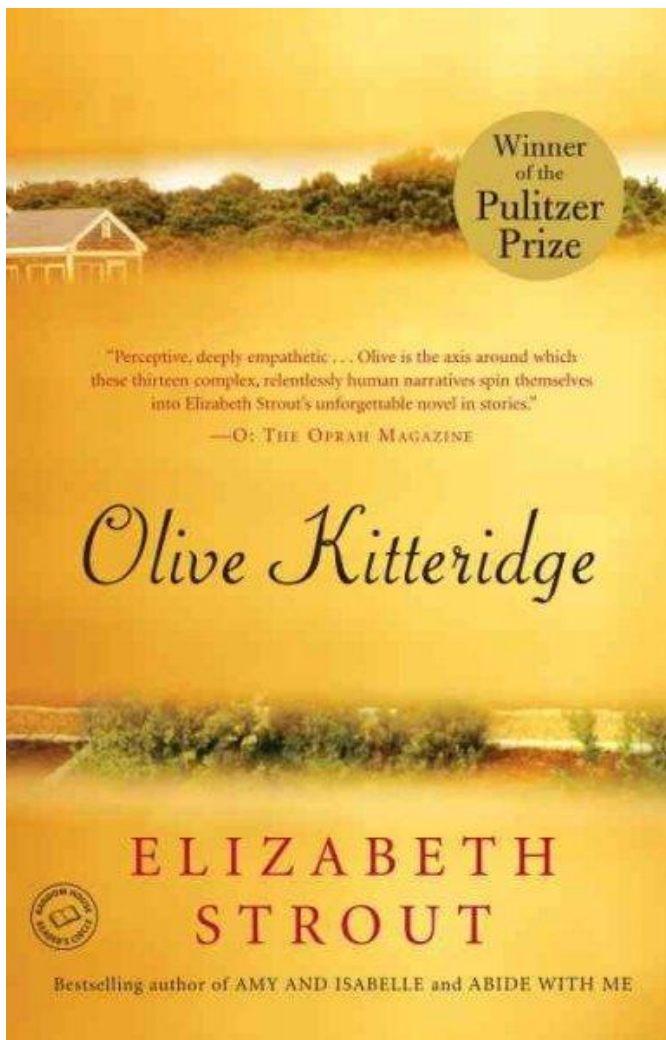


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1372329>

About the Book



At times stern, at other times patient, at times perceptive, at other times in sad denial, Olive Kitteridge, a retired schoolteacher, deplores the changes in her little town of Crosby, Maine, 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 her husband, 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.

About the Author



Elizabeth Strout is the author of *Abide with Me*, a national bestseller and Book Sense pick, and *Amy and Isabelle*, which won the *Los Angeles Times* Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction and the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize. She has also been a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize in England. Her short stories have been published in a number of magazines, including *The New Yorker* and *O: The Oprah Magazine*. She is on the faculty of the MFA program at Queens University in Charlotte, North Carolina, and lives in New York City.

Awards

Olive Kitteridge won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2009 (<http://pulitzer.org>), and was a finalist for the 2008 National Book Critics Circle Award (<http://www.nationalbook.org/>).

Reviews

Booklist *Starred Review*

Hell. We're always alone. Born alone. Die alone, says Olive Kitteridge, redoubtable seventh-grade math teacher in Crosby, Maine. Anyone who gets in Olive's way had better watch out, for she crashes unapologetically through life like an emotional storm trooper. She forces her husband, Henry, the town pharmacist, into tactical retreat; and she drives her beloved son, Christopher, across the country and into therapy. But appalling though Olive can be, Strout manages to make her deeply human and even sympathetic, as are all of the characters in this novel in stories. Covering a period of 30-odd years, most of the stories (several of which were previously published in the *New Yorker* and other magazines) feature Olive as their focus, but in some she is bit player or even a footnote while other characters take center stage to sort through their own fears and insecurities. Though loneliness and loss haunt these pages, Strout also supplies gentle humor and a nourishing dose of hope. People are sustained by the rhythms of ordinary life and the natural wonders of coastal Maine, and even Olive is sometimes caught off guard by life's baffling beauty. Strout is also the author of the well-received *Amy and Isabelle* (1999) and *Abide with Me* (2006).

Library Journal

In her third novel, *New York Times* best-selling author Strout (*Abide with Me*) tracks Olive Kitteridge's adult life through 13 linked stories. Olive, a wife, mother, and retired teacher, lives in the small coastal town of Crosby, ME. A large, hulking woman with a relentlessly unpleasant personality, Olive intimidates generations of community members with her quick, cruel condemnations of those around her, including her gentle, optimistic, and devoted husband, Henry, and her son, Christopher, who, as an adult, flees the suffocating vortex of his mother's displeasure. Strout offers a fair amount of relief from Olive's mean cloud in her treatment of the lives of the other townsfolk. With the deft, piercing shorthand that is her short story, telling trademark, she takes readers below the surface of deceptive small-town ordinariness to expose the human condition in all its suffering and sadness. Even when Olive is kept in the background of some of the tales, her influence is apparent. Readers will have to decide for themselves whether it's worth the ride to the last few pages to witness Olive's slide into something resembling insight.

Kirkus Reviews

The abrasive, vulnerable title character sometimes stands center stage, sometimes plays a supporting role in these 13 sharply observed dramas of small-town life from Strout (*Abide with Me*, 2006, etc.). Olive Kitteridge certainly makes a formidable contrast with her gentle, quietly cheerful husband Henry from the moment we meet them both in "Pharmacy," which introduces us to several other denizens of Crosby, Maine. Though she was a math teacher before she and Henry retired, she's not exactly patient with shy young people—or anyone else. Yet she brusquely comforts suicidal Kevin Coulson in "Incoming Tide" with the news that her father, like Kevin's mother, killed himself. And she does her best to help anorexic Nina in "Starving," though Olive knows that the troubled girl is not the only person in Crosby hungry for love. Children disappoint, spouses are unfaithful and almost everyone is lonely at least some of the time in Strout's rueful tales. The Kitteridges' son Christopher marries, moves to California and divorces, but he doesn't come home to the house his parents built for him, causing deep resentments to fester around the borders of Olive's carefully tended garden. Tensions simmer in all the families here; even the genuinely loving couple in "Winter Concert" has a painful betrayal in its past. References to Iraq and 9/11 provide a somber context, but the real dangers here are personal: aging, the loss of love, the imminence of death. Nonetheless, Strout's sensitive insights and luminous prose affirm life's pleasures, as elderly, widowed Olive thinks, "It baffled her, the world. She did not want to leave it yet." 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.

Publishers Weekly

Thirteen linked tales from Strout (*Abide with Me*, etc.) present a heart-wrenching, penetrating portrait of ordinary coastal Mainers living lives of quiet grief intermingled with flashes of human connection. The opening "Pharmacy" focuses on terse, dry junior high-school teacher Olive Kitteridge and her gregarious pharmacist husband, Henry, both of whom have survived the loss of a psychologically damaged parent, and both of whom suffer painful attractions to co-workers. Their son, Christopher, takes center stage in "A Little Burst," which describes his wedding in humorous, somewhat disturbing detail, and in "Security," where Olive, in her 70s, visits Christopher and his family in New York. Strout's fiction showcases her ability to reveal through familiar details—the mother-of-the-groom's wedding dress, a grandmother's disapproving observations of how her grandchildren are raised—the seeds of tragedy. Themes of suicide, depression, bad communication, aging and love, run through these stories, none more vivid or touching than "Incoming Tide," where Olive chats with former student Kevin Coulson as they watch waitress Patty Howe by the seashore, all three struggling with their own misgivings about life. Like this story, the collection is easy to read and impossible to forget. Its literary craft and emotional power will surprise readers unfamiliar with Strout.

Literary Criticisms

Pulitzer Winner Says Curiosity Drives Writing

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Elizabeth Strout blames her penchant for storytelling on her mother.

"She is really the reason that I always wanted to be a writer," Strout said. "It's not just that she told me to write things down in notebooks. It's not just that she gave me books to read. It's that she is a person who always said things you weren't supposed to say and therefore seemed to me the most interesting person in the world."

Strout was the opening speaker Thursday in the 2010 season of the MorseLife Literary Society's breakfast meeting held at The Colony. The society has grown by about 100 members from last year's inaugural season, said Mary Alice Pappas, chairwoman of the literary society.

Pappas described the society as "an intimate experience with these wonderful authors."

Joseph O'Neill, author of *Netherland*, will be the next speaker, Feb. 18.

"The common bond that brings us all together is good books and the love of the written word," Pappas said. "This year we wanted to focus particularly on books that are exceptional and outstanding, books that are deserving of venerable awards, such as the Pulitzer Prize or the PEN/Faulkner prize."

At 43, Strout's first book, *Amy and Isabelle*, was published in 1999. *Abide with Me* was published in 2006 and *Olive Kitteridge* in 2008, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Strout also has been a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize in England.

"I never decided to become a writer," she said. "I feel like I was born that way. I have no other memory of truly wanting to do anything else."

Strout was raised in Maine playing in the woods with toads and trees. She grew up with many elderly relatives who "talked amongst themselves in a dry kind of way." Strout remembers them talking about a neighbor who left her husband after 27 years of marriage--that she woke up one morning, decided she didn't want to be there anymore and left. When she asked why the woman left, Strout said she was told she "got sick of him, I guess."

"Being raised with that particular reticence of emotion, I was constantly in a state of curiosity," she said. "I always wanted to know what it feels like to be another person. That's part of the compulsion of storytelling for me."

Strout tried her hand at acting in college and discovered she had stage fright. She attended and graduated from law school, but realized she wasn't good at being a lawyer. The funding ran out on the job and Strout was fired, which was a huge relief, she said.

From there, Strout started getting short stories published, had a baby and landed a college teaching job, which she loved.

"For many years, I didn't tell people I was writing short stories and sending them out because I didn't like that look of pity that one gets," she said.

At a very young age, people are told what they should or shouldn't be feeling, Strout said. Strout remembers hearing a 3-year-old girl saying that she hated her birthday and had a terrible birthday, which was promptly followed by her mother telling her that she had a wonderful birthday and she loved it.

"We need literature where we can go to find those primitive feelings that we're not proud of, but most of us have them," she said.

"And if we can find them in a book where there is that sense that it's not such a bad thing, that's what I'm hoping to get at in my books."

Source: Dargan, Michele. "Pulitzer Winner Says Curiosity Drives Writing." *Palm Beach Daily News* (15 Jan. 2010): 1A. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 299. Detroit: Gale, 2011. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Maine Idea

"I have such an ambivalent relationship to Maine," Elizabeth Strout says, although her novels are all about life in her home state. She grew up in Harpswell, a small coastal town in Maine, and in Durham, N.H., but for the last 20 years, she's lived in New York City. She also admits to frustrations with the way outsiders sometimes view the people in Maine: "I remember the New Yorkers that came on vacation when I was a kid. One time, this couple took one look at me, decided I was 'cute'--I had on little overalls or something--and asked me to pose on the front steps for a picture. What did I know? Well, my mother was furious when she found out."

Strout has spent her life trying to reconcile her feelings, and trying to understand what Maine means to real "Mainers"--her own family arrived in 1603--and to those who know it as a place to spend the summer. "When people in New York say things like, 'I love Maine, Maine is so beautiful,' I want to say, 'You don't know anything about Maine.' It's a very rough life."

Mining her ambivalence, Strout has written two novels--the bestselling *Amy and Isabelle* and *Abide with Me*--both of which explore those rough lives, the claustrophobia of small towns and the encroachments of the world beyond Maine. Her new book, a novel-in-stories called *Olive Kitteridge*, due from Random House in April, actually leaves Maine, but only briefly.

Strout is 50 now, and her journey back home was full of detours. After graduating from Syracuse Law School in 1982, she moved to New York and married one of her classmates (they recently separated), with whom she had a daughter in 1983. She practiced law briefly and hated it, then dedicated herself to writing, teaching in the mornings as an adjunct at Manhattan Community College for the next 12 years while raising her daughter. The payoff came when she was almost 40 and her debut, *Amy and Isabelle*, was published, making Strout a sudden success.

That novel is about a mother and her teenage daughter living in the coastal town of Shirley Falls, Maine, where the daughter becomes infatuated with an inappropriately encouraging high school teacher. "I had to finally acknowledge that I needed to write about Maine," Strout says. "I was very anxious to move away from Maine. It was only well into my adult life that I began to learn just how 'from Maine' I was." It took something very New York to convince her: she took a stand-up comedy class, and found herself, she says, "making a lot of jokes about coming from Maine, and that's when I realized, 'Oh, it is my identity.'"

Her new book is about a quintessential Maine character, Olive Kitteridge, a retired high school math teacher in Crosby, Maine. Olive is stubborn, impatient, fierce, sometimes even cruel, but also fiercely loving, especially to her almost too-sweet husband, local pharmacist Henry, and her bitter son, Christopher, who leaves Maine at the behest of a pushy new wife and breaks Olive's heart. The 13 linked stories that make up Olive Kitteridge trace several decades in the lives of its titular character and the other residents of the town.

Many of the stories place Olive center-stage: as Henry tries to understand his feelings for his young assistant at his pharmacy; as Olive and Henry suffer through their son's ill-fated wedding; as Olive visits a vegetative, post-stroke Henry in a nursing home; as Christopher stumbles through another marriage in a large and--at least to Olive--overwhelming New York. Olive makes cameos in the other stories, passing through the bar where a lonely pianist plays nights and awaits her married lover; ministering to a teen with an eating disorder; and stopping a former student from killing himself. As Strout shows us Crosby bit by bit, Olive ultimately becomes a testament to the risks and rewards of old-fashioned self-reliance--her rigid personality allows her to withstand immeasurable losses, but leaves her lonelier than most.

The book Strout is working on now is as much about New York as it is about Maine. The story follows New York lawyers working with the community of Somali refugees relocated to Lewiston, Maine, the depressed industrial town that is also home to Bates College, Strout's alma mater. The action takes place in both cities, which may be as close to her real home as Strout can get: someplace between Maine and New York, a bit of both and neither--or, as Strout puts it, "on both sides."

Source: Teicher, Craig Morgan. "Maine Idea." Publishers Weekly 255.5 (4 Feb. 2008): 32. Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 299. Detroit: Gale, 2011. Literature Resource Center.

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions Source: <http://www.readinggroupguides.com/>

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?

Multimedia

***Who Says You Have To Like A Character?* (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/2008/12/08/97941739/who-says-you-have-to-like-a-character>

A discussion of *Olive Kitteridge* on NPR.

***Fiction Writers Get Personal* (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106681052>

An NPR broadcast discussing the author.

Further Reading

Amy and Isabelle by Elizabeth Strout

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1147611>

(Call number: Fiction Strout)

In her stunning first novel, *Amy and Isabelle*, Elizabeth Strout evokes a teenager's alienation from her distant mother--and a parent's rage at the discovery of her daughter's sexual secrets. In most ways, Isabelle and Amy are like any mother and her 16-year-old daughter, a fierce mix of love and loathing exchanged in their every glance. And eating, sleeping, and working side by side in the gossip-ridden mill town of Shirley Falls doesn't help matters. But when Amy is discovered behind the steamed-up windows of a car with her math teacher, the vast and icy distance between mother and daughter becomes unbridgeable. As news of the scandal reaches every ear, it is Isabelle who suffers from the harsh judgment of Shirley Falls, intensifying her shame about her own secret past. And as Amy seeks comfort elsewhere, she discovers the fragility of human happiness through other dramas, from the horror of a missing child to the trials of Fat Bev, the community peacemaker. Witty and often profound, *Amy and Isabelle* confirms Elizabeth Strout as a powerful new talent.

Abide With Me by Elizabeth Strout

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1255570>

(Call number: Fiction Strout)

In her luminous and long-awaited new novel, bestselling author Elizabeth Strout welcomes readers back to the archetypal, lovely landscape of northern New England, where the events of her first novel, *Amy and Isabelle*, unfolded. In the late 1950s, in the small town of West Annett, Maine, a minister struggles to regain his calling, his family, and his happiness in the wake of profound loss. At the same time, the community he has served so charismatically must come to terms with its own strengths and failings—faith and hypocrisy, loyalty and abandonment—when a dark secret is revealed. Tyler Caskey has come to love West Annett, "just up the road" from where he was born. The short, brilliant summers and the sharp, piercing winters fill him with awe—as does his congregation, full of good people who seek his guidance and listen earnestly as he preaches. But after suffering a terrible loss, Tyler finds it hard to return to himself as he once was. He hasn't had The Feeling—that God is all around him, in the beauty of the world—for quite some time. He struggles to find the right words in his sermons and in his conversations with those facing crises of their own, and to bring his five-year-old daughter, Katherine, out of the silence she has observed in the wake of the family's tragedy. A congregation that had once been patient and kind during Tyler's grief now questions his leadership and propriety. In the kitchens, classrooms, offices, and stores of the village, anger and gossip have started to swirl. And in Tyler's darkest hour, a startling discovery will test his congregation's humanity—and his own will to endure the kinds of trials that sooner or later test us all. In prose incandescent and artful, Elizabeth Strout draws readers into the details of ordinary life in a way that makes it extraordinary. All is considered—life, love, God, and community—within these pages, and all is made new by this writer's boundless compassion and graceful prose.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Author's official website

<http://elizabethstrout.com/>

The official website of Pulitzer Prize winning author and New York Times bestseller Elizabeth Strout.

Read-Alikes Source: <http://www.bookbrowse.com>

Apparition & Late Fictions: A Novella and Stories by Thomas Lynch

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1346545>

(Call number: Fiction Lynch)

Heart-rending stories of life and death: a debut fiction collection by the award-winning author of *The Undertaking*.

Burning Bright: Stories by Ron Rash

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1352977>

(Call number: Fiction Rash)

Pen/Faulkner finalist and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Serena*, Ron Rash, captures the eerie beauty and stark violence of Appalachia through the lives of unforgettable characters.

The Progress of Love by Alice Munro

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1049533>

(Call number: Fiction Munro)

This collection of 11 stories thoughtfully explores the themes of self-knowledge and love. Families, friends, eccentrics, lovers - the characters all bear the marks and burdens of unpredictable individualism and humanity.

The Girl in the Flammable Skirt by Aimee Bender

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1140906>

(Call number: Fiction Bender)

A darkly comic collection of stories features men and women whose lives are pulled into the bizarre by their erotic desires.

Because They Wanted To: Stories by Mary Gaitskill

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1115547>

(Call number: Fiction Gaitskill)

A collection of stories about people who do not quite know what they want and whose wants conflict with their deeper needs and moral sense of the world.

The Red Garden by Alice Hoffman

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1371566>

(Call number: Fiction Hoffman)

A young wounded civil war soldier is saved by a passionate neighbor, a woman meets a fiercely human historical character, a poet falls in love with a blind man, and a mysterious traveler comes to town in the year when summer never arrives. At the center of everyone's life is a mysterious garden where only red plants can grow, and where the truth can be found by those who dare to look.

Blue Water by A. Manette Ansay

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1270115>

(Call number: Fiction Ansay)

Ansay takes us on the dark, emotional journey of a mother's losing a child and brings us out on the other side into forgiveness and redemption. Meg and Rex Van Dorn's comfortable life in Meg's home town on the Wisconsin shore of Lake Michigan ends when their young son is killed in a car accident as Meg is driving him to school. Cindy Ann, the driver who caused the accident, was Meg's best

friend in high school. Meg and Rex file a civil suit against Cindy but drop it when they find that bitterness is dominating their lives. Trying to start over, they buy a sailboat and move to the Caribbean.

Everything She Thought She Wanted by Elizabeth Buchan

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1235812>

(Call number: Fiction Buchan)

It is the summer of 1959 when forty-two-year-old Barbara Beeching, a married mother of two grown-up children, meets Alexander Liberty. Adored by her family and admired by her friends, Barbara never imagined that an unexpected, tender, and surprisingly passionate affair with a much younger man was on the horizon. Will she allow it to destroy the only life she's ever known? Forty years later, thirty-five-year-old Siena Grant is at a very different crossroads.

74 Seaside Avenue by Debbie Macomber

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1297138>

(Call number: Fiction Macomber)

Dear Reader, I'm living a life I couldn't even have dreamed of a few years ago. I'm married to Bobby Polgar now (you know, the famous chess champion who just happens to be the man I love!). And we've got this beautiful house with a view of Puget Sound. Lately something's been worrying Bobby, though. When I asked, he said he was 'protecting his queen' and I got the oddest feeling he wasn't talking about chess but about me. He wouldn't say anything else. Do you remember Get Nailed, the beauty salon in Cedar Cove? I still work there. I'll tell you about my friend Rachel, who's got two men interested in her (count 'em, two). And I'll let you in on what I've heard about Linnette McAfee, who left town when her love life fell apart. (That kind of trouble I know all about.) Come in soon for a manicure and a chat, okay?

Extra!

Have each member discuss which character in the town they relate to the most and why.

