

Michael Caine, Glenda Jackson ... and Christians on Ageing

On the *Christians on Ageing* website, we recently talked about three new attractions of joining *Christians on Ageing* – the opportunity to contribute to and read short articles written by members about themselves (*Meet The Members*); and others entitled *The Older Person Who Has Inspired Me*. Our new, also bi-monthly, *Culture Club*, conducted via Zoom, is the third initiative we launched this autumn.

To date, we have held two meetings of *Culture Club*; in these cases, focussing on films (rather than TV or radio programmes, works of fiction or poetry, music or paintings), and with input from Catherine Shoard, the film editor at *The Guardian*.

At the most recent *Culture Club*, on November 3rd, for example, we focussed on the new film starring Michael Caine and Glenda Jackson, *The Great Escaper*. This tells the true story of Bernard Jordan, aged 89, who secretly left his care home on the South Coast to make a trip under his own steam to attend the 70th anniversary of the D-day landings. Caine plays Jordan and Jackson his wife, René, in her final role.

After considering whether we liked the film and were moved by it, we teased out aspects which depict older people in interesting and provocative ways. Firstly, we picked up on the apparent ease with which Caine had left his care home: is it really quite as easy as that in real life? This led to a discussion about the extent of the autonomy of older and disabled carehome residents.

In the film, Michael Caine and Glenda Jackson both appear as elderly, frail people, Caine pushing a walker, Jackson in a wheelchair. Despite his status as a sex symbol of the 60s, Caine appears in a bedroom scene in his vest, revealing his ageing, flabby arms. To several of us, this unvarnished depiction of old age was very welcome and quite daring, when contrasted with the youthful, glamorous appearance of many stars of stage and screen well into their 80s who appear far younger than their years would suggest and certainly never bent over a walking-frame.

The depiction of intergenerational tension in the film also came in for our attention. Jackson enjoys an affectionate relationship with her young carer in the care home, giving as well as receiving support. But in a walk along the prom, Caine deplors the ‘tossers’ who nearly run him over on their bicycles, and secretly lets the air out of their tyres. In an interview with Caine before the film’s release, Catherine reported that in real life he has called for the return of National Service.

Just like the first meeting of *Culture Club*, in September, which focussed on the recent film starring Judi Dench *Hallelujah* and which also benefited from Catherine’s insights having interviewed the stars and director, our lively discussions went on for an hour-and-a-half.

The next *Culture Club* will take place on Friday 19 January 2024 and will focus on the film *Help*, though participants are welcome to bring in other films, programmes and books with similar themes. Set in a care home in Liverpool, *Help* revolves around the friendship between newly qualified care worker Sarah and Tony, a resident with early-onset dementia, at the start of the Covid pandemic. Freely available on the website [channel4.com](https://www.channel4.com), *Help* won two BAFTA awards.

The programme for further meetings during 2024 is as follows:

19 January: Covid in Care Homes

Help

8 March 2024: Intergenerational relationships

Silas Marner – raising young Eppie transforms miserly Silas's life and worldview in George Elliot's classic.

The Old Man and the Sea – Hemmingway's best-known work is about an old man, a young boy and a big fish.

Up – Pixar's classic film sees a cantankerous widower team up with an eager junior scout on an adventurous mission to South America.

10 May 2024: Past depictions of old age

Memento Mori – Muriel Spark's darkly amusing whodunnit amongst sitting room-dwelling friends in 60s London bespeaks a world totally lost yet for many, still in living memory.

Ending Up – Kingsley Amis's comic classic about bickering upper class acquaintances conjures that genteel Edwardian sense of retired gentlemen and spinsters which persisted well into the 1970s, yet has since become tainted with more seediness and depression.

The Ladykillers – Mrs Wilberforce, a redoubtable relic from the late Victorian age, unwittingly outsmarts Alec Guinness's gang of dastardly criminals. The scene in which the mob must make nice while she has friends round for tea, cake and a sing-song is remarkable.

Fawlty Towers – That Miss Tibbs and Miss Gadsby happily lived out their final years in a Torquay guesthouse did not seem odd in the mid-1970s. Today, they would be the subject of keen interest and pity.

12 July 2024: Self-help

How to Live to 100 – Jon Snow's popular Channel 4 documentary managed to attract audiences from younger demographics by extending an upbeat travelogue treatment to questions of mortality and uncaring relatives.

All the amusing and not so amusing lighthearted "senior moment" compendiums.

13 September 2024: Relationships between children and elderly parents

The Tempest – if you think getting older is tough, wait til you tell your children about inheritance, as Shakespeare reminds us.

The Book Club – in this film, four friends in their 70s and 80s embark on new romantic partnerships – often to the chagrin of their children.

Elizabeth is Missing – BBC drama in which Glenda Jackson’s daughter is disbelieving and even scornful when her mother, who suffers from dementia, begins to solve the disappearance of her sister 70 years before.

8 November 2024: Life in a care home

Away From Her – Julie Christie won an Oscar for this 2006 drama about a woman with Alzheimer’s who begins a relationship with a man in a care home, having forgotten about her husband.

Alive Inside – a documentary about people with dementia responding to music.

Quartet – Maggie Smith stars in Dustin Hoffman’s comedy about a retirement home for classical musicians.

Savages – two children [Laura Linney and Philip Seymour Hoffman) decide to put their father, who has Parkinson’s, in a nursing home.

Watching or reading the subjects of each *Culture Club* isn’t essential – we summarise the plot(s) at the start of each meeting, while you can glean much from online reviews and, for films, their trailers, also free online. In addition, we list websites from which films and TV programmes can be viewed, such as the BBC iPlayer and YouTube in our publicity for members before each meeting.

Our first *An Older Person Who Has Inspired Me* was written by *Christians on Ageing’s* retiring Chair, David Jolley, about James Jolley, his father. Like many bright children of the early 20th century, poverty prevented James from taking up a free grammar school place: instead, he started work at the age of 14 in the local boot-and-shoe factory in Wolverhampton. David tells a fascinating and inspiring story of a devoted family man who, after service during World War II, worked for the Prue but found real satisfaction in helping the fledgling NHS as a driver of large vehicles containing bottled oxygen. David writes, “He loved to meet the people, to see the towns and countryside and to be part of the effort to make healthcare available to everyone.” Growing up in different times, David was able to become a consultant psychiatrist.

Marion Shoard, one of *Christians on Ageing’s* trustees, wrote our first *Meet The Members*. She explained that she had been pitched into the world of eldercare when her mother developed dementia 25 years ago. After securing good care for her mother, Marion decided to switch focus from writing and campaigning about countryside conflicts to the choices and challenges faced by older people; her books *A Survival Guide to Later Life* and *How to Handle Later Life* were published in 2004 and 2017. Within churches, Marion enjoys offering pastoral support, as well as taking older and disabled people without cars on trips into the local

countryside. Like David, she has a special interest in the care of people with dementia, not least those living in care homes.

We shall be circulating our next *Meet The Members* and *The Older Person Who Has Inspired Me* to CoA members in December, as well as further information about the next *Culture Club* meeting in January.