

# HBO's *Olive Kitteridge*: Why are these people so unhappy?

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*Directed by Lisa Cholodenko; written by Jane Anderson, based on the novel by Elizabeth Strout*

From premium cable television network HBO, four-part miniseries *Olive Kitteridge* treats life in a small community on the coast of Maine.

Adapted from Elizabeth Strout's 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning book of the same title, the series was directed by Lisa Cholodenko (*Laurel Canyon, The Kids Are All Right*) and stars Frances McDormand, who optioned Strout's novel and brought the project to HBO.

In the prologue, we see an older Olive in the woods preparing to commit suicide. The drama then returns a quarter of a century to look at the cramped Kitteridge household and the lives of others in the New England town. Olive is a frustrated seventh grade teacher and the wife of an amiable pharmacist, Henry (Richard Jenkins). Harsh in her judgments of people, she is "proudly" prone to depression ("Happy to have it; comes with being smart").

Olive is rock-solidly spiteful and hard-wired to eschew human empathy. (In an interview, McDormand said her husband, writer-director Joel Coen, termed Olive an "emotional Dirty Harry.") When chiding Rachel (Rosemarie DeWitt), a neighbor, for her suicide attempt, Olive matter-of-factly observes that "My boy can't stand me either, [but we] can't oblige them by killing ourselves." She also runs down everyone in Henry's life. When he hires a new assistant, Denise (Zoe Kazan), Olive deprecatingly dubs her "the mouse."

Nonetheless, the long-suffering Henry, despite his fantasies about Denise, loves his wife, although he occasionally registers a complaint: "Allow me one single act of kindness without making me feel like a sap." Olive meanwhile has dreams of running away with a teaching colleague, Jim O'Casey (Peter Mullan),

a gruff, hard-drinking spouter of John Berryman's poetry. (O'Casey scrawls "Save us from shot guns & fathers' suicides," a line from a well-known Berryman poem, on a napkin in a bar just prior to his demise).

Later, on the day her son Chris (John Gallagher Jr.) gets married, Olive vindictively—and childishly—steals a piece of jewelry and destroys an item of clothing belonging to her new daughter-in-law, after she overhears the bride's snide remarks about her handmade dress. Olive does, however, thwart the plans of Rachel's son—now a Columbia University medical school student in psychiatry—to kill himself.

At one point, Henry demands of Olive, "Where is your compassion?" (a good question!) and, at another, her son Chris explodes: "You say these horrible things to me that make me want to crawl in a hole and die." Olive herself remarks: "I'm waiting for the dog to die so I have a reason to shoot myself." Eventually, when tragedy strikes her immediate family, Olive softens (in an earlier scene when Chris is an infant, she also shows a tender side). Jack Kennison (Bill Murray), a lonely widower, becomes the beneficiary of her late-in-life conversion.

One can understand why the book and the miniseries attracted accomplished and appealing performers like McDormand, Jenkins, Mullan and DeWitt in the first place and even why Cholodenko's work garnered generally positive reviews. Amidst the avalanche of comic book and superhero movies, more astute and thoughtful actors must be on the constant lookout, along with at least a portion of the critics, for stories and scripts about recognizable people and places. In an overall climate of cinematic bombast, *Olive Kitteridge* does make a connection to real life.

Difficulties arise, however, as in so many contemporary works, from the filmmakers'

problematic and limited attitude toward the characters and their predicaments, and beyond that, to the larger social world.

In the case of *Olive Kitteridge*, the filmmakers ask us to accept a great deal, and in the process all sorts of unstated assumptions may slip through unnoticed. The series never addresses some of the most obvious questions: why is Olive so unhappy and mean-spirited? Moreover, why are so many people in a relatively comfortable, picturesque town contemplating, or succeeding in, offing themselves?

The narrative inclines toward taking the heroine's emotional state as a given and never exploring it. Or, rather perhaps, never *feeling the need* to explore it, because one of the unstated, quasi-feminist assumptions, which the “knowing” part of the audience is expected to grasp intuitively, is that *all* sharp-eyed and independent middle class women are suppressed and have a hard time finding their way in the world. There is something of the self-pitying spirit of Jane Campion's *The Piano* here.

(In this regard, *Olive Kitteridge* strikes a note that was also present in Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right*, which as the WSWS review noted, “had the opportunity to go in a different direction, to open up to the world” and instead ended up as “belligerent protection of the middle class from all kinds of threatening realities.”

The only explanation offered for Olive's inner agitation is that her father “blew his head off” (her words) when she was 13. The real trajectory of her life is never worked through. Her childhood, her work and relations at work, the status of her family in the town, the times she's lived through, and so forth are hardly touched upon. Instead of developing a detailed, comprehensive picture, the filmmakers rely on a shortcut—an emotional vigilantism—that conceals more than it reveals. In its own peculiar way, this is the equivalent of special effects and technological fireworks in “action” films. Instead of waiting for the bombs to go off, here one anticipates Olive's *bon mot* s

The characters' pain in *Olive Kitteridge* is not derived from their life situation, by and large, but from their individual psychologies and relatively arbitrary traumas. Even in certain recent American films, such as *Nebraska* and *Frozen River*, the hurt in people's lives

flows from their social circumstances. Instead, Cholodenko's miniseries tends to depict human suffering as daytime talk shows see it, as inexplicable and almost akin to an act of nature.

Herein lies the connection between the complacency of the generally well-off people who made *Olive Kitteridge* and the timeless, asocial character of the piece. There is no hint of the fact that Maine is the poorest state in New England and a state where in a number of rural areas more than one in three people live in poverty. The filmmakers are not especially angry at social conditions, and their self-satisfaction seeps into the series in various ways.

A lack of money, of course, is not the only source of unhappiness in the present world. The mini-series also sidesteps the opportunity to explore the psychic consequences of a stultifying and stagnant environment, economically deprived or not.

All in all, while *Olive Kitteridge* is sincerely done, it is not a drama whose aim is to look deeply at the social facts and processes that might generate emotional dysfunction. It would have been legitimate and considerably more intriguing to probe, for example, why Mullan's character needs “a reason to wake up in the morning.”



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