

# DURHAM COUNTY LIBRARY

## Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

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*Olive Kitteridge*  
by  
Elizabeth Strout  
(New York: Random House Trade Paperback, 2008)

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### **Author:**

Elizabeth Strout was born on January 6, 1956, and has lived most of her life in Maine. She feels deeply connected to Maine through both the land and the culture, as her family has lived there for ten generations. She attended Bates College and later received a law degree and a certificate of gerontology from Syracuse University. Her first novel, *Amy and Isabelle*, explores the complicated relationship between a mother and daughter; she worked on it for almost seven years. It was shortlisted for the 2000 Orange Prize and nominated for that year's PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. She published *Abide with Me*, also to favorable reviews, in 2006. *Olive Kitteridge* received the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Strout now teaches at the low-residency MFA program at Queens College in Charlotte, North Carolina.

### **Summary:**

At the edge of the continent, in the small town of Crosby, Maine, lives *Olive Kitteridge*, a retired schoolteacher who deplors the changes in her town and in the world at large but doesn't always recognize the changes in those around her.

### **Questions:**

1. How does loneliness initially appear in *Olive Kitteridge*?
2. What does Jim O'Casey mean to Olive?
3. How is Jim O'Casey important to Olive and Henry's marriage?
4. What is Olive's relationship with her son like as he is growing up?
5. Why does Christopher move away, and how do Olive and Henry react?
6. What is the significance of schadenfreude in *Olive Kitteridge*?
7. What does Olive's visit to New York illustrate about her character?
8. What does Olive's relationship with Jack Kennison reveal about *Olive Kitteridge*'s theme of loneliness and love?

## Further Reading:

*Climbing the God Tree: A Novel in Stories.* Jaimee Wriston Colbert (1998)

Twenty-four interconnected short stories create this atmospheric portrait of an isolated Maine town and its residents, uniquely connected by their relationship with the federal prison that is located in their town and is a foundation of their community.

*Cranberry Queen.* Kathleen DeMarco (2001)

A woman flees her job and life in New York after her parents and brother are suddenly killed in a car accident, and finds herself adopted into a rural New Jersey town and participating in their cranberry harvest festival.

*Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café.* Fannie Flagg (1987)

An aged woman at a nursing home recounts her life and the stories of her friends struggling in small-town Alabama, in this gentler portrait of a woman's life and decline than *Olive Kitteridge*.

*Empress of the Splendid Season.* Oscar Hijuelos (1999)

A portrait of a Cuban woman and her struggle to support her family's life in New York. Hijuelos is a Pulitzer Prize winner and one of Strout's favorite writers.

*The Progress of Love.* Alice Munro (1986)

Eleven short stories by another of Strout's favorite authors capture people who are affected by loss, disappointment, and the complexities of love and human relationships.

*Preacher's Lake.* Lisa Vice (1998)

A diverse set of characters, all permanent or temporary residents of the small town of Preacher's Lake, Maine, see their lives intertwine through circumstance and fate as they work through their difficulties and reach out to each other for love and support.

*The Easter Parade.* Richard Yates (1976)

A pair of sisters experience their parents' divorce and its consequences. They each deal with the trauma in different ways, and eventually lead very different lives in which they are confronted by disappointment and the results of their sordid family history.

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*This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Kaitlyn Moore, a graduate of Guilford College, a teacher of English as a second language, and an itinerant expert on South East Asian cuisine.*