

The Champion of English Section

Senior Division

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Book Title : *Still Alice*

Author : Lisa Genova

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**A profoundly sympathetic memoir of a fading
woman one should not miss**

‘My yesterdays were disappearing, and my tomorrows are uncertain, so what do I live for? I live for each day.’

It is in the fall of 2003 when Alice Holland, a tenured professor at Harvard, first experiences the ravages of Alzheimer’s disease. Alice, with her husband John and her three children, lead an enviable life. With her

intellectual brilliance, she has produced pioneering theories withstanding the passage of time, fostering the future of psycholinguistics. Yet, her distinguished career comes to a screeching halt as the untoward news is announced from the utterance of her doctor - she has Early-onset Alzheimer's Disease.

With physical fitness well surpassing women of her age and mental agility astonishing many, being diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease has never occurred as a possibility for her, not to mention the fact that dementia renders virtually inconceivable for women her age. First there is consternation, then comes melancholy. She mourns, for the ferocious attack of dementia has crippled her dignity and pride, marriage and family. She grieves, for the atrophy of her neurons that fundamentally formulate her identity and eventually annihilates it. She reproaches herself, for her incapacity to fulfill her role as a mother - to protect her children

from the callous disease.

Neurons that once constituted Alice Holland wither. Her identity, too, gradually evaporates. Evaluations void of accolades have proactively prompted her to depart from her profession. The deliberate avoidance of her colleagues veils their unease in confronting Alice's mental frailty. Meanwhile at home, John's fervent passion for science eclipses that for her as he would rather emotionally invest in his research. Apparently, he would relinquish his last sabbatical year with Alice for a shot at a magnificent scientific discovery. She is alienated by frigid colleagues and an estranged husband. It is Lydia, her youngest daughter, whom she assumes as reckless and unconventional, that understands her, and would advocate for her autonomy and self-determination.

Misfolded amyloid, Tau aggregation, defunct neurons. Alice once doubts whether love could transcend them.

Sixteen months after diagnosis, she could not conjure up the grossly unfamiliar man in front of her with her husband. The memory of herself, preserved in the dwindling intact and pristine part of her ravaged brain, is only accessible in momentary lucidity. Her children are reduced to mere strangers, extraneous, unassociated. Yet, at the end, when Lydia plays out a scene from a play, Alice, plagued by dementia, utters a word - 'love'.

Proteins misfolded, neurons dead, memories fade.
Still, love endures.

Still Alice provides a compelling account of life with Alzheimer's Disease. Written in Alice's point of view, we, as readers, first-handedly experience the horrendous disorientation, immense bewilderment and the impotence of watching memories being obliterated. The book enables the readers to attain a compassionate insight into lives tormented by the beastly disease and the profound

impact on their families. The sophistication of Genova's writing has fabulously constructed numerous poignant scenes, omitting cliché melodrama and cloying sentiment. While it serves as a candid portrayal of the harrowing disease, the writer has injected hope in the story that, despite the grim outlook, the capacity to love remains unscathed by the disease. In the impeccable execution of the author, this story is one weaved with intense emotions and uplifting scenes, enthralling and provocative.

Amongst the theme that the author has delved into, the most salient one is arguably the quality of life as a dementia patient. Alice hinges upon prestige and independence to acquire fulfillment and gaiety, and therefore, broods over the misery once her autonomy is seized. Notwithstanding her previous belief, her happiness and joy remain. Despite her past crumbling in the mayhem of her ravaged brain, she savors the

happiness her present surroundings offer - the scrumptious smell of her granddaughter, the wide-mouthed laugh of her grandson. The joy and the life she experiences are still significant and valid. This has challenged my erroneous stereotype that patients are impassive and are not worthy of a meaningful life. Irrefutably, yesterday dissipates, and tomorrow is abstract for them. Regardless of that, today shall be consequential, as now their lives are defined by each present moment. This has, in turn, provoked the thought that we, demented patient or not, shall cherish and relish the present. While the past is irrevocable and tomorrow is not promised, we shall not be disheartened, yet derive bliss from living intentionally and being present.

Additionally, the novel details the irrecoverable devastation of marriage and conciliation of estranged relationships. For Alice and John, it is their academic prowess, their lofty goals and their ardent enthusiasm for

research that bind them together. Their marriage, to a large extent, is sustained by their endorsement of each other's independence and pursuit of ambitions. Upon the gradual manifestation of Alzheimer's symptoms, the Alice who once perpetually awes him with her intellectual remarkability reduces to a soulless shell. The inability to connect intellectually and the dependency of Alice aggravate their estranged marriage, and partially contribute to the inevitable deterioration of their marital relationship. The unfathomable tragedy, nonetheless, creates a mutual understanding that rekindles the intimacy between Alice and Lydia, her youngest daughter. Disapproving of each other, they initially share a strained relationship. The faltering of Alice's professional life has prompted her to cease imposing her beliefs on Lydia, and since exhibits thorough understanding of her will. Lydia, being observant and forbearing, acknowledges her yearning for autonomy. The simultaneous alienation and reconciliation is delicately portrayed, illustrating the

complexity of relationships affected by the merciless disease. Besides, Genova has infused an apt proportion of optimism into the story and diluted the grimace. Without Genova's mastery, the attempt to do so would have been an abortive one, ending up offering a plethora of misery. It also accurately depicts the unpredictable nature of this disease and life after diagnosis - an onerous one but one certainly with hope.

From the subtly ominous indication of the impending calamity to the thorough obliteration of her identity, the once venerable Alice succumbs to the dire disease before our eyes. Seemingly dramatic, regrettably, though, it is the stark reality for many 'Alices' out there. Dementia patients witness the perilous iceberg of Alzheimer's closing in, yet they are on destined courses, unable to steer away. As their neurons atrophy, their memories evanesce. Their despondency and dejection is inconceivable. It is disheartening that a cure is still

unattainable to mitigate their anguish. Truthfully, we are not scientists and our power to make a difference to the status quo is finite. Nevertheless, any concrete actions, however minuscule it seems, exert substantial impact on the uphill battle to eradicate Alzheimer's Disease. By making donations and arousing awareness, we are paving the way for a better future for our loved ones and ourselves.

A riveting work of Lisa Genova, the gripping book has offered me an intriguing insight into the predicament of Alzheimer's victims, as well as those evolving around them. The account of Alice, raw and compelling, has exposed the utterly dismaying side of Alzheimer's and the horrors of it. Readers will live Alice's life alongside her, perplexed as her at times and weep with her at others. With rousing narrative and the rare eloquence of an ingenious writer, it is only natural that it has garnered critical acclaim and instant recognition since its

publication.

Terrifying, stirring, heart-wrenching. This is a masterpiece that one should definitely not miss.