Jack Nicholson has become widely known for “playing Jack Nicholson” in Hollywood films, so when he starred in Alexander Payne’s 2002 About Schmidt, his performance attracted a different sort of critical attention. It is the intent of this chapter, through a close reading of almost 600 message board posts on the IMDB.com fan forum, to show how fans have been communicating online about Nicholson’s role in this film over the past several years. Henry Jenkins describes fan message boards as one mode of participatory culture, which he envisions as a function of individuals interacting with each other in a now-convergent media culture according to a set of rules and outcomes that are not completely known to those in the community.1

That is certainly the case among the heavily used message boards on the IMDB.com website, where fans create postings that most often do not cite the points of others on the board but seem to serve as a consumer’s mode of self-expression. In most cases, fans give little explicit information about their identities, but their rhetoric often creates occasion for inferences about such characteristics as life stage. This chapter aims to show how About Schmidt is viewed as a novel representation of aging in film and how Nicholson’s performance and his character have remained an occupation of his fans through the seven years since the movie’s theatrical release. A brief description of the film’s storyline precedes the message board discussion.

The film, based loosely on a novel by Louis Begley, is set in director Payne’s hometown, Omaha, Nebraska, itself depicted as a symbolic doppelganger of a bland Midwestern United States.2 Nicholson
plays Warren R. Schmidt, who retires from a bureaucratic job as a life insurance actuary at age 66. At his pro forma retirement dinner, he is so miserable that he leaves the party room and heads for the restaurant bar for a solo drink. Later in the week, his newly minted MBA replacement blows off Warren’s attempt to feel that he can still contribute. His one-dimensional wife, Helen, whose very existence irritates him, drops dead soon afterward, and his only child, Jeannie, arrives from Denver for the funeral with her intended husband, Randall, a schemer/loser. Soon, Warren concludes that his life is purposeless and that, according to his actuarial charts, he is destined to die at age 74 with apparently nothing to show for it.

In the midst of all this, Warren sits, rudderless, aimlessly cruising through television channels with his remote control until his attention is captured by the voice of Angela Lansbury hailing him to view pictures of poverty-stricken children in the developing world. Warren gets out his checkbook and his pen. Upon learning that his “adoptive child” is a six-year-old Tanzanian boy named Ndugu, he begins a series of spleen-venting letters, irrationally trying to communicate to this young child his adult feelings and impressions about his new life and the questionable accomplishments in his accrued past. The letters become a plot device as Nicholson narrates them in Warren’s voice.

Warren pads dully about a house now filled with empty pizza boxes and other daily detritus. He is unshaven, gray whiskered, and haggard. Finally, missing Helen, he immerses himself in her personal belongings, down to smothering his face in her cold cream in a pitiable attempt to reconnect to her absent self. He stumbles upon a shoebox filled with yellowed love letters that reveal an affair between Helen and his best friend. Devastated, he jumps into the Winnebago that Helen had insisted on buying for their retirement years. He drives toward Denver to surprise Jeannie and, he hopes, stop her from marrying “beneath her.” Warren surprises her with a phone call saying he will arrive soon. She demurs, saying that he should arrive only a day or two before the wedding, not a week ahead.

He undertakes a road trip down a flat memory lane, one highlight of which is discovering that his childhood house has been replaced by a tire store. Ultimately, Warren arrives at his future in-laws’ house in Denver. Randall’s mother, played by Kathy Bates, is a wild New Age woman who makes the repressed Warren uncomfortable with her sexual openness. The most talked-about scene in the movie, by critics as well as the posters in the forum described in this chapter, is when the middle-aged, plump Bates is shown in a brief, nude, full-frontal shot slipping into a candle-ringed hot tub with her reticent guest.