

OLIVE KITTERIDGE

A Book Review

By Heather Anne McIntosh
heather@heatherannemcintosh.com

I've been a fan of Elizabeth Strout since her first novel [Amy & Isabelle](#) was published in 1998. So, when her latest book [Olive Kitteridge](#) became available, I ordered a copy right away. The book sat in a pile on my nightstand, waiting to be read. In April, the news broke that [Olive Kitteridge](#) had won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. I read the book soon after the announcement during a long weekend spent in Ipswich, Massachusetts – a place in some ways similar to the fictionalized town that Ms. Strout so vividly describes.

The structure of this book is quite unique. [Olive Kitteridge](#) is a set of linked short stories which have two commonalities: they all contain at least a cameo appearance by one central character - Olive Kitteridge - and they're all set in the seaside New England town of Crosby, Maine. Some critics and literature junkies have been critical of Ms. Strout in her choice to publish a set of stories, instead of the more common novel. A few

reviewers have called this book a “novel in stories,” and though there are some who dispute this categorization, I tend to agree that this book should qualify as a novel.

Merriam-Webster defines the novel as: “an invented prose narrative that is usually long and complex and deals especially with human experience through a usually connected sequence of events.” This book, though told in a series of related tales, is a complete narrative which chronicles Olive Kitteridge’s life. There is a clear arc, both within each story, as well as holistically in relation to the larger theme – the growth of Olive’s own self-awareness, and ultimately her newfound gratitude towards life.

The book begins with the story “Pharmacy” – which is told from the point of view of Olive’s husband Henry Kitteridge. Henry is devoted to an overweight, frequently cranky Olive. “Oh, for God’s *sake*, Henry,” Olive says repeatedly throughout the book. Henry is stalwart and kind throughout this story – although it’s clear that he has fallen into unrequited love with his assistant, Denise. She is much younger than Henry, married, and lacks the self-assuredness that Henry so desperately wants for her. Henry finds himself in the role of a father and mentor to young Denise, and when her husband dies tragically, Henry helps Denise restart her life. She eventually moves away to start again - with another man. This story is gorgeous yet tragic, and it’s just the first of many incredible situations found in this book.

Ms. Strout is uniquely gifted in her ability to craft characters who, likeable or not, quickly become understood in a thorough and meaningful way. It is surely rare to connect so deeply and passionately with characters in a book, and as a writer I have to wonder how the author accomplished this feat. Ms. Strout apparently developed her love of the

“hidden lives” of people early in her life. In a 2008 interview with Barnes & Noble, she speaks of her mother’s influence on her writing: “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.”

The stories in Olive Kitteridge shine a light on the secret emotional lives of otherwise ordinary folk. Reading about them is thrilling, akin to peeping in the windows of a stranger’s house late at night. You’re surprised at what you find, though not terribly. In the second story, “Incoming Tide,” we see the first glimmer of goodness in Olive. It’s told from the point of view of Kevin Coulson - a former math student of Olive’s, who has suffered from depression most of his life. A grown Kevin has completed medical school and returned back to his childhood home to commit suicide in the same manner as his father, who shot himself and left no note. Olive climbs unbidden into Kevin’s car, and it is here that we discover a surprising side of Olive: her sixth sense. She has a keen awareness of the suffering of others and an unflinching desire to bring them healing and hope.

It isn’t until a quarter of the way through the book in “The Little Burst” that we encounter the first story told by Olive Kitteridge herself. Here we learn about Olive and Henry’s son, Christopher. A podiatrist who resents his mother and is emotionally absent from either of his parents, Christopher is about to marry a mean, controlling Jewish woman – a gastroenterologist named Suzanne – whom he has known only six weeks.

Olive is thoroughly devastated. After the wedding, she sneaks away to lie down in the newlywed's bedroom. Through the open window, Olive hears her new daughter-in-law criticize Olive's choice of dress. Though Olive acknowledges that the loud and gaudy print is off-putting on somebody of her weight, "her heart really opened when she came across the gauzy muslin... those flowers skimming over the table in her sewing room." On impulse, Olive steals a bra from Suzanne's dresser and one leather loafer from her closet. She then takes a magic marker to one of Suzanne's new sweaters. "It does not help much, but it does help some, to know that at least there will be moments now when Suzanne will doubt herself," muses Olive.

In the next two stories, Olive is confronted with unexpected situations which bring about a mixed array of responses. In "Starving," we meet the owner of a hardware store named Harmon, and Daisy - a widow who lives alone. Harmon is married to Bonnie, a bitter woman whom he is "finished" with sex, and whom he no longer loves. Harmon and Daisy begin what is at first a sexual relationship, and later becomes a real love affair. Both eventually share a friendship with a young cinnamon-haired, anorexic woman named Nina White. Soon a dying Nina moves into Daisy's home. One Sunday, Olive stops by to collect money for the Red Cross. In yet another example of Olive's "sixth sense", she is drawn to the sickly Nina and tries to convince her to eat. "I'm starving," said Olive. "You're not starving," Nina said with disgust. "Sure I am. We all are." Again we watch as Olive reaches out to another human being in such a direct and honest way. One cannot help but admire her.

In “A Different Road,” Olive and Henry end up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Held hostage together in a hospital, Olive breaks down and accuses Henry of causing their son Christopher to leave Maine. “Did it ever occur to you that’s why Christopher left? Because he married a Jew and knew his father would be judgmental – did you ever think of that, Henry?” Henry said quietly, ‘That’s a despicable thing to accuse me of, Olive, and you know it isn’t true. He left because from the day your father died, you took over that boy’s life. You didn’t leave him any room. He couldn’t stay married and stay in town, too.’” Henry and Olive’s marriage will never be the same after this exchange. For the rest her life, even after Henry is gone, Olive will hear these words. Eventually, she can admit to their truth and move forward.

After Henry has a stroke, Olive struggles with both the loss of her husband and her son Christopher - who has divorced Suzanne, remarried, and moved to New York City. Christopher’s new wife, Ann, comes with children from a prior relationship. In “Security”, Olive is summoned to the couple’s home to help take care of the youngest of her children – a toddler. It’s the first time she’s met Christopher’s Ann, who shows Olive a kind of acceptance Olive both despises and secretly admires. The visit is cathartic for Olive, who struggles to reestablish a relationship with her son. Christopher opens up to Olive for the first time. “I’m not going to be ruled by my fear of you, Mom,” he says to an incredulous Olive, who in turn breaks down and returns home.

I have to admit that during the final story in this book, I fell in love with both Olive Kitteridge and Elizabeth Strout. As I read “River”, I silently pleaded with Olive: *please Olive, please don’t run*. Without ruining the ending, let me just say that I was

stunned, and eternally grateful to Ms. Strout for what happened next. The final lines of the story (and book) come from Olive herself: “Her eyes were closed, and throughout her tired self swept waves of gratitude – and regret. She pictured the sunny room, the sun-washed wall, the bayberry outside. It baffled her, the world. She did not want to leave it yet.”

Its clear Ms. Strout doesn't cater to the critics or to the pressures of the book-reading public in her writing. In a 1998 interview with Bookreporter.com, Elizabeth Strout is asked about writing short stories vs. novels. She responds: “I think now that a story is a more ‘difficult’ form in many ways, but characters and the style of telling the story dictate, for me, what form something takes.” Critics may pontificate about whether this is legitimately a novel or a set of short-stories. What's important to me is not the label which describes the specific structure, but rather the effect the book has had on me. Belligerent, sad, overweight, and ultimately hopeful, Olive Kitteridge will live beyond the pages of this book, or the fantasies in the mind of Ms. Strout – she will forever be alive for me. I know she will help guide me in the choices I am faced with in my life, and I will call to her often for advice and guidance.

For those who call the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for fiction a “lightweight” winner, I have to say I couldn't disagree more. Elizabeth Strout, in Olive Kitteridge, has achieved more than merely the writing of a brilliant book with a unique structure, vivid characters, an exceptional setting and lyrical descriptions. She's created a real work of art – and as such, this book suffers from an enviable calamity: it defies label.