

*Still Alice* by Lisa Navaro

Reviewed by Michael Weston, spouse of an Alzheimer's patient

I have recently re-read "Still Alice" for the second time, and found it so fascinating that I could not put it down. It is the heartbreaking story of a woman who knows she is developing Early Onset Alzheimer's disease, told through her eyes as the progression of the disease unfolds.

While her diagnosis seems to flow too easily, from mysterious memory lapses and getting lost in familiar surroundings, to one of Alzheimer's disease, I don't think it is altogether uncommon with advances in medical diagnostic techniques today.

I feel the most interesting aspect to "Still Alice" is living the development of Alzheimer's disease, through the eyes of a highly educated person who knows that something is happening to her, and following Alice and her family through recognition, denial, diagnosis, denial, acceptance, treatment and the multitude of issues they face along the way. From her initial "memory lapses," to finding an alternative cause (menopause), to getting lost while running, not remembering how she got somewhere, and all the other stages she went through coming to recognition and acceptance of her condition – I recognized a path very similar to that followed by my wife in her path through this process.

Following Alice's husband, John, along his path, from disbelief to denial, to the male response of "I can fix this problem", through more denial and finally to acceptance, the emotions displayed and shared by the couple and their children are all too real and familiar. Our grown children have experienced these same uncertainties, emotions, discussions, disagreements and realities, faced by Alice's adult children, because of the hereditary nature of some types of this horrible disease. The quandary of wanting to know, yet not wanting to know, is real, and very emotional, and is well presented by the author in "Still Alice."

I feel "Still Alice" illustrates how friends and co-workers respond to the EOAD patient by 'pulling away', because they don't understand the disease and don't know how to act around someone with dementia, whether out of their own fear or ignorance, or the stigma placed on dementia and Alzheimer's patients by our society in the recent past. I have found this to be a very realistic portrayal of how many patients are treated today, by both friends and co-workers.

I think the portrayal of her handling by the doctor's throughout her treatment was a bit idealized, but may be truer, in a large facility with a more specialized staff. Most doctors today simply do not have the time to devote to handling patients the way the author presents Alice's care. This is not a criticism of doctors, as much as a criticism of the state of treatment of Alzheimer's patients by the medical community as a whole.

I feel "Still Alice" is an excellent presentation of the emotions I think a person going through this disease, and knowing what is happening to them, might experience. It clearly shows how the disease affects different members of the same family differently, and describes how those family members handle the emotions on a daily basis.

I have recommended "Still Alice" to my family, to my Alzheimer's Support Group, to my Optimist Club friends, and have given copies to our church staff, because the book so expertly discusses the varied physical and emotional aspects of this disease. If you have a family member or friend who has a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, please read this excellent novel by Dr. Genova. It will be well worth your time and money.