

# **Olive Kitteridge**

## **by Elizabeth Strout**

### About the Book

In a voice more powerful and compassionate than ever before, New York Times bestselling author Elizabeth Strout binds together thirteen rich, luminous narratives into a book with the heft of a novel, through the presence of one larger-than-life, unforgettable character: Olive Kitteridge.

At the edge of the continent, Crosby, Maine, may seem like nowhere, but seen through this brilliant writer's eyes, it's in essence the whole world, and the lives that are lived there are filled with all of the grand human drama—desire, despair, jealousy, hope, and love.

At times stern, at other times patient, at times perceptive, at other times in sad denial, Olive Kitteridge, a retired schoolteacher, deplors the changes in her little town 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 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.

### Praise for the Book

“Deeply human... Though loneliness and loss haunt these pages, Strout also supplies gentle humor and a nourishing dose of hope.”

—*Booklist*

“Strout's sensitive insights and luminous prose affirm life's pleasures... A perfectly balanced portrait of the human condition, encompassing plenty of anger, cruelty and loss without ever losing sight of the equally powerful presences of tenderness, shared pursuits and lifelong loyalty.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Rarely does a story collection pack such a gusty emotional punch.

—*Entertainment Weekly*

*Courtesy of Random House*

## About the Author

Title: Elizabeth Strout

American Novelist ( 1956 - )

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### Personal Information:

Born January 6, 1956, in Portland, ME; daughter of Richard (a science professor) and Beverly (a teacher) Strout; married Martin Feinman, August 14, 1982; children: Zarina. Education: Bates College, Lewiston, ME, B.A., 1977; Syracuse University, J.D., 1982. Avocational Interests: Rollerblading. Memberships: National Writers Union, Authors Guild. Addresses: Home: New York, NY. Office: Bard College, P.O. Box 5000, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504- 5000. Agent: Lisa Bankoff, International Creative Management, 40 West 57th St., New York, NY 10019.

### Career:

Writer and educator. English and literature teacher, Manhattan College and the New School, New York, NY, and Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. Former pub worker, house cleaner, secretary, cocktail waitress, artist's model, and Elderly Abuse project worker; former staff attorney, Legal Services, Syracuse, NY.

### Awards:

Heartland Award, *Chicago Tribune*, 1999; *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for First Fiction, 1999, for *Amy and Isabelle*.

### Works:

#### Writings:

#### Novels

- *Amy and Isabelle*, Random House (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Abide with Me*, Random House (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Olive Kitteridge*, Random House (New York, NY), 2008.

Also author of screenplay for television movie *Amy and Isabelle*, based on the author's novel; fiction has appeared in numerous periodicals, including the *New Yorker*.

#### Media Adaptations:

*Amy and Isabelle* has been made into an audiobook, Chivers Audiobooks, 2000.

#### Sidelights

In her first novel, *Amy and Isabelle*, Elizabeth Strout tells the story of Amy Goodrow, a high school student in the 1970s who has a strained relationship with her mother Isabelle since being found in a compromising situation with her math teacher. For her part, Isabelle also has secrets from her past concerning her husband and family. In the meantime, Isabelle seeks a quiet life in contrast to the burgeoning women's movement of the day and hopes to one day fall in love with a "good" man. Carol Anshaw, writing in the *Women's Review of Books*, noted: "The novel, like *Isabelle*, is old-fashioned in form, told by an omniscient narrator privileged not only to every character's innermost thoughts and hidden pasts, but also to futures they can't yet see." Anshaw went on to write that "the novel surprises with the familiar." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor called the story "beautifully nuanced."

*Abide with Me* takes place in the 1950s and focuses on a recently widowed minister, Tyler Caskey, who struggles with life and his faith as he deals with his parishioners' numerous problems, foibles, and hidden vices. To complicate matters, Tyler, who is also coping with a troubled daughter, becomes the object of town gossip concerning an affair he may be having with his housekeeper. "Strout's deadpan, melancholy prose powerfully conveys Tyler's sense of internal confinement," wrote a *Publishers Weekly* contributor. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor called the novel "a melancholy tale of faith lost and found."

Strout's third novel, *Olive Kitteridge*, is sometimes described as "a novel in stories" because the various components can stand alone or function as part of a larger whole. While most of the stories are not about the title character, a somewhat abrasive, aging former math teacher living in a coastal town in Maine, she appears (or is at least mentioned) in each of them. Strout chose the decentralized approach in order to demonstrate the many facets of Olive's character. "I deliberately did that," she told interviewer Robert Birnbaum on the *Morning News* Web site, "because I think that Olive is such a complicated character that in order to see it from different points of view--the way I chose to construct the book--I did that to give people a break from the full-front effect of her, and also because it helps me, and I think it helps the reader, understand that we're all more complicated than we appear. There are different aspects of Olive, and these different ways to look at her, I think, help to bring that out." She "is a complicated person," agreed Susan Whitney, writing in the *Deseret News*. "She's impatient and too sharp-tongued, too often angry. But she is also deeply compassionate."

Critics have agreed that Strout sensitively evokes the sense of small-town life throughout *Olive Kitteridge*. "The tales recounted in *Olive Kitteridge* "could be considered a twenty-first-century version of 'Our Town' with its moving portraits of regular folks in a fictional small town on the coast of Maine," wrote John Marshall in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. "The difference is: These are not the timeless archetypal characters seen in Thornton Wilder's fictional Grover's Corners, N.H. Stout's residents of her fictional Crosby, Maine, are fully realized characters in this time and place over recent turbulent decades." "The curse of small towns is that everybody knows everybody else. The local townspeople who appear in stories of 'Olive Kitteridge' are not immune from town gossip and the nosy neighbors," opined Nicole Chvatal, writing for the *Oregonian*. "The characters are often sad, broken, scared and insecure--none more so than Olive." In Strout's fictional New England town, "lives intersect frequently, and secrets are few and far between--spouses have affairs, children unhappily run off to the big city, old men develop dementia--and everybody knows about it," wrote Deirdre Fulton in the *Portland Phoenix*. "Their stories, told in a chronology that freely skips and backtracks, read like a cross between a community newspaper's gossip-page archives and a collection of padlocked diaries." "Like Sherwood Anderson's 'Winesburg, Ohio,' this novel in stories captivates us because the characters are so human, the place so vivid," declared Ann Cummins in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "Funny, wicked and remorseful, Mrs. Kitteridge is a compelling life force, a red-blooded original. When she's not onstage, we look forward to her return. The book is a page-turner because of her."

#### Further Readings About the Author:

##### Periodicals

- *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1, 2008, review of *Olive Kitteridge*.
- *Booklist*, November 15, 1999, Bonnie Smothers and Brad Hooper, review of *Amy and Isabelle*, p. 602; January 1, 2008, Mary Ellen Quinn, review of *Olive Kitteridge*, p. 46.
- *Boston Globe*, May 25, 2008, Jessica Treadway, "Emotions Are Raw and Real in *Olive Kitteridge*."
- *Christian Science Monitor*, May 16, 2008, Yvonne Zipp, "A Prickly Protagonist with a Tender Heart."
- *Down East*, May, 2008, Patricia O'Donnell, "Awful Things Happening: Two Story Collections Examine Maine's Dark Side."
- *Entertainment Weekly*, March 28, 2008, "Heart Murmurs," p. 70.
- *Harvard Crimson* (Cambridge, MA), October 3, 2008, Kerry A. Goodenow, "*Olive Kitteridge* Explores the Same Thing Over and Over Again."
- *Kirkus Reviews*, January 1, 2006, review of *Abide with Me*, p. 14; February 1, 2008, review of *Olive Kitteridge*.
- *Library Journal*, October 1, 2005, Susanne Wells, review of *Abide with Me*, p. 69; February 1, 2008, Beth E. Andersen, review of *Olive Kitteridge*, p. 65.
- *MBR Bookwatch*, March 1, 2008, Audrey Larson, review of *Olive Kitteridge*.
- *New Yorker*, May 5, 2008, review of *Olive Kitteridge*, p. 77.
- *New York Times Book Review*, April 20, 2008, "The Locals," p. 13.

- *Oregonian* (Portland, OR), April 4, 2008, Nicole Chvatal, review of *Olive Kitteridge*.
- *Publishers Weekly*, October 17, 2005, review of *Abide with Me*, p. 37; December 10, 2007, review of *Olive Kitteridge*, p. 31; February 4, 2008, "Maine Idea," p. 32.
- *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, CO), April 24, 2008, Bianca D'Angelo, review of *Olive Kitteridge*.
- *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 9, 2008, Ann Cummins, "Review: *Olive Kitteridge* Stories Come Alive."
- *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 11, 2008, John Marshall, "Short Stories Intertwine Town's Powerful Modern Characters in *Olive Kitteridge*."
- *Seattle Times*, April 11, 2008, Valerie Ryan, "Elizabeth Strout's New Novel Is about a Crusty New England Wife."
- *USA Today*, April 24, 2008, "*Olive Kitteridge*: Intertwined Lives, Stories," p. 7.
- *Washington Post Book World*, June 8, 2008, Molly Gloss, "Family Matters: A Retired Schoolteacher Lives a Life of Quiet Desperation," p. 5.
- *Women's Review of Books*, June, 1999, Carol Anshaw, review of *Amy and Isabelle*, p. 11.

#### Online

- *Bookreporter.com*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (November 18, 2008), Jana Siciliano, review of *Olive Kitteridge*.
- *Chelsea Forum*, <http://www.chelseaforum.com/> (November 18, 2008), author profile.
- *Mlive.com*, <http://www.mlive.com/> (November 18, 2008), Olive Mullet, "Small Town, Close Calls."
- *Morning News Online*, <http://www.themorningnews.org/> (November 18, 2008), Robert Birnbaum, "Birnbaum v. Elizabeth Strout."
- *Portland Phoenix Online*, <http://www.thephoenix.com/> (April 2, 2008), Deirdre Fulton, "When I'm Sixty-four," review of *Olive Kitteridge*.\*

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## Author Interview

Random House Reader's Circle sat down with Olive Kitteridge and Elizabeth Strout in a doughnut shop in Olive's hometown of Crosby, Maine.

**Random House Reader's Circle:** Thank you both for meeting with us. This is such a treat.

**Olive Kitteridge:** Well, it's strange, I'll say that.

**Elizabeth Strout:** It's lovely to be here, thank you.

**RHRC:** Ms. Strout, our first question is for you. Which characters were the easiest for you to write?

**ES:** The easiest character to write about was Olive herself. She is so vibrant, so powerful in her desires and opinions, she came to me fully formed and with little trouble. Whenever she walked through a door, took a ride in her car, or walked along the river, I felt lucky to follow her.

Harmon, the hardware store owner, was also easily available to me, though in a very different way. His quiet sadness helped me see him, made me feel for his situation. Louise Larkin came to me clearly, as did Jack Kennison, and Angela O'Meara. And the steadfast Henry, of course.

**OK:** Wait, you were *following* me? I knew it. I don't know why you felt so compelled to write about me. There are far more interesting people in Crosby to talk about.

**ES:** I did talk about them, Olive. But the truth is, you are the most fascinating to me. You are ferocious and complicated and kindly and sometimes cruel. In essence, you are a little bit of each of us.

**RHRC:** That is gorgeously said, Ms. Strout. Is there something about Olive's complexities that made you decide to write about her through a collection of related short stories, as opposed to a novel? What was it about this format that worked best for you?

**ES:** I chose to use this form primarily because I envisioned the power of Olive's character as best told in an episodic manner. I thought the reader might need a little break from her at times, as well.

**OK:** A *break* from me?

**ES:** Well, Olive, you are a force to contend with. Besides, I also love point of view, and I thought it would be interesting for the reader to see you from different sets of eyes in the community. You are Olive, but you are also a member of the town, and therefore your role, in its many permutations, could be revealed by telling the story of you in this way.

**OK:** Well, speaking of the community: Were the single folks in Crosby just plain boring to you, or do you enjoy telling the secrets of old couples who've been married so long that no one even thinks they have secrets anymore?

**ES:** Olive, I'm not sure it's fair to say that the single folks of Crosby were boring to me. And I also think about half the population of this country is married. Therefore, to write about this town would necessarily entail writing about married couples. There are also a number of stories in this book that do not include married people. Angie O'Meara was single all of her life, and she was hardly boring to me. Nor was the tortured Kevin Coulson. And Rebecca is young and single, and her story was compelling to me. And Julie, who runs away—it looks like she may be single for a while, depending on what Bruce decides to do.

Do I enjoy telling the secrets of old married couples? I adore telling the secrets of old married couples. A marriage is always a source of great drama for a fiction writer. It is in our most intimate relationships that we are truly revealed, and this is why, perhaps, I chose to write about a variety of married relationships. It was not a conscious decision. And besides, who doesn't like learning a good secret or two?

**RHRC:** We sure do. In fact, we're just dying to know—Mrs. Kitteridge, Ms. Strout—is there a reason doughnuts are so prominently featured in these stories?

**OK:** That's the truth. You seem to make note of every one I have—or that Bonnie craves, for that matter!

**ES:** I think Olive was the one who suggested meeting in this doughnut shop where we are now. And why not? Look around. Olive comes from a time and place where doughnut shops abound. She loves the comfort of food, and doughnuts are a source of comfort to her, as they are for many people. She's not entirely careless about her physical well being, but the doughnuts represent a certain heedlessness in her desire to appease her appetites.

**OK:** So, do you have a predilection toward doughnuts, too?

**ES:** Oh, don't be defensive, Olive. I know exactly how pleasing a good doughnut can be.

**RHRC:** Don't we all?

**OK:** But before we get off the topic of secrets: What did Angie O'Meara tell you about her affairs? Who knew?

**ES:** Ah, you see, you like a good secret as much as the next person. Poor Angie, she did not have an easy time of it.

**OK:** Did you suspect that Angie was the one causing the bruises on her old mother in the nursing home?

**ES:** Well, that's up to the reader to decide. But Angie suffered in that affair with Malcolm Moody for years. She didn't think she deserved much better until the very end of the story when—whether or not anyone knows—she decides her dignity can still be salvaged by moving away from the role of the “other woman.”

**OK:** Has Suzanne been in touch with you at all? I wonder what that no-good woman is up to these days.

**ES:** I have no idea what Suzanne is up to, but hopefully she is saving lives by encouraging people to have their colonoscopies. By the way— I think you may be due.

**RHRC:** Mrs. Kitteridge, we'll change the topic, as you seem a bit uncomfortable. Ms. Strout, may we ask where you got the information about Henry and—

**OK:** Yes, just wait a minute here. What were you insinuating about Henry and Denise Thibodeau?

**ES:** I was not insinuating anything, Olive, and you know that. Come now, you're an intelligent woman, and you don't flinch from the truth. You surely know that in the course of a long marriage it is not unusual for a husband or a wife to develop a crush on someone else, as you yourself did. If Henry needed to feel important in a way that you could not (at that time in your lives) make him feel, he is only human; that he would be drawn to someone who needed him is not unreasonable. He did not act on this, and you did not act on your own attraction to another. For all your problems, you and Henry were very good friends, and you loved each other as best you could.

**RHRC:** Yes, Mrs. Kitteridge, we are all very sorry for your loss. Mr. Kitteridge was an amazing man. Did you notice any changes in yourself after Henry's death?

**OK:** When your husband of many, many years dies, you see nothing for a long while. There is anguish and terror. And then you may see yourself in a book.

**ES:** What did you notice about yourself, seeing your life in writing this way?

**OK:** That I couldn't control everything. I didn't think I could, of course. But I still saw that—that things happen that you can't control. That you can go on. Amazing, really.

**RHRC:** Amazing indeed.

**OK:** You know what else is amazing? This book. It may be the strangest thing that ever happened to me, reading this book, but I thought it was pretty damn good. Still, I never thought to compare the two Kevins— you know, Bonnie’s boy and the Coulson kid. Did you write them so similarly on purpose?

**ES:** Well, I guess I don’t see them as similar. Kevin Coulson was a very depressed young man with a particular and extremely difficult family history. Bonnie’s son, Kevin, came from a family that functioned far better, and he had an easygoing relationship with both his parents. If he was made a bit nervous by his young wife and her strict vegetarian beliefs, well—that is hardly a large problem. Certainly nothing as large as what Kevin Coulson faced.

**OK:** Imagine not eating carrot soup because the base is made from chicken stock. I hate that kind of foolishness.

**RHRC:** Mrs. Kitteridge, our next question is for you. Which of your students do you remember the best?

**OK:** Oh, I had a young girl years ago. Tense as a witch. Beautiful girl. She’d often have tears in her eyes. She’d come speak to me after school, and just stand there with tears in her big pretty eyes. She told me, eventually, what was going on. But I’m not going to tell you.

**ES:** Which of your students reminded you most of yourself?

**OK:** The ones who were mad. I don’t mean crazy-mad. I mean angry-mad. The ones who had some spit and vinegar to them.

**RHRC:** Interesting. Ms. Strout, do you see any of yourself in Olive? In Henry? In Christopher?

**ES:** I actually see myself in all my characters. In order to imagine what it feels like to be another person I have to use my own experiences and responses to the world. I have to pay attention to what I have felt and observed, then push these responses to an extreme while keeping the story within the realm of being psychologically and emotionally true. Many times after writing a story or a novel, I will suddenly think, oh, I’m feeling what (for example) Olive would feel. But in fact, the process has worked the other way around.

**RHRC:** What do you think is the best thing about Olive? Do you think she’s aware of how people in town perceive her—especially before Henry’s illness?

**ES:** I think Olive is partially aware of how people in town perceive her. But there are different perceptions of her, remember. To some, she is insightful and likeable. To others she is bossy and contentious. I think to some extent she believes that she doesn't care what people think of her, but I also think that she does care. She is easily wounded, as when her first daughter-in-law insults her new dress. And she is fiercely proud of her New England ancestry. I think she may not understand that her relationship to her son is as possessive as it originally is. But the best thing about Olive is her forthrightness, her ability to eventually see more and more of herself. While she is, like most of us, blind to aspects of herself, she does not shy away from things she begins to perceive about herself; she is willing to strive after the truth. This makes her commendable, I think.

**OK:** Yuh. That's ducky. Duck soup.

**RHRC:** What do you hope your readers get out of reading Olive's story—or stories, as they are?

**ES:** I would hope that my readers feel a sense of awe at the quality of human endurance, at the endurance of love in the face of a variety of difficulties; that the quotidian life is not always easy, and is something worthy of respect. I would also hope that readers receive a larger understanding, or a different understanding, of what it means to be human, than they might have had before. We suffer from being quick to judge, quick to make excuses for ourselves and others, and I would like the reader to feel that we are all, more or less, in a similar state as we love and disappoint one another, and that we try, most of us, as best we can, and that to fail and succeed is what we do.

**RHRC:** Thank you both so much for your time. This was really—

**ES:** Before you go, Olive, may I ask if you think Patty Howe was trying to kill herself? Because there might be some confusion about that.

**OK:** Why in the world would Patty Howe be trying to kill herself? She has a lovely husband and is looking forward to a family, and she was picking him flowers. She also has a nice, smart mother, and if she was careless in getting too close to the edge of that drop-off, well, accidents happen frequently on these jagged coastline rocks. Kill herself? You're crazy.

**ES:** But don't you think there are maybe a lot of suicidal thoughts— or suicide attempts—for a small town like Crosby? Why do you think that is?

**OK:** You may be the writer, Elizabeth, but I think it's a wacky question, and I'll tell you something else—it's none of your damn business. Goodbye, people. I have a garden to weed.

*Courtesy of Random House*

## Discussion Questions

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 flee 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?

*Courtesy of Random House*