

## FINISHING SCHOOL: TWO NOVELS

In *Finishing School: Two Novels*, we will read Jane Gardam's *Old Filth*, published in 2004, and Elizabeth Strout's 2019 novel, *Olive, Again*. Although the first is British and the second American and though fifteen years separate them, both novels have much to say about growing older, remembering the past, and "finishing" the "school" of living.

Gardam's novel opens with Edward Feathers, retired and highly respected former judge, watching his wife, Betty, work in her garden. As events unfold we learn a great deal about Eddie's past as a judge in Asia during the waning days of the British Empire, his marriage with Betty, his childhood and young manhood, and how all of that has shaped him and continues to do so even as the end approaches.

Strout's novel reintroduces us to Olive Kitteridge, whom you may have met before in the Pulitzer Prize winning novel named for her. It begins not with Olive but with the near arrest of Jack Kennison, a former professor who has retired to Crosby, Maine, where Olive also lives. *Olive, Again* is a novel, but it's also a series of stories, one per chapter, which slowly reveal Olive's past, her character and personality, her relationships, and her changes. Olive and Eddie share some qualities: determination, even stubbornness, a taste for solitude, the sometimes grudging acceptance of the challenges and gifts of old age. They are also profoundly different in class, life experience, education, worldliness, and more.

Finishing school is a way to say we have completed formal education. It's also a term for acquiring a certain kind of social ease and polish. Neither Eddie nor Olive is "finished" in either sense. We will explore how they and perhaps we look back across lifetimes, manage the challenges, rewards and new lessons of growing older, and continue growing and changing through it all.

This will be a seminar style discussion-based class. In addition to the novels, we will also discuss some handouts which look with humor and insight at the aging process. We'll read the novels in their order of publication.

To make discussion more efficient, it will help a great deal if we all read the same editions of the books. *Old Filth* is available from Barnes and Noble in Europa Editions. It should also be available from Amazon in that edition. At the time of this writing, in late May, *Olive, Again* is still only available in hard cover, published by Random House. If a paperback version is available by September, we'll use that one. The hard cover edition is available at Barnes and Noble and Amazon.

No advance preparation is necessary for this course. Both novels repay rereading if you're so inclined.

---

**Leader:** Lynne Cullinane is a former English teacher who has taught several literature courses for the Evergreen Forum.

**Thursdays:** 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., 8 weeks: September 24 through November 12

**Maximum:** 15 seats