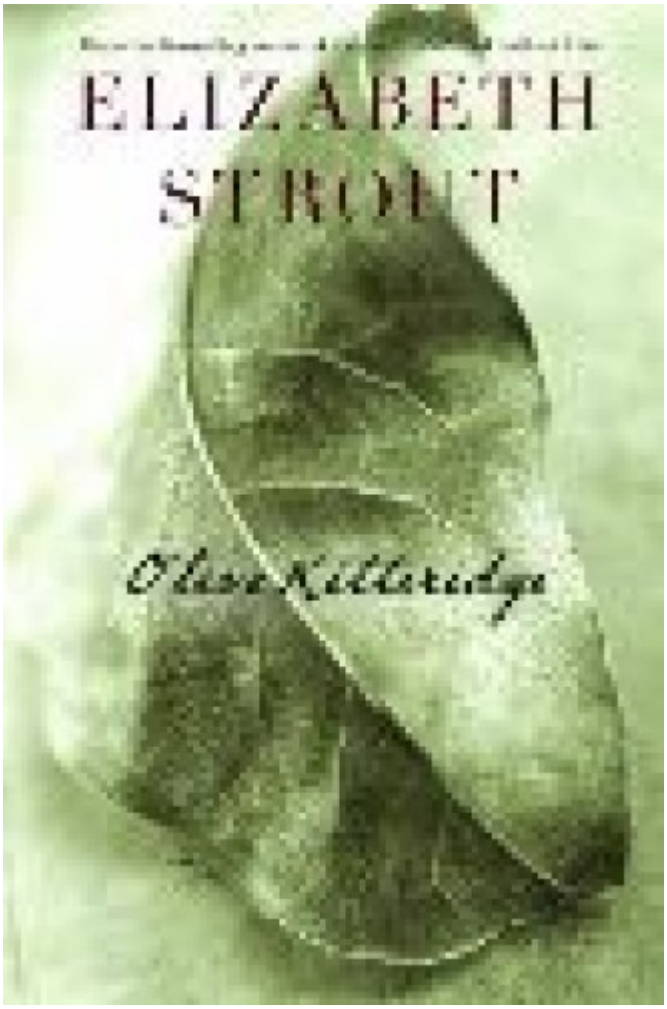
Olive Kitteridge

reviewed by Trudy Bush in the October 20, 2009 issue

In Review



Olive Kitteridge

Elizabeth Strout
Random House

Many of the main characters in Elizabeth Strout’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel are old, and like aging itself, this book is not for wimps. The 13 interconnected stories

that compose the novel are linked by Olive Kitteridge, a retired seventh-grade math teacher who appears in all of them—as one of the main characters in some of the best, as little more than a passing reference in others. Together the stories do for small, coastal Maine towns what Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg*, *Ohio* did for Midwestern villages: show them as communities of complex, often alienated, lonely and hurting people who nevertheless sometimes connect in profound and hopeful ways.

Olive is not an immediately likable character. In the opening story, "Pharmacy," she announces that she will no longer accompany her kind, long-suffering husband to church. "*You*, Mr. Head Deacon Claptrap Nice Guy, expect me to give up my Sunday mornings and go sit among a bunch of snot-wots!" she shouts in fury. She's a person who never apologizes, who says what she thinks and who doesn't care if she offends people. Only a few of her students remember her fondly. Yet she helps a young doctor who is on the verge of suicide and forms a strong bond of sympathy with an anorexic girl. Henry, her husband, suffers from her black moods and temper, but also loves and appreciates her. And by the end of the book, so may the reader.

In "River," the final story and one of the best, Olive, now 74 and widowed, decides to accept a final offer of love. She pictures herself and the man as "two slices of Swiss cheese pressed together, such holes they brought to this union—what pieces life took out of you." The largest of those pieces come from the betrayals that haunt long marriages and the tensions in relationships between parents and adult children.

Marital betrayal takes various forms in these stories of couples whose "lives get knit together like bones." Though Henry and Olive love each other, they are so unalike that each sometimes feels unbearably lonely in their marriage. In their middle years, both find temporary solace in an intense but platonic relationship with someone they recognize as similar to themselves. Henry's happiest years are spent working with a woman who is as orderly, kind-hearted and quiet as he is. Olive yearns for a fellow teacher in whom she sees a wariness and quiet anger that matches her own. When she first meets him she has "the sensation that she had been seen. And she had not even known she'd felt invisible." They are, she tells him, "cut from the same piece of bad cloth." Yet Olive and Henry's marriage survives, and in the end each is glad that it has.

In another story an old woman discovers that her husband recently visited his former mistress. Though she feels that her heart has been broken all over again, she

is too tired, too aware of how limited their remaining time together is, to react with anger or blame. “What did they have now, except for each other, and what could you do if it was not even quite that?” she reflects.

The vividness of her images makes Strout’s stories memorable. In “Starving,” Harmon finds the wife who has been “the central heating of his life” growing cold after their sons leave home and become involved in their own lives. As he gradually finds intimacy and warmth with another woman and knows he will soon leave his wife, he feels like a “man waiting for open-heart surgery, not knowing if he would die on the table, or live.”

Relationships between aging parents and their grown children are a source of pain and frustration far more often than joy for the inhabitants of Crosby, Maine. Longed-for grandchildren are slow in coming. Sons marry impossible women, move away and seldom call home. Grandchildren who do live nearby say things like, “Just because you’re my grandmother doesn’t mean I have to love you.” Daughters distress their conservative, Republican fathers by announcing that they’re gay. And aging parents struggle to come to terms with the ways in which they have harmed their children and now try to strengthen their bonds with them.

There are lots of epiphanies but not much cheer in these stories. All the more reason, then, to be grateful for the humor that sometimes brightens them. When Olive’s son, Christopher, marries an overbearing big-city doctor who criticizes the dress Olive wears to the wedding, Olive steals a shoe and a bra from the bride’s wardrobe. “At least there will be moments now when Suzanne will doubt herself,” she thinks. “Christopher doesn’t need to be living with a woman who thinks she knows everything.”

It’s easy for an older person to identify with the characters in Strout’s book—and therein lies a problem. As we go through the pains and losses that aging brings, we may need something other than stories that make us feel them more keenly. We may need stories that convey the value and beauty of life—stories that give us a sense of transcendence. The people in Strout’s book who, like Henry, go to church find no real comfort in it. “When they bow their heads or sing a hymn, there is no sense anymore—for Henry—that God’s presence is blessing them.” Characters talk about their souls, but usually about how those souls are hurting or wearing out.

Paradoxically, this book about growing old may be more meaningful to younger people. One of Strout's degrees is in gerontology, and her book may help young people to understand that, as Olive reflects, "lumpy, aged, and wrinkled bodies were as needy as their own young, firm ones, that love was not to be tossed away carelessly." But those of us who are the age of Strout's characters have already learned these lessons.

When I was young I couldn't understand why many of the old people I knew looked for books that made them feel good—biographies about hardships overcome, fiction that presents life as happy and worth living. Now, as I grow old myself, I value fiction that makes me feel the wonder and mystery of life, even when life is sad or difficult—books like Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*, Louise Erdrich's *The Plague of Doves* or almost anything by Alice Munro. Excellent though Strout's stories are, they leave me sad and earthbound, and tell me little that I don't already know.