

1. The Original Program:

The Elderquest in Today's Movies and Novels is a new course made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) entitled *Examining a New Model for Old Age in Literature and Film*.

Note: Although this course is free and open to all, it does require advance registration.

Elder heroes behave very differently from younger ones. Their journeys are often inward rather than outward, backward rather than forward, slow and intentional rather than fast and impetuous. But their actions are just as heroic, if not more so, for the stakes are higher, time is short, and the flesh is weak. Victory, and it's far from guaranteed, is full acceptance and then transcendence of the self, an authentication of one's experience and then a willingness to let it go as one helps others to prepare for the ascendancy of the next generation.

Join us as our elder heroes—men and women, Swedish, American, and Brazilian—hit the road to show us what old age, and especially the new old age, is really about.

The facilitator will introduce each film (five or six minutes). Then, after we have spent one and a half to two hours watching the film and taking a break, there will be a 45-minute guided discussion of its themes and how they relate to our own experience of so-called old age.

The course will also involve reading and discussing two *Elderquest* novels.

Session One: An Introduction to the *Elderquest*

Here we will introduce and define the *elderquest* with the use of clips from a number of *elderquest* films arranged according to those essential components of the form defined in Handout Six: **Plotting the *Elderquest* and Using *Wild Strawberries* as a Prototype.**

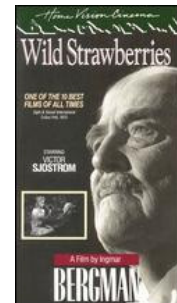
(Note: The Syllabus and Course Description, Handout Two, Defining the *elderquest*, and The Introduction and Study Questions for **Wild Strawberries** should also be distributed at this class. Clips to come from any of the following: **The Winter Guest, The Straight Story, Wrestling Ernest Hemingway, The Talent Given Us, Harry and Tonto, Central Station**, etc.



Session Two: The Prototype for the Modern Elderquest: *Wild Strawberries*.

Victor Sjöström, Bibi Andersson, Max von Sydow, 1957. (Swedish; with new, easy to read subtitles). Written and directed by Ingmar Bergman.

An aging professor, on the road to accept an award, must come to terms with his past as well as his present. Rated by one international survey as among the 20 best films of all times. B/W, 1 hr., 30 mins. added features, including a film-length commentary by Peter Cowie.



Session Three: Coming Home: Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful*.

Geraldine Page, John Heard, Rebecca DeMornay, 1985. Directed by Peter Masterson from a Horton Foote screenplay. Best Actress Award: Page. An aging woman, living in a small apartment with her son and his wife, returns to Bountiful, her childhood home, even though it no longer exists, and the trip provides her with “more than enough to last me for the rest of my life.” Color, 1 hr., 47 mins.¹



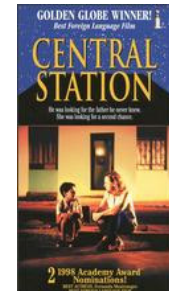
Session Four: Hitting the Road Again: David Lynch's *The Straight Story*. 1999.

This gem of a movie by David Lynch chronicles a trip made by 73-year-old Alvin Straight from Laurens, Iowa, to Mt. Zion, Wis. in 1994 while riding a lawn mower. He takes this strange journey to mend his relationship with his ill, estranged, 75-year-old brother Lyle, and it is a superb example of late-life revitalization and transformation. Richard Farnsworth's performance earned him Golden Globe and Oscar nominations for best actor. At 79, he is the oldest to be so honored. Color, 112 mins.



Session Five: From Despair to Integrity: Part One: Brazil's Central Station.

Fernanda Montenegro and Vinicius de Oliveira, 1998. (Portuguese with excellent subtitles). This Brazilian masterpiece may be the best intergenerational film ever made. It is also an excellent example of an *Elderquest*, a middle passage, desperately needed and successfully completed. Dona Dora, old, angry, and totally hopeless, writes letters for the young, illiterate, and still hopeful in Rio's Central Station, and then throws them away. But she is gradually and against her will drawn into the life of nine-year-old Josue whose mother writes a letter trying to reunite him with his father and is then run over by a bus. Dora is slow to rehumanize, and Josue is equally slow to let down his barriers and begin once again to hope, but they embark on an endless odyssey in search of both of their lost fathers, and eventually the letter writer rewrites her own script as well as the boy's. Heartbreaking, realistic, and finally revelatory story of how the life review can give us the power to redefine not only our own lives, but those of our descendants as well. Color, 106 mins.



Session Six: From Despair to Integrity: Part Two: Paule Marshall's novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983).

Seventy-something Avey (short for Avatar) Johnson, a middle class widow, jumps ship in mid-cruise to rediscover her Afro-Caribbean roots and re-establish her identity in a harrowing and heroic *Elderquest*.



1. p. 57 Foote, Horton, **Collected Plays: Volume One**. Lyme, NH: A Smith and Krause Book. 1996.

Session Seven: A Failed *Elderquest*: Alexander Payne's *About Schmidt*. 2002.

Jack Nicholson as Warren Schmidt, a clueless 65-year-old retired insurance executive from Omaha, sets out on an hilarious but doomed *Elderquest* in the huge camper his recently deceased wife had bought for traveling in their golden years. But he is so shut down emotionally that his encounters—with his daughter, her fiancé and her fiancé's mother (Kathy Bates)—all end badly. Based on a novel by Louis Begley, which is totally different—not an *Elderquest*, and about a successful, upper-crust insurance executive from New York City who retires to Long Island. Color, 124 mins.



Session Eight: Summing Up: Ethan Canin's novel, *Carry Me Across the Water* (2001).

August Kleinman, a successful retired Jewish brewer, takes off in his mid-seventies to redeem himself and restore his integrity by returning to Japan to confront the descendants of a Japanese officer he has killed in the south Pacific in WWII. Another harrowing but heroic *Elderquest*.

