War and poverty in Elizabeth Strout's novel, *Oh William!*

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Oh William! by Elizabeth Strout, New York, Random House, 2021, 240 pp.

In *Oh William!* Lucy Barton, a successful writer living in Manhattan, ventures into the family past of her ex-husband William, a scientist at New York University. The two are in their sixties and early seventies and the novel takes place in recent times. Neither has resolved the issues bound up with his or her past, although they have both tried. Unexpected and powerful feelings surface in what they discover about it in this book.

History, poverty and the difficulty of human relationships are baked into the lives of the characters. Lucy Barton is a figure who reckons with all of this and in a compassionate and thoughtful way that makes her an important addition—and an exception—in contemporary American fiction.

Strout (born 1956 in Portland, Maine) has published seven novels. Her first, *Amy and Isabelle* (1998), is about the difficult relationship between a mother and her teenage daughter in a small mill town in Maine. The novel became a best-seller and was made into a television film starring Elizabeth Shue (2001), directed by Lloyd Kramer.

Strout won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2009 for her novel about a grade-school teacher, her family and her community, *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), also a commercial success with over a million copies sold. The book was made into an HBO miniseries in 2014 directed by Lisa Cholodenko and starring Frances McDormand in the title role. The series won several Emmy awards.

While the *Olive Kitteridge* miniseries departs from the novel in several important ways, one issue raised in the *World Socialist Web Site* review could also apply to Strout's book: "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."

Olive Kitteridge is about small-town life in contemporary US—a subject that Strout has returned to in other novels—and tends to take on the limited scope of that life in some of its own judgments. Strout is always generous and compassionate to her characters, but her work has lacked a broadly socially critical viewpoint. It is somewhat passive in relation to contemporary life, a widespread problem.

Oh, William! follows *My Name is Lucy Barton* (2016), which Lucy narrates, about the time her mother sat by her bedside in a New York hospital in the 1980s, and *Anything is Possible* (2017), a novel made up of interrelated stories (like *Olive Kitteridge* and its 2019 sequel *Olive, Again*). These books deal, in one way or another, with the fictional town of Agawam, Illinois, and the family and neighbors of Lucy Barton, as well as Lucy's later life in New York City. A fourth novel in the series, *Lucy by the Sea*, is slated to be published this month.

Readers of the Agawam series will already know that Lucy comes from extreme poverty, with episodes of parental abuse, accumulating resentment and a longing for change. The themes of war and war crimes appear in these two books as well.

Oh William! begins when William's third wife leaves him. Lucy's second husband, a cellist, has died recently, and so the two come together for mutual support. Lucy and William have a pair of daughters together, who have finished college and are beginning lives of their own. Both William, who has inherited money, and Lucy, a successful writer, live in Lower Manhattan comfortably.

Although they do not strike the reader as especially callous, no one pays any attention to the worsening economic conditions in New York City. Instead, there are the usual markers of this social layer's life: comfortable apartments, striking furniture, generally cultured friends. Manhattan feels as circumscribed, in its way, as Olive Kitteridge's Crosby, Maine.

Nevertheless, the themes of poverty and war appear in *Oh William!* as they do in the previous novels in the series, and in a new, perhaps even more powerful, manner.

Early in the novel, William tells Lucy that he has "awful terrors in the middle of the night." Some of these concern his mother, Catherine, who had died many years earlier. But,

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as Lucy relates, “William’s worst terror, because his father [a German soldier] had been fighting on the side of the Nazis … he would see very clearly the concentration camp … and he would see the rooms where people were gassed, and then he would have to get up and move into the living room and put the light on and sit on the couch and look out the window at the river.”

As Lucy helps her former husband cope with the loss of his marriage, his mother’s past comes to the fore. Catherine, whom Lucy knew as a comfortable and proper realtor in a wealthy Massachusetts suburb, had run away with a German POW, William’s father, who worked on her husband’s farm once the war was over.

After Lucy gives William a subscription to an on-line genealogy tool as a birthday present, he discovers that he has a half-sister from his mother’s first marriage. Lucy and William then set off to Maine to find her. Notably, the Maine that they see is not Olive Kitteridge’s middle class Crosby but a town called Houlton, where “there were lots of almost-falling-down houses, and lots of stars on the sides of these houses for veterans, gold stars for the ones who were dead. We passed by signs that said Pray for America.”

The poverty of Houlton has a powerful effect on Lucy:

“As I rode now next to William I almost wanted to say, with a sweep of my hand: These are my people. But they were not. I have never had a feeling of belonging to any group of people. Yet here I was in rural Maine and what had just come to me was an understanding … for a few moments I felt this: that I understood where I was. And even, also, that I loved the people we did not see who inhabited the few houses and who had their trucks in the front of these houses.”

The central scene of the novel occurs when Lucy goes to meet William’s half-sister, Lois, because William is unable to get out of the car. Lois, as one might imagine, is cold at first. But she is also level-headed and becomes unabashed about her feelings as the conversation progresses. Lucy is astonished to find that the woman has all the books she (Lucy) has written on her shelf and knows about Catherine, her biological mother, from Lucy’s memoir.

Lois paints Catherine as an opportunist who married Lois’s father to escape poverty and abuse, just the sort of escape that Lucy has made. Lois tells her, “‘She came from less than nothing. She came from trash.’”

Then Lois tells Lucy, much to her surprise, that many years ago Catherine came to find her. In a life without many regrets, she says that she regretted being unkind to her biological mother.

Lois’s description of her meeting with Catherine is characteristic of concerns that have come up in Strout’s fiction before, especially the distance between people and their selfishness: “Do you know what bothered me the most about her visit?” Lois asks. “‘It was the fact that she only talked about herself. Oh, she asked a few questions about me … but she went on and on about’—Here Lois shook her head slightly. ‘Herself. Herself is what she talked about and how hard this had been on her.’”

The familiarity and connection that Lucy feels with this working class community she hardly knows, as well as the guarded generosity of Lois is contrasted to the selfishness of Catherine, a refugee (or defector?) into the upper middle class who was accustomed to introduce Lucy with the phrase, “she comes from nothing.”

William, back in the car, is unable to process any of this. As they leave, they drive past, on Lois’s suggestion, the house where Catherine had grown up, the most ramshackle of all the houses in the area. Lucy remarks, “I had grown up in a very small house, and this one was much smaller. It was one story and looked as though it had two rooms.”

Much of *Oh William!* is arguably about love, and Lucy certainly projects empathy and giving. But it is all conditioned by a terrible history and by poverty. The magnitude of the Second World War is never entirely absent: The Holocaust and other war crimes side appear in the Agawam series as well as the depredations of poverty. In *Oh, William!* these elements appear again, suddenly and irrevocably, both to the characters and the readers.

The author does not fully flesh them out, but perhaps they feel more inevitable, even persistent, because of that. History here manifests itself through family relationships, much as in the work of Canadian writer Alice Munro, whose efforts Strout’s resemble.

The fact that war and poverty do appear marks a certain advance over *Olive Kitteridge*—the recent books are deeper and feel more attuned to what makes people what they are. The final novel in the Agawam series, *Lucy by the Sea*, will appear later this month. The book deals with an enormously compelling topic, since most of it takes place during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. How will Strout handle that and these two characters (who move back in together)? It will be interesting to find out.

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