

THE SUMMING UP

Lynn and I watched the first part of *63-Up* last night (the ninth incarnation of director Michael Apted's documentary about growing up under the British class system.) Apted interviewed a group of children at seven-year intervals from the time they were seven. The children are now 63. Apted himself died at 79 in January of 2021, and so I imagine the series is over. I hope no ambitious assistant producer will try to keep it alive. Without Apted's sensibility and off-camera voice, the enterprise would have no center, no mooring.

As is, the film is almost unendurably moving. Entire lives are compressed to fifteen minutes. But there it all is: the childhood dream of being remarkable—the schooling or lack of it; the weddings and divorces; the careers; the careers rerouted; the children; the *children's* children—and now the deaths of parents; the participants' own enlarging medical crises (deep vein thrombosis, esophageal cancer....) We feel the weight of what they've accomplished, and the more gnawing weight of what they haven't. And so they realign their dreams.

I watch these lives close to tears because it is, of course, my life I'm watching. My regrets. My missed opportunities. My fear of catastrophic illness—my own bidding farewell to everything, everyone I've known. The deaths of beloved dogs. All those plans....

When I first came upon these characters they were 28. I sat watching by myself in the back of a movie theater in Los Angeles. Even then I remember my eyes tearing up over the plight of Neil, one of the participants—who had gone homeless; he was interviewed sitting by the side of a lake, nodding rhythmically. A woman behind me in the theater muttered loudly, in the dark, "What a loser!" I think I'll hear her indictment for the rest of my life.

I've seen every one of the *Up* films since. I watch Tony, Nick, Sue, and Andrew, and think: "What would I have said at 14?" How would I have articulated all I wanted to become? How will I live with all I actually became?

APTED: And whatever became of that new novel you were working on seven years ago, Robert....

I'm the ghost in the film, as we all are. We join Tony, the cab driver; Andrew, the lawyer; Sue, the school administrator; Nick, the science teacher in America. Nick's voice is substantially lower in tone since his throat cancer. He's got a scientist's indomitable objectivity.

APTED: Are you frightened about it? (Death)

NICK: Not for myself. But for them, a bit. Yeah, I'm frightened for them.

And so this segment ends. A complicated, bittersweet farewell: their lives still abundantly confused, unresolved; resentful of a class system that never offered fairness—and then the credits begin.

Lynn reminds me our President was voted in at the age of 77, and he's now 78. Life is hardly over. But still the emotional gravity of *63-Up* lies in the sense that this is the final film; there will never be another chance to explain these lives. The thought that cries out in my heart, in the name of all the participants in the documentary—including myself—is: "*Wait*. There's so much more we want to say."