

Using a Novel to Help Sociology Students Feel Less “at Sea” in Their Sociology of Aging Course

By

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The novel: *Lucy by the Sea* by Elizabeth Strout. Random House: New York: 2022.

Numerous authors (e.g., Castellano et al, 2008; Hartman 2005; Roberts & Roberts 2008; Wyant & Bowen 2018) have argued for the value of using novels as teaching tools in college sociology courses. Some of the benefits attributed to using novels along with other course materials include increased student engagement, enhanced conceptual understanding, improved analytic ability, longer-term retention, and perspective-transformation.

We are not aware of anyone, however, who has advocated a specific novel for a course in the Sociology of Aging. Here we argue that one such book is Elizabeth Strout’s most recent novel, *Lucy by the Sea*. This ninth novel by Stout and her fourth about her character, Lucy Barton, is set in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. This timeframe might be enough to draw in students who have their own vivid (or repressed) memories of those scary early days.

Lucy and William, the book’s main characters, fall into the category of what the *Economist* dubs the “yold,” or “young old”-- people whose ages fall somewhere between 65 and 75. (William is 71 just before the start of the book and Lucy is just a few, unspecified number of, years younger.)

This is an age group that, in the U. S., is increasingly staying in the workforce (rather than retiring), and Lucy, at the beginning of the novel, is a successful novelist, in the midst of a book tour. William, while retired at the start of the novel, is inspired, towards the end, to work again in his specialty, parasitology-- a branch of biology that studies parasites, their hosts, and the relationship between the two. He was looking into ways to protect

potatoes from the ravages of global warming. Here we examine their stories for the insights they might provide students regarding four topics relevant to courses on aging, other than aging and work. The four topics are marriage and divorce, health and illness, loneliness and friendship, and loss and grief.

Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

With the world confronting Covid and lockdown in March 2020, Lucy is reluctantly convinced by her ex-husband, William, to leave her Manhattan apartment. He has found an old beach house on a cliff above the ocean in Crosby, Maine, a small town where they can hunker down.

By 2010, 50 percent of people 65 or older had been divorced (Quadagno 2013:184). This novel provides opportunity for student discussion of this phenomenon. When the novel begins, Lucy and William, parents of two adult daughters, have been divorced for almost twenty years after being married for about the same amount of time. Their divorce was due to William’s multiple infidelities. Like Lucy, most Americans expect sexual exclusivity in marriage. Both men and women view sexual infidelity as the most upsetting and least forgivable imagined infidelity act (Pettijohn & Arisida 2013).

However, despite the usual expectation for monogamy, infidelity frequently occurs in marriage. In a national survey, Whisman & Snyder (2007) found significant rates of infidelity, with an estimated 20–40% of married men and 20–25% of married women reporting sexual

infidelity.

After infidelity, both partners typically report lower relationship satisfaction; marriages characterized by infidelity are nearly twice as likely as others to end in divorce (Previti & Amato 2004). Like the one quarter of men and women who have married two or more times (US Census 2012), Lucy and William found other partners. While William was divorced again, remarried again and then separated from his third wife; Lucy became a widow nine months before the story began.

As the months go on, the feelings between Lucy and William rekindle. She feels he is kind – taking over the cooking, buying her warm clothes for the winter, comforting her when she has panic attacks. At one point, in discussing why he wanted her to come to Maine, he says, “Lucy, yours is the life I wanted to save” (p. 56).

However, many of the issues that were part of their marriage continue all these years later. Lucy notes that William is often distracted, not a great listener and keeps secrets. This fits with research suggesting the most frequently reported conflict topic in romantic relationships is communication (Meyer & Sledge 2022).

Like Lucy and William, a significant number of divorced couples (10-15%) reconcile after they separate with 6% actually remarrying each other (Busco 2022). Lucy’s willingness to give their relationship a second chance is summed up by her comment about his affairs during their marriage that “You can become bigger or bitter, that is what I think.”

Eventually, Lucy and William feel confident enough in their revitalized relationship to tackle the difficult task of telling their daughters that they are together again. By the end of the novel, they seek permanence by buying the house they rented in Maine.

Interestingly, both of their adult daughters, Chrissy and Becka, throughout the novel, are more likely to be in touch with William than they are with Lucy. Lucy notices this particularly when the daughters come down with Covid, and she asks William, “Why did they call you but not me?” He responds, “Oh Lucy, they just worry about how much you worry” (p. 145).

This is *not* the usual pattern of adult children of divorce, who tend to have much less contact with their fathers than their mothers (Quadagno 2013:186). The anomaly is partly explained by all the practical care William gives to his daughters—including helping one escape the unhealthy confines of New York City at the start of the pandemic and the other, when she learns about the infidelity of her own husband. This is not to say that Lucy does not play a meaningful role in her daughters’ lives. She does. And it is she, for instance,

who helps Chrissy decide that being unfaithful to her husband would not be a good idea. It’s just that she (Lucy) isn’t always the first one either daughter turns to when they want to talk.

Health and Illness

Aging is generally associated with a gradual decline in physical and mental capacity (WHO 2022). Lucy, in her late sixties, seems to have remained in generally good health. She does suffer from insomnia, something that becomes more common as people age (WebMD 2022), and occasional panic attacks that are more likely to occur in older people who have recently lost a spouse (Stone 2020), as Lucy did.

William’s health issues have been serious. He had prostate cancer, and a botched surgery has left him impotent. About 1 in 8 men are diagnosed with prostate cancer during their lives. It is the second leading cause of cancer deaths among men and many men find it difficult to talk about it (Sreenivas 2023). William’s hesitancy to talk about his cancer has left Lucy, and their whole family, in the dark, even though the two of them have been in reasonably close contact ever since Lucy’s second husband, David, died. When William’s cancer does come out, Lucy finds it hard to sleep:

I could not sleep that night. I kept thinking of William and how he had had cancer and had his prostate out and how he had never told anyone...

Oh William, I thought—Oh my God. William...

No wonder he could not listen to me often. What a thing he had been through! Swiping his hand down toward the lower middle of himself, “I’m through,” he had said (p. 91).

Nonetheless, despite William’s bout with cancer, both Lucy and William are physically fit and mentally sharp. One reason is probably their regular exercise routine. “[Older] people who exercise regularly,” Jill Quadagno (2013:254) reminds us, “show improved cardiovascular function, better long-term and short-term memory, and less disability than sedentary people.” William is religious about getting his 10,000 steps a day and Lucy walks a lot everyday too.

The early days of the pandemic led Lucy and William, as it did many of us, to watch TV reports of the carnage Covid was wreaking. Such news reports, one might think, would have made everyone, everywhere, aware of how important social distancing, mask-wearing and handwashing were, but Tiwari et al. (2021) found that local, word-of-mouth communication and modeling was vital for driving the message home. William’s

precautions, and those of neighbors, make Lucy aware of the importance of masking, hand washing, social distancing and preventive isolation as ways of protecting herself and others.

Strout reminds the reader that not everyone agreed about how to respond to the pandemic. William needs to persuade Melvin, the father of one of William's and Lucy's children's spouses, to social distance from the children for a couple of weeks just after Melvin (and his wife, Barbara) had driven up from Florida where few people were masking. As it turns out, four days after they had begun their quarantine Melvin is hospitalized with a serious case of Covid-19—so William's efforts were clearly justified.

Since the start of the pandemic, older people have been much more likely to die of Covid-19 than younger ones (Rossen et al, 2020). Melvin's near-death experience reminds us of this statistic, and as do the deaths of other of their acquaintances, including one of Williams' oldest friends, Jerry (p. 7). However, certain risk factors made even younger people more susceptible to the worst effects of Covid. One of these risks is asthma, a condition that plays a substantial role in William's (and Lucy's) concern about the possible exposure of their son-in-law, Michael, an asthma sufferer, to Covid. Their concern about Michael's exposure becomes a driving element of the book's plot, as they seek living quarters for Michael, and their daughter Chrissy, outside of New York City and protection from exposure by Michael's father and mother.

The many health-related themes related to Covid will give many students an opening to share the experiences of their own families and friends, many of which will connect them more closely to considerations of aging and (ill-) health.

Loneliness and Friendship

Recent research suggests that, in general, younger adults are more likely to experience loneliness than older ones (Winch 2016). But, under certain circumstances, especially after the loss of a long-time loved one, older people can also be expected to experience loneliness (Winch 2016).

Many people experienced unusual levels of loneliness early in the pandemic and this was certainly true of Lucy. At first, Lucy and William do not allow themselves to be with anyone else in their new home in Maine. As we have noted, they take walks alone or together. Although William seems content to be with Lucy and his walking, isolation is very hard on Lucy. Lucy seems to have been

socially engaged in New York. While she was grieving the death of David, her beloved second husband, she frequently saw friends and her daughters. Her work as a novelist kept her busy with writing and book tours. With the pandemic and re-location to Maine, Lucy is unhappy about not seeing anyone else and is not sure how she feels about William (p. 21). She experiences daily ups and downs, both physically and emotionally, commenting that she feels “all over the map.” She takes long walks and interacts with William but the normal give and take of her social world is gone.

The isolation created by Covid was a serious handicap for Lucy and most of us. Reporting on the longest scientific study of happiness ever conducted, Waldinger & Schulz (2023), argue that good relationships and social connections are the most important predictors of health and happiness. In their study, broad social networks and significant social activities are more important than any other variable in forestalling disease, infirmity, and cognitive decline. They argue that it is our friendships that buffer us during the most difficult events of our lives (Waldinger & Schulz 2023:257).

Until Lucy begins to make new friends, she is adrift. After a time, she develops both strong and casual ties with others. Strong ties are the ones we have with our most important friends. These are the people who will support us and help us when we most need it (p. 262).

Weak ties or casual friendships, while not the ones we turn to in times of distress, do provide us with “jolts of good feeling or energy during our days, as well as a sense of connection to larger communities” (263).

As the months go by, Lucy finds comfort in her friendship with Bob Burgess and his wife, the town minister. Bob and Lucy take walks and have talks (while masked) that become very important to both of them. This friendship helps her feel better as she has the opportunity to sort out her feelings about many issues, including her traumatic and impoverished childhood, the current political climate, her marriage, her grief over her beloved husband David's death, and her experience as a mother. Lucy says that Bob “made me feel that I mattered.” Towards the end of the book, Bob's comment that he would like her to stay in Maine is one of the reasons she ends up remaining in Crosby.

Lucy also develops casual friendships across political divides. She develops a quiet friendship with Charlene, a fellow volunteer at the local food pantry despite the fact that Charlene is a supporter of “the current President” (p. 163). Early in her time in Maine she waves to an old man who sits on the front steps of a small house that she passes on her walks (p.44). She soon asks him how he is

and learns his name. After that whenever she sees him on his steps she says, “Hello Tom” and he answers “Hello, de-ah”. When Bob tells her that Tom was probably the person who put the sign on her car that said “Go Home New Yorkers,” Lucy replies, “Well, who cares... Tom and I are friends now”(p. 86).

Loss and Grief

In many ways *Lucy by the Sea* is a story about loss and grief, but, given the overarching context of the pandemic, it feels odd to say that the most heartfelt losses reported are not deaths caused by Covid-19. But they *are* related to the aging of the main characters. Women have a greater chance of being widowed than men, not only because they live longer, but also because they tend to be the younger member of most married couples (Quadagno 2013:309). As we have already mentioned, Lucy had lost her beloved second husband, David, and by the midpoint of the story, was one and a half years into her widowhood. She longs for him desperately:

It has been said that the second year of widowhood is worse than the first—the idea being, I think, that the shock has worn off and now one has to simply live with the loss, and I had been finding that to be true, even before I came to Maine with William (46).

But she felt that she could *not* share this with William, because “Grief is a private thing.” Research has shown that shock is frequently an early reaction to the loss of a loved one (e.g., Kubler-Ross 1969) and that the second year is frequently more emotionally challenging than the first partly because of that early shock and sometimes because of the “legal, financial, and end-of-life formalities” that must be tended to (e.g., Vasquez 2021). So, Lucy’s explanation for her grief-related pain at the beginning of the book makes sense in relation to this literature.

What makes less sense is Lucy’s feeling that she should *not* be sharing her grief with others. It is true that there are many ways of dealing with grief, but Lucy’s choice *not* to share hers finds little support in the grief-therapy literature (Prend 1997; Rando 1991; Wolfelt 2021). However, it does raise potential issues for students to ponder.

The tendency *not* to share is one she does have in common with William, who, only when she asks why he washes his jeans so frequently, lets-slip that he’s had the “botched” prostate surgery that’s left him impotent and without full control of his bladder. He admits he’s never told anyone in the family about this.

Their inability to share feelings about their major

losses is an early theme, but eventually, there are breakthroughs. After a while, Lucy does share with William that, while she loved David, the place she lived with him “was never home.” “The only real home I ever had in my whole *life*, I had with you. And the girls.” And she cries and cries, eventually being comforted by William in a way that leads to their having sex (there are ways to achieve intimacy even when the man is impotent (Starkman 2023) and reestablish their ancient habit of sleeping together every night. Thus do the two of them move towards the establishment of a meaningful life, one that can occur when grieving people “develop... a new relationship or strengthen... an attachment with someone [they] already know” (O’Connor 2022:201).

CONCLUSION

The novel *Lucy by the Sea* contains themes that could make it a useful companion for sociology courses, especially the Sociology of Aging. (It could doubtless be helpful in Marriage and the Family and Introduction to Sociology courses, too). Marriage, divorce and remarriage are all topics that could be made more vivid to college-aged students by this novel. As we have suggested, health and illness are almost constant concerns for Lucy and William, as they are for many older adults. The same can be said for the loneliness and the need for friendship. Loss and grief are also themes that most courses on aging address, and the grief experiences of both Lucy and William, one associated with the loss of a spouse, the other with losses associated with disease, would enable students to think about such experiences with concrete examples in mind.

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