



*All About*

*olive*

Conventional images of centenarians do not normally involve 'colourful' language, waltzes with dinner-suited young men and breathtaking spins in dodgem cars.

**A**LL ABOUT OLIVE is an amazing documentary – one that opens in the safe and expected environs of a nursing home, and then constantly surprises the viewer with twists and turns as it explores the rich and gutsy life of Olive Riley.

Olive, 105 at the time of filming (now 106) and still sprightly, articulate and relatively mobile, is not only the star of this insight into her life, she is also one of those who directs the shape of the documentary. The use of actors to re-enact scenes from earlier life is not in itself unusual, but to see Olive intervening in these scenes to make sure that truth is not distorted, is a rare touch that brings a refreshing immediacy to the story.

### Olive's Story

Olive was born Olive Dangerfield, in Broken Hill on 20 October 1899, the youngest of twelve children. Her early life seems to have been marked by two significant experiences, the perception that her mother didn't want or love her, and the death of her much loved sister Emma, aged fifteen, when Olive was only seven. After a brief marriage to an unfaithful husband, and the birth of three children, Olive spent most of her life as a single mother, supporting her family in a variety of jobs, from house cleaner to barmaid.

*All about Olive* focuses on the first thirty years of Olive's life; there are only occasional glimpses of her later years, but there is an overwhelming impression of a life lived cheerfully and courageously. Director Mike Rubbo's description of her as a 'national treasure' is not fanciful or patronizing. Here is a woman who embodies many of the characteristics that we like to think of as typically Australian. She is remarkable and not just because she has managed to live for 105 years.

### The Director

Mike Rubbo, the writer, producer, director and cameraman has worked in the genre of personal





documentary since the early 1970s. His particular style involves a strong personal intervention as he tells the story, and he even makes the

occasional personal appearance in his documentaries, among them *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1969) and *Waiting for Fidel* (1972). In *Waiting for Fidel* a group of journalists wait in Havana for a meeting with Fidel Castro. When the meeting does not eventuate, the documentary develops as an engaging series of interviews with the journalists.

More recently he tracked down scholars who were prepared to discuss the possibility that Shakespeare did not write the plays and poems attributed to him in *Much Ado about Something* (2003) ([www.muchadoaboutsomething.com](http://www.muchadoaboutsomething.com)). Rubbo is also a painter, who has said of his work: 'My film work has been mostly documentary, and so it's perhaps not surprising that my painting is documentary too. I paint the people and places around me. I film the subjects that fascinate me.' See <http://www.cust.idl.net.au/rubbo/> for more information on Mike Rubbo.

Rubbo clearly has a strong connection with his subject in *All about Olive*. 'The original intention had been an essay on the centenarian phenomenon' says Rubbo. 'But when I met this feisty ex-barmaid from Broken Hill, I knew that I had found a story that had to be told, and a character larger than life who I had to bring to the screen.'

Rubbo is very much part of this documentary. He travels with Olive to Broken Hill on the Indian Pacific, his voice is heard at various points, explaining his thoughts on the film and on Olive herself, and he makes a brief on-screen appearance. He is clearly captivated by this woman, whom he describes as his 'energizer', and this connection is tangible in the unfolding story. 'Olive somehow gives us permission to live a full life to the very end', Rubbo says.

*All about Olive* would be a valuable educational resource for secondary and tertiary students in English, SOSE, History, Media Studies, Religious Studies, Psychology, Nursing and Aged Care, Welfare Studies and Sociology. It could also be used most effectively by Counsellors, Psychologists and Mediators working in the Aged Care area.



## Before watching the Documentary

- Brainstorm on words, concepts and issues that come to mind when you think about people over 100 years old. Use this material to write a paragraph beginning with the words 'When I think of a centenarian ...'
- If you were to plan a documentary about the life of someone aged 105 and currently living in a nursing home, how would you go about it? Note the people you would involve, the settings you would use, and the themes you would explore.
- Older people tend to view the past through rose-coloured glasses and to be critical of the present. Make up a two column chart. On one side, list all of the aspects of life (material, social etc) that you believe were better fifty or sixty years ago. On the other side, list aspects of life that you believe are better today.

Use this material to hold a class debate on the topic: 'The good old days are nothing but a myth.'

- What is your view of the way that modern Australian society treats its elderly people? Support your answer with specific examples from among your own relatives, acquaintances, neighbours etc.
- Do you believe that people are deserving of respect and attention simply because they have managed to live for a long time?

## As you watch the Documentary (Thinking and Discussion)

- Think of five questions, other than those addressed in the film, that you would like to ask Olive, if you had the opportunity to meet her.
- The documentary begins in Olive's nursing home, as she prepares to leave on her journey. What is the initial impression that you form of Olive in these scenes? How do the others in the home react to her and what does this tell us about her?
- Mike Rubbo says 'I've been friends with Olive for two years now and we're doing something rather risky together.' What does Rubbo mean by this? Is he referring to Olive's health, to the emotional burden of the journey, to the approach to the docu-





mentary or to some other risk?

- As you watch the documentary, make a note of several references that Olive makes to the poor relationship that

she had with her mother. Can you suggest any explanations for this perception in Olive's mind?

- Olive's language is colourful. Make a list of the expressions she uses which we don't use anymore.
- Olive deals with bullying in a way we don't accept today. Do you think she was acting in a way typical, or acceptable, for her times, or was she way out of line even then?
- Apparently Olive was quite used to corporal punishment. What do you know about the history of such punishment in schools?
- Olive clearly has a rebellious streak when it comes to authority. Find examples and discuss them.
- Think about Olive's description of the accident that caused her father to lose his arm. How did her mother react and why? What does this tell you about the mother's character?
- What can you learn about Olive's character and determination from her description of the break-up of her marriage and of the child custody issue?
- What do you consider to be the most powerful scene or re-enactment in the documentary?
- The fact that Olive is 105 in the film seems to earn her automatic admiration and respect. If you do not consider her age, do you still believe her to be an admirable person? Why?
- Can you suggest why Bonnie's attitude to her Mother is so different from Evelyn's?
- What do you think of Olive's assertion about Bonnie and her husband Bill, 'I'm telling you straight, I don't want nothing to do with them.' Do you think it is genuine or just a way of dealing with her hurt?
- The director says that 'I have also found that young people, who often seem quite disconnected with the old, are equally fascinated by Olive'. Do you agree that young people are disconnected with the old, or is their attitude altered by the nature of the elderly people they are dealing with?
- Evaluate the changes of emotion that you go through as you watch this documentary. How many of the following emotions





do you experience and at what points in the documentary? Amusement, frustration, admiration, annoyance, surprise, concern, anger, sadness, pride.

## History Questions and Activities

- Olive comments on several occasions that she would like to have been a nurse, but her mother wouldn't allow it, 'because ... it would be too expensive'.

This would have been about the time of the First World War. Use the internet to find out about girls and women in training to be nurses in this period. Prepare a report on nursing during the First World War including training, the nature of the work, working conditions, the status of nurses and the cost involved.

- At the time of Olive's divorce, some time in the 1920s, the law was on the side of the man. Examine changes in laws relating to divorce at three points since the 1920s commenting on what has changed. Some would argue that the law now favours women. What is your opinion? Support your view with evidence.
- There are several references to the City of Broken Hill, and some interesting shots of its wide streets and beautiful public buildings. Research the history of this city, including its establishment, the role of mining, the power of unions and the city's heyday, when there were literally hundreds of pubs. Write a profile of one important building or institution in Broken Hill.
- In recent years, as mining has declined, Broken Hill has become a tourist Mecca and a centre for Australian art. Many movies have been shot in the district, especially at the old pub in Silverton, outside Broken Hill. Research the history of Broken Hill as a centre for art and tourism. Write a historical profile of the city to appear on a brochure for art tourists.
- The film links Olive to several items of technology that she has seen come into use. What are they and how are they introduced?
- Conduct an investigation into changes in aged care and government policies regarding aging, over the past thirty-five years. What influences have led to these changes? Do you think that there has been a link between the feminist movement over the past thirty-five years and attitudes to aging?



## English Questions and activities

- Olive says of her mother, 'Mum couldn't stand a bar of me.' Do you think that this is really true, or just Olive's impression? Write a letter that Olive's mother left, to be opened after her death. In it she explains her attitude to Olive. Draw on your knowledge of Olive's family, gained from the documentary.
- The documentary shows Olive to have been a spirited, feisty young woman. Write an account of one the following incidents:
  - a. The incident at school where she punched the girl who was teasing her ... from the viewpoint of the teasing girl.
  - b. The court case over custody of the children, where Olive was 'impudent' ... from the viewpoint of the magistrate.
  - c. The incident where Olive sneaked out to go skating ... from the viewpoint of her mother.
  - d. Olive's reaction to her discovery that her husband was unfaithful with her ... from the viewpoint of the friend.
- Olive says 'I used to sell bottles ... and I used to buy little presents ... and I'd give them to her [Mother] just so that she'd take notice of me and she'd like me a little bit' Develop a role play between Olive and her mother around this quotation from the documentary.
- Imagine that Bonnie, the daughter, eventually agrees to meet with Olive. Construct a dialogue between the two, in which both have the opportunity to express their grievances and resolve the issues that are dividing them.
- Think about the scene in which the soldier shatters Olive's doll. Write a poem or reflection expressing Olive's feelings.
- Write a poem about Emma that Olive could have read at her sister's funeral.
- Think of a novel in which a woman's childhood experiences of suffering and emotional neglect form the backdrop for the way that her life unfolds. Write a comparison between this novel and the documentary *All about Olive*.
- Write an essay examining the topic '*All about Olive* challenges one's notion of old age'. Use evidence from scenes, dialogue and commentary in the documentary to support your views.



## Media/Film Studies Questions

- What techniques does the filmmaker use to bring this story to life? Consider such factors as script, setting, specific scenes, re-enactments and interviews.
- Identify the scenes which you consider to be the most:  
Powerful  
Sentimental  
Amusing  
Confronting.  
What is it about these scenes that evokes these reactions in you?
- The director Mike Rubbo says '*All about Olive* is typical of my work, in that it is a personal journey for me too'. Using the Internet and or video libraries, see if you can locate information on either *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* or *Waiting for Fidel*. Identify similarities and differences between Rubbo's earlier work and his work in *All about Olive*.
- Imagine that you were a young director, given responsibility for directing the re-enactment scenes where Olive intervenes. Write a report for the director in which you explain what happened, how you felt about Olive's intervention and the impact that this had on the finished scenes. Complete your report with your recommendation that the whole process be included in the documentary and why.
- Imagine that, as Olive was about to start her journey to Broken Hill, she suffered a medical problem that prevented her from traveling. As the director you decided to go ahead with the documentary but you have to make some modifications. Outline and describe two other approaches that could have been taken, that would still have made this documentary powerful and effective.
- Olive has just turned 106. Imagine you are asked to make a sequel. What would you include?
- The film plays with the timeline. It begins with Olive's departure from the nursing home and then it has a series of flashbacks which break

this forward movement. List these flashbacks. What are they doing for the film and the story being told?

- Pay special attention to the two medical flashbacks. How does it help us to know these things about Olive?
- The film concentrates on the first thirty years of Olive's life. Why do you think it might choose to do so?
- Do you think the director allowed Olive to participate in directing the re-enactment scenes, or did Olive herself decide to take charge? What evidence is there one way or the other?
- What benefits did her participation bring to these re-enactments?
- What moral dilemmas do you think the director faced in making the film, especially when dealing with subject matter that might have upset Olive?
- At one point, the film allows Olive to meet a young actress playing Emma as if this girl really was Olive's dead sister. Imagine how this scene might have come about. What were the risks involved?
- There is a very touching scene when Olive is shown Emma's grave. What were the risks here? What responsibilities does a documentary filmmaker have to his subjects?
- Documentary films tell stories; not quite in the way that fiction films do, but stories nonetheless. Think of ways that the story in a documentary can unfold which makes it different from how this might happen in a fiction film.
- Note the ways that the director introduces his story elements early and then 'pays them off' later in the film. When is the first mention of Olive's father's arm? When is the first mention of the problem with Bonnie? When is the first mention of the cheating husband? The second? The third? When is the first mention of Emma? The second? The third? The fourth? The director calls this 'progressive revelation' and it allows him to tell a story almost as a fiction film would.

- Is there an emotional progression in the film? How does this progression work?
- It is important for films to create a sense of place, so that you know where things are happening. List the place setting shots in the film.
- What clues do we get to Olive's politics?
- What do you think the filmmaker's obligations to his subjects would be as the film nears completion? Should he show the film to all concerned before release? Would he dare show it to Bill and Bonnie?
- When a filmmaker is following real events like this, for example Bonnie's decision not to come to the birthday party, how far should he or she go to influence events? Did the filmmaker try to influence events in this case? Is this the right thing to do? What is the difference between a journalist reporting a situation and a reporter working to make life fairer? Think of other examples that you know of where the intervention of the journalist in the story has taken place. (Reporters saving Australians in New Orleans during the Hurricane Katrina floods, for example.)

## Social Work/Health Care Questions and Activities

- In what ways does *All about Olive* challenge stereotypes about older people? Identify five qualities or characteristics that Olive displays, that do not fit with the conventional image of a centenarian.
- Describe the attitude towards Olive displayed by the carer Amber. What particular qualities does Amber reflect? Is her attitude to Olive what you would expect?
- Olive's feeling that her mother did not love her is still powerful, many decades after her mother has died. Identify the references to her mother made in the documentary. Do you believe that this feeling could have an impact on Olive's poor relationship with her daughter Bonnie?
- How could this documentary play a positive role in changing atti-





tudes to older Australians?

- Construct a questionnaire to be given to a cross section of people (age, gender, occupation etc). The questionnaire should cover perceptions about the elderly, attitudes to the elderly, knowledge about needs, facilities, government spending etc. Use the findings of your research to write a newspaper article entitled 'The ageing of our population – Where to now?'

### Essay Topics

- 'Once the post war baby boomers start moving into retirement, the treatment of the elderly will improve immeasurably.' Discuss this statement.
- 'People should be admired and praised for their character and achievements, not for their age.' How far do you agree?
- The strength of documentaries is

that they put you in the shoes of others, creating empathy. Discuss how they do this.

### Debate Topics

- 'Childhood experiences shape the adult.'
- Young people had it harder a century ago.'
- 'A child who feels unloved has little chance of growing into a loving adult.'
- Documentary filmmakers have the right and duty to reveal whatever they can discover about their characters.

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