There are a number of critical social and personal issues evocatively portrayed in What’s Eating Gilbert Grape, a 1993 classic film, by director/producer Lasse HallstrÖm. The film focuses on the Grape family who live in Endora, a small country town in Iowa, USA. Gilbert Grape, played by Johnny Depp, has assumed the role of father figure since the death of his father seven years earlier. He takes responsibility for the family and, in particular, his younger brother, Arnie (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) who has an intellectual disability. In contrast to the saying ‘it takes a village to raise a child’, Endora is intolerant of Arnie’s atypical, erratic and volatile behaviours and sometimes dangerous escapades. The family is given little support and the police are frequently called to rescue (or curtail) him.

Bonnie Grape hasn’t left the house since her husband’s death and has become depressed and morbidly obese. She sits, eats and sleeps on a couch in the living room. The family accommodates mealtimes and rituals around their mother’s limited mobility – bringing the table set with food to her so that they can eat together. The small town setting intensifies the issues of being ‘different’ and stigmatism and prejudice are pervasive in the film. Even Gilbert uses terms like ‘fat’ and ‘whale’ to describe his mother. Although his friend Tucker claims ‘she’s not that big’, Gilbert is required to reinforce the timber foundation boards under the house. The local children, often being

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1 What’s eating Gilbert grape [online image]. Retrieved August 8, 2018 from: https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQra55nLpfnalxGnClJfF1_U_zcEHjjH4A6pLJ_L8is7WMXGWV1
dared by friends, try to get a glimpse of Mrs Grape ‘the freak’, with Gilbert sometimes complicit in this.

Several turning points emerge in the second half of the film. Bonnie Grape leaves her house for the first time in years to demand Arnie’s release from police custody, while several of the townspeople gather to see the woman they have heard so much about. Children openly laugh, an older man takes a photograph, and others looked at her with distain. Tensions at home escalate and result in Bonnie confessing her innermost fears for the family and about being a burden:

*I never meant to be like this … a joke.*

After talking with Gilbert’s new girlfriend Becky (played by Juliette Lewis), changes begin to happen. With great effort, Bonnie climbs the stairs to her bedroom, but soon after is found dead. Instead of allowing his mother’s body to be removed from the house by a crane, Gilbert, with his family’s help, makes a final decision to preserve Bonnie’s dignity in a dramatic conclusion to the film.

**ENDNOTE**

Actress Darlene Cates (who plays Bonnie Grape) was discovered by author Peter Hedges on a talk show titled ‘Too Heavy to Leave Their House’. On the program, Darlene shared how being overweight had impacted her life, including experiences of depression and suicidal ideation. Darlene Cates died of natural causes in 2017 aged 69 years.

**RELATED RESEARCH**

Obesity is one of the most prevalent public health issues in developed countries (OECD, 2015). Australia recently ranked as having the fifth highest rate of obesity worldwide and a recent study identified a significantly increased prevalence of extremely obese patients in Australian hospitals (Dennis et al., 2017).

Studies suggest that healthcare professionals often have a high-level of bias towards people who are overweight or obese, stereotyping them as ‘lazy, stupid and worthless’ (Schwartz et al., 2003). These judgmental attitudes negatively impact the quality of care healthcare professionals provide (Gray et al., 2011; Phelan et al., 2015; Setchell et al., 2014). Studies of healthcare students also depict negative attitudes, with derogatory and cynical humour often directed towards obese patients (Flint, 2015; Wear et al., 2006).

An empathic and a person-centred approach to care, which considers each person’s life experiences, perspectives, feelings and needs, are critical to understanding and supporting patients with obesity. Developing insights into one’s prejudices and unconscious biases is an important beginning step in changing attitudes and behaviours towards people who are overweight. Reflecting on What’s Eating Gilbert Grape provides multiple opportunities to explore deeply held beliefs and attitudes, and by so doing improving empathy towards people who are frequently stigmatised.

**DISCUSSION/REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. The film presents multiple personal and social issues associated with ‘being different’, perhaps exacerbated by living in a small town. What do you think the screen writer and director were hoping to portray in What’s Eating Gilbert Grape? Do you think they were successful in achieving this goal?
2. Gilbert’s behaviors and attitudes often seem to be at odds with protecting his mother’s privacy and dignity. Why do you think Gilbert behaved in this way when interacting with friends and people from the town?
3. How do you think Gilbert felt towards his mother, brother and life circumstances, and why?
4. What’s Eating Gilbert Grape is more than 20 years old and the prevalence of obesity has continued to increase. Do you think public attitudes about obesity have changed/improved in comparison to those portrayed in the film?
5. How do you think people who are obese might feel when in hospital, particularly when needing help to mobilise or requiring the use of lifting devices?
6. Social media impacts substantially on individual and group attitudes. How do you think social media impacts societal views about being overweight? How could social media be used to elicit empathy and a greater understanding of people with obesity?

**EXCERPTS FROM WHAT’S EATING GILBERT GRAPE**

Short trailer (2:09): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6sLIP3908w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6sLIP3908w)

Long trailer (7:26): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOtssqKWZbo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOtssqKWZbo)

**LINK**

Reflect on this TED talk where Dr Helen Riess’ describes an interaction with an overweight patient and how it impacted on her understanding of the power of empathy: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baHrcC8B4WM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baHrcC8B4WM).

**REFERENCES**


