys, and the endurance it requires

Elizabeth Strout's new "novel in stories" brings to life a hardscrabble community on the coast of Maine, a quintessentially New England town where people serve baked beans and ketchup when company comes and speak in familiar Down East accents ("ay-yuh"). But "Olive Kitteridge" is provincial only in a literal sense. Most stories turn on some kind of betrayal. A few document fragile, improbable romances. They encompass a wide range of experience.

The presence of Olive Kitteridge, a seventh-grade math teacher and the wife of a pharmacist, links these 13 stories. A big woman, she's like a planetary body, exerting a strong gravitational pull. (from ***NY Times Sunday Book Review***)

Reviews

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review.

Thirteen linked tales from Strout (*Abide with Me*, etc.) present a heart-wrenching, penetrating portrait of ordinary coastal Mainers living lives of quiet grief intermingled with flashes of human connection. The opening *Pharmacy* focuses on terse, dry junior high-school teacher Olive Kitteridge and her gregarious pharmacist husband, Henry, both of whom have survived the loss of a psychologically damaged parent, and both of whom suffer painful attractions to co-workers. Their son, Christopher, takes center stage in *A Little Burst*, which describes his wedding in humorous, somewhat disturbing detail, and in *Security*, where Olive, in her 70s, visits Christopher and his family in New York. Strout's fiction showcases her ability to reveal through familiar details—the mother-of-the-groom's wedding dress, a grandmother's disapproving observations of how her grandchildren are raised—the seeds of tragedy. Themes of suicide, depression, bad communication, aging and love, run through these stories, none more vivid or touching than *Incoming Tide*, where Olive chats with former student Kevin Coulson as they watch waitress Patty Howe by the seashore, all three struggling with their own misgivings about life. Like this story, the collection is easy to read and impossible to forget. Its literary craft and emotional power will surprise readers unfamiliar with Strout.

From Booklist

Starred Review

"Hell. We're always alone. Born alone. Die alone," says Olive Kitteridge, redoubtable seventh-grade math teacher in Crosby, Maine. Anyone who gets in Olive's way had better watch out, for she crashes unapologetically through life like an emotional storm trooper. She forces her husband, Henry, the town pharmacist, into tactical retreat; and she drives her beloved son, Christopher, across the country and into therapy. But appalling though Olive can be, Strout manages to make her deeply human and even sympathetic, as are all of the characters in this "novel in stories." Covering a period of 30-odd years, most of the stories (several of which were previously published in the *New Yorker* and other magazines) feature Olive as their focus, but in some she is bit player or even a footnote while other characters take center stage to sort through their own fears and insecurities. Though loneliness and loss haunt these pages, Strout also supplies gentle humor and a nourishing dose of hope. People are sustained by the rhythms of ordinary life and the natural wonders of coastal Maine, and even Olive is sometimes caught off guard by life's baffling beauty. Strout is also the author of the well-received *Amy and Isabelle* (1999) and *Abide with Me* (2006).

The New Yorker

"Strout animates the ordinary with astonishing force. . . . [She] makes us experience not only the terrors of change but also the terrifying hope that change can bring: she plunges us into these churning waters and we come up gasping for air."



Biography

<http://elizabethstrout.com/>

Elizabeth Strout (born January 6, 1956) is an American author of fiction.

She was born in Portland, Maine and was raised in small towns in Maine and New Hampshire. After graduating from Bates College, she spent a year in Oxford, England, followed by studies at law school for another year. In 1982 she graduated with honors, and received both a law degree from the Syracuse University College of Law and a Certificate of Gerontology from the Syracuse School of Social Work. That year her first story was published in *New Letters* magazine.

Strout moved to New York City, and continued to write stories that were published in literary magazines, as well as in *Redbook* and *Seventeen*. It took her six or seven years to write *Amy and Isabelle*, which when published was shortlisted for the 2000 Orange Prize and nominated for the 2000 PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. *Amy and Isabelle* was made into a television movie starring Elisabeth Shue and was produced by Oprah Winfrey's studio, Harpo Films. She was a NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) professor at Colgate University during the Fall Semester of 2007, where she taught creative writing at both the introductory and advanced level. She is on the faculty of the MFA program at Queens University of Charlotte in Charlotte, North Carolina.

In 2009 Strout was honored with a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), a collection of connected short stories about a woman and her immediate family and friends on the coast of Maine.

Bibliography

Amy and Isabelle (1998)

The Friend Who Got Away (2005, Strout contributed 1 short story)

Abide with Me (2006)

Olive Kitteridge (2008, Pulitzer Prize, aka *On the Coast of Maine*)

English Lesson: A Memoir, *Washington Post* magazine, July 2009

LitLovers (from 2006 Barnes & Noble interview)

http://www.litlovers.com/guide_olive_kitteridge.html

With the kind of reception that Elizabeth Strout's debut novel *Amy and Isabelle* received, one might have expected her to rush right back to her writing desk to author a follow-up while the proverbial iron was still hot. However, that is not

the way that Strout works. "I wish tremendously that I was faster about all this," she recently told Bookpage.com. "But, you know, it didn't turn out to be that way." It ultimately took her about seven years to write *Abide with Me*, her sophomore effort, and the amount of time she put into crafting the novel is apparent on every page.

The multitudinous hours that went into writing *Abide with Me* are not anything new to Elizabeth Strout. She took an equally measured number of years to write her debut, which she developed out of a short story. "It took me around three years to 'clear my throat' for this book," she told Bookreporter.com at the time of the release of *Amy and Isabelle*. "During much of that time *Amy and Isabelle* remained a story. Once I got down to actually writing it as a novel it took another six or seven years." However, the pay off for the time she spent writing this humorous, expertly rendered tale of the troubled relationship between a mother and her daughter was substantial. *Amy and Isabelle* received nearly unanimous praise, lauded by *Mademoiselle*, *The New Yorker*, *Newsweek*, *Time Magazine*, *People Magazine*, and *Publishers Weekly*, to name just a few. The novel also nabbed nominations for the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and the Orange Prize for Fiction, and was the subject of a 2001 made-for-television movie starring Elizabeth Shue.

So, what kept Strout from completing her second novel sooner? Perhaps it was her unorthodox writing methods. "I try to get in three or four hours (of writing per day)," she explains, "and I put off having lunch for as long as I can because having lunch seems to change the energy flow. If I'm lucky, I'll get through till one o'clock. And then I throw everything out. And that's a morning's work."

While Strout may be indulging in a little good-natured, comical leg-pulling, she did not write *Abide with Me* to elicit giggles from her readers. This somber piece introduces Tyler Caskey, a minister in a small New England community whose mounting personal doubts following a tragedy cause the community that he serves to develop their own doubts about his ability to guide them spiritually.

While *Abide with Me* stands in contrast to the comparatively humorous *Amy and Isabelle*, it was not Strout's intention to render a serious exploration of theology or religion. She views the book as more of a character study. "It is the story of a minister," she explains. "I was interested in writing about a religious man who is genuine in his religiosity and who gets confronted with such sadness so abruptly that he loses himself. Not his faith, but his faith in himself."

Extras (from Barnes & Noble interview)

- My first job was when I was about 12, cleaning houses in the afternoons for different elderly women in town. I hated it. I would be so bored scrubbing at some kitchen tile, that my mind would finally float all over the place, to the beach, to a friend's house...all this happened in my mind as I scrubbed those tiles, so it was certainly good for my imagination. But I did hate it."
- Without a doubt my mother was an inspiration for my writing. This is true in many ways, but mostly because she is a wonderful storyteller, without even knowing it. I would listen, as a child, when some friend of hers came to visit,

and they would gossip about the different people they knew. My mother had the most fascinating stories about people's families, murderers, mental illnesses, babies abandoned, and she delivered it all in a matter-of-fact way that was terribly compelling. It made me believe that there was nothing more interesting than the lives of people, their *real* hidden lives, and this of course can lead one down the path of becoming a fiction writer.

- Later, in college, one of my favorite things was to go into town and sit at the counter at Woolworth's (so tragic to have them gone!) and listen to people talking; the waitresses and the customers -- I loved it. I still love to eavesdrop, but mostly I like the idea of being around people who are right in the middle of their lives, revealing certain details to each other —leaving the rest for me to make up.
- I love theater. I love sitting in an audience and having the actors right there, playing out what it means to be a human being. There is something about the actual relationship that is going on between the audience and the actors that I just love. I love seeing the sets and costumes, the decisions that have been made about the staging...it's a place for the eye and the ear to be fully involved. I have always loved theater."
- I also like cell phones. What I mean by that is I hear many people complain about cell phones; they can't go anywhere without hearing someone on a cell phone, etc. But I love that chance to hear half a conversation, even if the person is just saying, 'Hi honey, I'll be home in ten minutes, do you want me to bring some milk?' And I'm also grateful to have a cell phone, just to know it's there if I need it when I'm out and about. So I'm a cell phone fan.
- I don't especially like to travel, not the way many people do. I know many people that love to go to far-off and different places, and I've never been like that. I seem to get homesick as quickly as a child. I may like being in some new place for a few days, but then I want to go home and return to my routine and my familiar corner stores. I am a real creature of habit, without a doubt.

When asked what book most influenced her life as a writer, she answered:

- Perhaps the book that had the greatest influence on my career as a writer was *The Journals of John Cheever*. Of course many, many books had influenced me before I read that, but there was something about the honesty found in Cheever's journals that gave me courage as a writer. And his ability to turn a phrase, to describe in a breath the beauty of a rainstorm or the fog rising off the river... all this arrived in my life as a writer at a time when I seemed ready to absorb his examples of what a sentence can do when written with the integrity of emotion and felicity of language. (From Barnes & Noble.)

Discussion Questions from Novelist online

How does loneliness initially appear in Olive Kitteridge?

Many characters in Olive Kitteridge find themselves, according to circumstance, trapped in their own loneliness. An early and stark example of this is Kevin

Coulson, whose loneliness leads him to consider suicide. Unable to fit in in Crosby, Kevin moves to a string of different places, but "[t]hey all became places that sooner or later, one way or another, assured him that he didn't, in fact, fit"

What is Olive's relationship with her son like as he is growing up?

Olive never directly reflects on her relationship with Christopher as he was growing up. She is mainly concerned with how he acts towards her and Henry after his marriage and his move. At the same time, the reader gets hints of the tensions at play in the Kitteridge household through Olive's musings.

What is the significance of schadenfreude in Olive Kitteridge?

Olive does not allow herself to feel grief or anger in a typical way after Henry's stroke or his death, as she thinks it is unseemly to have bad feelings about a natural event — death — that people should expect throughout their lives (p. 222). Her distance from these feelings means that she has few ways of coming to terms with these events or healing herself from them, but she does indulge in one method that, at first, appears cruel: she visits other people who are in pain or mourning

What does Olive's relationship with Jack Kennison reveal about Olive Kitteridge's theme of loneliness and love?

While none of the characters in Olive Kitteridge can fully escape loneliness, Olive herself finds unlikely solace with Jack Kennison. Though she initially dislikes Jack, she comes to realize that it is not the particular partner or circumstances that make loneliness disappear, it is accepting the love that is available and giving companionship and love to someone else.

The metaphor of a plate full of tarts reinforces the idea that love is not about finding a perfect partner and striving always for a better match — it is about holding love for a person and cherishing a relationship with a person who cherishes you. Many of the young characters in Olive Kitteridge would benefit from this lesson, but Olive's eventual change of heart suggests that there is always the chance that they will eventually learn, just as she does.

Discussion Questions (from ReadingGroupGuides.com)

1. Do you like Olive Kitteridge as a person?
2. Have you ever met anyone like Olive Kitteridge, and if so, what similarities do you see between that person and Olive?
3. How would you say Olive changed as a person during the course of the book?
4. Discuss the theme of suicide. Which characters are most affected (or fascinated) by the idea of killing themselves?
5. What freedoms do the residents of Crosby, Maine, experience in contrast with those who see the town for bigger "ponds" (California, New York)? Does anyone

feel trapped in Crosby, and if so, who? What outlets for escape are available to them?

6. Why does Henry tolerate Olive as much as he does, catering to her, agreeing with her, staying even-keeled when she rants and raves? Is there anyone that you tolerate despite their sometimes overbearing behavior? If so, why?

7. How does Kevin (in "Incoming Tide") typify a child craving his father's approval? Are his behaviors and mannerisms any way like those of Christopher Kitteridge? Do you think Olive reminds Kevin more of his mother or of his father?

8. In "A Little Burst," why do you think Olive is so keen on having a positive relationship with Suzanne, whom she obviously dislikes? How is this a reflection of how she treats other people in town?

9. Does it seem fitting to you that Olive would not respond while others ridiculed her body and her choice of clothing at Christopher and Suzanne's wedding?

10. How do you think Olive perceives boundaries and possessiveness, especially in regard to relationships?

11. Elizabeth Strout writes, "The appetites of the body were private battles" ("Starving," page 89). In what ways is this true? Are there "appetites" that could be described as battles waged in public? Which ones, and why?

12. Why does Nina elicit such a strong reaction from Olive in "Starving"? What does Olive notice that moves her to tears in public? Why did witnessing this scene turn Harmon away from Bonnie?

13. In "A Different Road," Strout writes about Olive and Henry: "No, they would never get over that night because they had said things that altered how they saw each other" (p. 124). What is it that Olive and Henry say to each other while being held hostage in the hospital bathroom that has this effect? Have you experienced a moment like this in one of your close relationships?

14. In "Tulips" and in "Basket of Trips," Olive visits people in difficult circumstances (Henry in the convalescent home, and Marlene Bonney at her husband's funeral) in hopes that "in the presence of someone else's sorrow, a tiny crack of light would somehow come through her own dark encasement" (p. 172). In what ways do the tragedies of others shine light on Olive's trials with Christopher's departure and Henry's illness? How do those experiences change Olive's interactions with others? Is she more compassionate or more indifferent? Is she more approachable or more guarded? Is she more hopeful or more pessimistic?

15. In "Ship in a Bottle," Julie is jilted by her fiancé, Bruce, on her wedding day. Julie's mother, Anita, furious at Bruce's betrayal, shoots at him soon after. Julie quotes Olive Kitteridge as having told her seventh-grade class, "Don't be scared of your hunger. If you're scared of your hunger, you'll just be one more ninny

like everyone else" (p. 195). What do you think Olive means by this phrase? How does Olive's life reflect this idea? Who is afraid of his or her hunger in these stories?

16. In "Security," do you get the impression that Olive likes Ann, Christopher's new wife? Why does she excuse Ann's smoking and drinking while pregnant with Christopher's first child (and Henry's first grandchild)? Why does she seem so accepting initially, and what makes her less so as the story goes on?

17. Was Christopher justified in his fight with Olive in "Security"? Did he kick her out, or did she voluntarily leave? Do you think he and Ann are cruel to Olive?

18. Do you think Olive is really oblivious to how others see her— especially Christopher? Do you think she found Christopher's accusations in "Security" shocking or just unexpected?

19. What's happened to Rebecca at the end of "Criminal"? Where do you think she goes, and why do you think she feels compelled to go? Do you think she's satisfied with her life with David? What do you think are the reasons she can't hold down a job?

20. What elements of Olive's personality are revealed in her relationship with Jack Kennison in "River"? How does their interaction reflect changes in her perspective on her son? On the way she treated Henry? On the way she sees the world?

From One Minute Book Reviews

<http://oneminutebookreviews.wordpress.com/2009/04/27/a-totally-unauthorized-reading-group-guide-to-%E2%80%98olive-kitteridge%E2%80%99/>

Questions for Discussion:

1. Olive Kitteridge, the title character, is an angry woman often infuriated by small things, such as her husband's spilling the ketchup in "Pharmacy." [Page 7] What is she really angry about?

2. To phrase the first question differently: Many long-married people learn to accept minor flaws in their spouses, such as occasional clumsiness. Why does Olive have trouble accepting Henry's?

3. Olive Kitteridge includes stories published in very different publications, such as *Seventeen* and the literary magazine *South Carolina Review*. How well do the tales fit together?

4. Critics have argued that some tales in Olive Kitteridge work better than others. A reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* said that the weakest stories are those that barely mention Olive, such as "Ship in a Bottle": "Without her, the book goes adrift, as if it has lost its anchor." Do you agree? What stories do you find strongest and weakest?

5. Olive and her grown son, Christopher, have spent much of their lives locked into a dance of reciprocal misunderstanding. Olive insists that she loves Chris and seems to believe that she has gotten “all wacky” with him only because of “how scared he was of her.” [Page 71] Is that all there is to it? What is the broader problem between Olive and Chris?

6. Much of the action in *Olive Kitteridge* involves ordinary events, such as going to church or Dunkin’ Donuts. That’s not true of “A Different Road” (which takes “a different road” from the other tales). In this story, Olive and her husband are taken hostage at a hospital by armed men who want to steal drugs. This scene is an example of what Flannery O’Connor called “the grotesque” in fiction, “something which an ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life.” And a critic saw “A Different Road” as the only story in which Strout went “overboard.” How did you react to this usual story? Did it add to or detract from the book?

7. Apart from the hostage-taking, *Olive Kitteridge* refers to many violent or traumatic events in the lives of its characters or their friends or relatives – suicide, divorce, infidelity, miscarriages, death by drowning, a major stroke, a fatal hunting accident. Books can seem oppressive when painful events pile up, or so dark you can’t finish them. If you read all of *Olive Kitteridge*, how did Strout keep you reading? Why didn’t the book seem oppressive?

8. The publicity materials for *Olive Kitteridge* call the book “a novel in stories,” possibly because novels sell better than short stories. But the Pulitzer Prize judges correctly identified the volume as “a collection of 13 short stories” bound together in part by Olive. How does the book differ from a novel with a traditional linear narrative? Would you have enjoyed it more or less if Strout had told Olive’s story as a novel instead of a collection of stories?

9. Olive shows throughout the book that she hates many things about the world. But in the end, as an old woman, she chooses to accept love, in however imperfect a form. [Page 270] How believable was this transformation?

10. For all of its bleakness, *Olive Kitteridge* does have humorous moments. One occurs at the wedding reception for Olive’s son, where guests clink their glasses and a man says, “A toast to Fidelity Select.” [Page 72] What lines or scenes from the book did you find amusing?

For Further Reading

The literary term for a group of linked short stories like *Olive Kitteridge* is a cycle of stories or short story cycle. If you like the form, you might enjoy other short story cycles, such as

Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*

Tama Janowitz’s *Slaves of New York*

Carson McCullers’ *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*

Suggestions From Novelist Plus (online database @RT Library)

Jaimee Wriston Colbert, *Climbing the God Tree: A Novel in Stories* (1998)
Twenty-four interconnected short stories create this atmospheric portrait of an isolated Maine town and its residents, uniquely connected by their relationship with the federal prison that is located in their town and is a foundation of their community.

Kathleen DeMarco, *Cranberry Queen* (2001)
A woman flees her job and life in New York after her parents and brother are suddenly killed in a car accident, and finds herself adopted into a rural New Jersey town and participating in their cranberry harvest festival.

Fannie Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (1987)
An aged woman at a nursing home recounts her life and the stories of her friends struggling in small-town Alabama, in this gentler portrait of a woman's life and decline than Olive Kitteridge.

Oscar Hijuelos, *Empress of the Splendid Season* (1999)
A portrait of a Cuban woman and her struggle to support her family's life in New York. Hijuelos is a Pulitzer Prize winner and one of Strout's favorite writers.

Alice Munro, *The Progress of Love* (1986)
Eleven short stories by another of Strout's favorite authors capture people who are affected by loss, disappointment, and the complexities of love and human relationships.

Lisa Vice, *Preacher's Lake* (1998)
A diverse set of characters, all permanent or temporary residents of the small town of Preacher's Lake, Maine, see their lives intertwine through circumstance and fate as they work through their difficulties and reach out to each other for love and support.

Richard Yates, *The Easter Parade* (1976)
A pair of sisters experience their parents' divorce and its consequences. They each deal with the trauma in different ways, and eventually lead very different lives in which they are confronted by disappointment and the results of their sordid family history.