OLD AGE AND LOSS IN FEATURE-LENGTH FILMS

When the audiovisual review column began in 1976, reviews of feature-length films seldom were a part of the mix of educational and training videos reviewed. Beginning in the 1990s, however, reviews of feature-length films began to appear on a regular basis. In all, 27 feature-length films have been reviewed in the column. The most recent were reviews of the fictional films Waking Ned Divine and Tea With Mussolini (Vol. 39, no. 4, 1999) and the full-length documentaries The Buena Vista Social Club (Vol. 40, no. 2, 2000), Old Men (Vol. 41, no. 5, 2001), and The Fighter (Vol. 42, no. 2, 2002). Feature-length films run 3–4 times longer than typical educational videos and thus are more difficult to integrate into gerontology curricula. But feature-length films (and feature-length documentaries) offer much greater complexity of characterization, a broader scope of the depiction of themes relevant to aging, and a higher level of subtlety and complexity in the interaction among characters. Feature-length films are to educational videos what novels are to short stories.

In this column, three reviewers evaluate two feature-length films from 2001 and one film from 2002. The first two films, Iris and Last Orders, are similar in terms of the structure of the screenplay. Both films utilize extended flashbacks that interrupt the narrative in order to convey a sense of how the lives and values of characters in the present are informed by events in the past. Iris is based on the relationship between Iris Murdoch, one of the great 20th-century English novelists, and her husband John Bayley, a fellow at Oxford University. In her old age, Iris suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. Last Orders weaves together the relationships, family lives, and secrets of six characters. About Schmidt, the third film, celebrates the transformation of a retired insurance executive, played by Jack Nicholson, as he works out the parameters of his new identity after the sudden death of his wife. All of these films are about loss. In Iris, a spouse grieves the loss of his wife’s former self because of her dementia; in Last Orders, a man’s wife and his best friends experience the dimensions of the grieving process; and in About Schmidt, the main character overcomes the loss of his role (in retirement) and the loss of his spouse. At the same time these films offer insights into the way those who recover from loss adapt to their changed circumstances and find a new and deeply felt identity that will sustain them in their old age.

I hope readers will let me know their thoughts on the quality and content of future issues, share their ideas for future themes, inform me of their media productions, and share their thoughts on new developments in film, television, and other media as they relate to gerontology. Readers may contact me via e-mail at the following address: yahnk001@umn.edu

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Iris Murdoch and John Bayley met in 1955 and wed in 1956 in Oxford, England. John was a fellow in English at the New College; Iris was a fellow in philosophy at St. Anne’s College. They were an odd pairing—gangly, shy, clumsy, and sexually naive John and beautiful, sensual, sexually experienced, and worldly Iris. Iris Murdoch became one of the great 20th-century English novelists. She wrote 26 novels; and some of the central themes in her writings are the tensions between free will and circumstance, the search for love set against the absolute in a world dominated by randomness and absurdity. In the feature-length film Iris, viewers are treated to “pages” out of Iris and John’s relationship from their first meeting through the moments following Iris’s death in 1999. Scenes from across their relationship are interspersed in the midst of their final “chapter” together as Iris slips into her “secret life” and into Alzheimer’s disease. The film Iris is based on Bayley’s book Elegy for Iris: A Memoir (1998), one of the three books in which he documents his life with Iris, their battle with her Alzheimer’s disease, and his struggles as a widower following her death. The other two books are Iris and Her Friends (1999) and Widower’s House (2001).

Words are vital to Iris: “If one doesn’t have words, how does one think?” Her difficulty remembering words marks the beginning and progression of her Alzheimer’s in real life and in this film. The first inkling that anything is wrong comes as she and John are in a pub. She repeats a sentence, then immediately recognizes she has done so.
Soon after that incident, during a writing session interrupted by a spat between a cat and a fox outside her window, Iris appears to struggle with the word “puzzled.” She seems not to understand its meaning or use, but writes it multiple times on a page of manuscript. She says, “We worry about being mad, don’t we? How would we know ... those of us who live in our minds? Other people would tell us, wouldn’t they, John?” In this same scene, Iris and John resume their individual writing, but Iris struggles to find the words she wants—scratching through word after word with her pen. In this scene they both seem to recognize something is seriously wrong.

Later, during the taping of a retrospective of her work for a television program, Iris seems distracted, loses her train of thought mid-sentence, leaves the interview, and returns home in a panic without any memory of the interview. During a house call from their doctor, Iris says, “I have a lot of ideas, but they interrupt her window, Iris appears to struggle with the word ‘... wonderful novels.’”

When Iris wanders away from home, a policewoman called by John is startled by the disarray of the home; John’s trials at caregiving have left the place a shambles. When an old friend brings Iris back the next day, John calls by John is startled by the disarray of the home; John’s trials at caregiving have left the place a shambles. The narration engages and respects the viewer’s ability to move easily between the present and past without going to excess. The narration engages and respects the viewer’s ability to move easily between the present and past without going to excess. The narration engages and respects the viewer’s ability to move easily between the past and present without needing excessive transitions. Visual scenes without dialogue (as in the swimming scenes) and symbolism (especially in the scene near the end when Iris lets go of the novel she cannot write by releasing blank pages from their stone paperweights) challenge the intellect of the viewer with appropriate abstractness.

This film should be mandatory viewing for all students in gerontology and geriatric studies programs, as well as for professionals/paraprofessionals working in the field of aging. It would be a wonderful film to use in training direct service providers who work with Alzheimer’s-afflicted individuals and their families. Iris is an excellent film to trigger discussion in educational programs and support groups for family caregivers and family members dealing with Alzheimer’s disease. Professionals and students of clinical psychology, social work, family studies, and marriage and family therapy/ counseling should find this to be a rich case study for analysis and application to similar cases. The film, along with John Bayley’s books, would seem to be wonderful learning tools in courses in literature, literary criticism, and film. Professional practice with and/or on behalf of elders and their families who are coping with Alzheimer’s disease, related dementias and other chronic health problems would be more sensitive and appropriate if “case studies” such as portrayed in
Iris were used in more non-clinical educational and training programs.

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