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Resilience and Vulnerability: A Journey of the Self in Lisa Genova's *Still Alice*

Maha Samih Alanbagi

Al Naharain University/ College of Engineering

Maha.samih@nahrainuniv.edu.iq

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Abstract

The novel deals with one of the most important social dilemmas of our contemporary society. It tackles the issue of Alzheimer disease which has become very common in our lives worldwide, almost all families have suffered from this illness, whether a close family member or a relative. What makes Lisa Genova's novel special is that the author is a neuroscience and has studies many cases with Alzheimer, this as many critics assured adds authenticity and credibility to the main character Alice, Genova commented in an interview that she has mirrored the condition of Alzheimer from the inside, where the narrator Alice is an eloquent university professor suffering from Alzheimer. Although the novel is quite emotional and touching it widens the readers perception about the illness and gives an optimistic conclusion that even though Alice lost her memory and eventually identity, she still keeps her humanity, where she is capable of having emotions of love, joy, and compassions. The paper is divided into four parts: first giving an overview about Genova and her career as a researcher and a scientist, then explaining Alice character, after that dealing with the theme of identity, and finally a conclusion sums up the findings of the study.

I. INTRODUCTION

Lisa Genova, the author of *Still Alice*, is a neuroscientist by training and the New York Times bestselling author of five novels. They include *Still Alice*, *Left Neglected*, *Love Anthony*, *Inside the O'Briens*, and *Every Note Played*, as well as a memoir, *Remember*: The *Science of Memory* and the *Art of Forgetting*. Genova's novels have been translated into 37 languages and are published in 50 countries. *Still Alice* was adapted into an Academy Award-winning film starring Julianne Moore, who won the Academy Award for Best Actress (Ruf, 2015). Before turning to writing in 2007, Genova worked in biotech as a research scientist and consultation to drug companies. Her first novel, *Still Alice*, was originally self-published. Genova lives outside Boston with her husband, and children. She is a passionate advocate for biomedical research. In order to pursue this advocacy, she volunteers with several organizations, including the Alzheimer's Association, where she is trained to speak about early-onset Alzheimer's disease and care-giving. Maslin, Praises the novel's scientific accuracy and emotional power in depicting cognitive decline. "The neurological details feel chillingly real... Genova masterfully charts the disintegration of a formidable intellect."

Genova has appeared on various shows and has written for several publications. Genova holds an MA in education and a BA in psychology. Currently, she is a Barry B. Saslaw Award winner for Outstanding Writing. She is also a Stephen, John G. Morris/United Nations Faith and Hope Award finalist.

II. AN OVERVIEW: *STILL ALICE*

Still Alice (2007), the debut novel by neuroscientist-turned-author Lisa Genova, is a groundbreaking work of contemporary fiction that offers an intimate and unflinching portrait of early-onset Alzheimer's disease. More than just a story about illness, it's a profound exploration of identity, memory, love, and what it means to be oneself when the very foundation of self – the mind – begins to unravel. Hanna (2014), discusses *Still Alice* as a key cultural text shaping modern understanding of dementia, particularly its focus on the subjective experience and threat to identity. The novel is narrated almost exclusively from Alice Howland's point of view, in the present tense. It creates an immediate, immersive, and deeply unsettling experience. The reader doesn't just observe Alice's decline; they experience her confusion, fear, frustration, and moments of clarity as they happen. We are inside her disintegrating mind, sharing her subjective reality. Genova leverages her PhD in neuroscience to depict the symptoms, progression, and science of Alzheimer's disease with remarkable accuracy and authenticity. Christer (2018) argues, that narratives like *Still Alice* (and the interactions within them) contribute to re-imagining identity and communication in dementia, moving beyond the "loss of self" trope. Medical consultations, test results, and physiological explanations are woven into the narrative seamlessly. Despite the complex subject matter, Genova's prose is clear, direct, and accessible. She avoids overly technical terms or explains it naturally within Alice's understanding. This makes the difficult subject matter approachable for a wide audience. The language is generally straightforward, simple, and often emotional. Genova prioritizes clarity and emotional honesty over lyrical flourishes or complex metaphors. This simplicity mirrors the way Alzheimer's can strip away complexity. It also prevents sentimentality, allowing the raw emotion of Alice's situation to emerge naturally from the events themselves, rather than from tense description. Some critics have described this as "workmanlike" prose. Genova meticulously details Alice's internal cognitive processes – the struggle to find words ("tip-of-the-tongue" moments), the loss of orientation, the confusion about time and place, the fleeting awareness of her own lapses, and the eventual simplification of thought. Alice's changing perception of her sensory environment (sights, sounds, textures) is also noted, reflecting how the disease alters her interaction with the world.

While the story follows a chronological timeline of diagnosis and progression, the narrative often feels episodic. Chapters or sections focus on specific incidents or challenges (a lecture gone wrong, getting lost, a family gathering). This structure subtly reflects the fragmentation of Alice's memory and experience. McDonagh (2013), emphasizes that Alice doesn't passively succumb to the disease. She actively struggles to maintain her identity and connection to her life: writing notes, taking tests, giving the speech, trying to navigate her environment. Alice's reliance on lists, notes on her BlackBerry, and reminders serves both a practical function within the story and a stylistic device, visually representing her attempts to anchor herself in a vanishing reality. The novel is primarily character-driven, centered on Alice's internal journey and her changing relationships. There is no external mystery or complex plot beyond the progression of the disease. The power comes from the emotional truth of Alice's experience, the fear, vulnerability, frustration, moments of surprising insight, love, and the poignant struggle to maintain her sense of self.

The Novel falls within Medical Realism, using fiction to accurately portray a specific disease experience. However, its core achievement is Empathetic Realism. Its primary goal is not just accuracy but fostering deep understanding and compassion for the subjective experience of living with Alzheimer's. It prioritizes emotional resonance and human connection alongside clinical detail. While powerful, its style generally lacks the complex narrative structures, dense symbolic layers, or highly experimental prose often associated with literary fiction. Its strength lies in its accessibility and emotional directness. Dialogue becomes increasingly simplified and repetitive as Alice's language skills deteriorate, realistically mirroring the progression of the disease. Conversations often highlight misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. Genova's style in *Still Alice* is characterized by its constant first-person present perspective, clinical accuracy delivered with accessible clarity, understated and direct prose,

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intense focus on internal cognitive and sensory experience, episodic structure reflecting mental fragmentation, and unwavering commitment to emotional truth and empathy. While not stylistically ornate or experimental, its power lies precisely in this clear, immersive, and authentic rendering of a devastating experience from the inside out. It prioritizes emotional impact and understanding over complex literary devices, making it a landmark work in empathetic medical realism.

III. ALICE IN *STILL ALICE*

> **The disconnect between her thoughts and her reality was widening into a chasm. Some days, it felt like she was floating just outside her own skin, hovering a few inches above the woman who moved through her house, spoke to her family, performed the rituals of her day. She watched this familiar stranger pick up her favorite mug, respond to the name 'Alice,' shuffle through papers on her desk. But the woman's gestures felt rehearsed, her smiles automatic, her conversations scripted fragments of a life she could no longer quite grasp.** (Genova, p.228)

At 50, Alice is at the peak of her career – a renowned Harvard professor, expert in linguistics, sought-after speaker, and published author. Kirkus explained that "The early-onset Alzheimer's of a 50-year-old woman is rendered with heartbreaking poignancy and profound insight... Genova's background in neuroscience lends authority to the medical details, while her empathic storytelling gifts convey the emotional truths." he emphasizes the effectiveness of Genova's scientific background combined with emotional storytelling, noting the "heartbreaking poignancy" of an expert losing her mind. Her identity is deeply rooted in her intellect, professional achievements, and control over language and thought. From the outset, Alice's career defines her. She is a successful professor at Harvard University, a world-famous expert in linguistics and cognitive psychology. Her life revolves around research, lectures, publishing, and prestigious speaking engagements.

> **"Alice Howland, Harvard professor of cognitive psychology, recipient of the prestigious William James Award for outstanding contributions to psychological research, world-renowned expert in linguistics, happily married mother of three grown children, fifty years old, stood at the front of the auditorium..."** (Genova, p. 15 - Prologue).

Critics widely praise Genova's choice to make Alice an expert. Kirkus Reviews states it creates "heartbreaking poignancy" as we witness "a cognitive psychology expert... helplessly watching her own mind unravel" (Kirkus). The specific nature of her profession makes the loss more visceral and intellectually terrifying. Her struggle isn't just with forgetting names; it's the disintegration of the tools she used to understand the world and herself. Her professional knowledge becomes a curse, forcing her to confront the grim prognosis with chilling clarity initially. "The irony that she, a woman who had built her career and identity on the foundation of her intellect, should lose her mind was beyond cruel." (Genova, p. 60). Genova masterfully employs dramatic irony. Alice's expertise is in the very faculties – memory, language, reasoning – that Alzheimer's destroys. This makes her decline uniquely shocking and touching, both for her and the reader. Her professional background allows her an unusual level of self-awareness in the early stages. She recognizes the symptoms (losing words, getting lost) as neurological red flags long before others might. "She thought about the misplaced keys, the forgotten name, the confusion in the lecture hall, the lost run, the inability to find the bathroom in her own restaurant. She was a cognitive psychology professor at Harvard, for Christ's sake. She knew what this looked like." (Genova, p. 68). This allows Genova to explore the psychological terror of diagnosis with unique depth. While acknowledging the novel's power, Clark suggests the prose can be "workmanlike" and notes the supporting characters

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primarily serve to illuminate Alice's experience rather than being fully developed individuals themselves. ("...the writing is straightforward, even workmanlike... the other characters... are largely there to service Alice's story.")

making Alice so exceptional (Harvard professor, young, fit) risks distancing the story from the experience of 'average' Alzheimer's patients, often older and without such elite backgrounds. It unintentionally suggests her loss is more tragic because of her high status. Genova arguably uses Alice's exceptionalism precisely to challenge societal biases about worth tied to achievement. By stripping away the accomplishments of someone so evidently 'valuable' by society, the novel forces the question: (Is her inherent value diminished?) The answer, explored through Lydia and later John, is a resounding "no." However, the critique highlights the risk that some readers might initially perceive her loss as greater, reinforcing the very bias the novel seeks to distort. As noted in a review in *The Guardian*, "The fact that Alice is so clever makes her decline particularly shocking, but... it also risks making her seem exceptional" (Clark, 2009).

Lucy Burke argues that the novel uses Alice's profession to directly critique neoliberal values that equate personal worth with productivity and cognitive ability. Alice's journey becomes a powerful deconstruction of this idea. Alice's initial identity is her achievement. The novel accurately shows this identity crumbling. The critical question becomes: What remains? The narrative argues that her core humanity – her capacity for love, fear, connection – persists beyond utility. Her high achievement serves as the starkest possible backdrop against which to affirm intrinsic human value. Her profession isn't just about irony; it's the setup for the novel's core philosophical argument about personhood.

As a neuroscientist herself, Genova leverages Alice's profession to deliver scientifically accurate descriptions of intellectual decline and neurological concepts in an accessible way through Alice's own understanding. This lends credibility and depth.

Alice's professional lens allows Genova to seamlessly integrate explanations of anterograde amnesia, semantic memory loss, and neuroanatomy (e.g., references to the hippocampus - p. 96) into the narrative without feeling didactic. Alice's internal monologue naturally grapples with these concepts. While Alzheimer's is statistically more common in older populations, early-onset cases (like Alice's) do occur in individuals in their prime career years. The Alzheimer's Association notes that approximately 200,000 Americans under 65 have younger-onset Alzheimer's (Alzheimer's Association, 2023 Facts and Figures). Making Alice a high-achieving professional reflects a reality for some in this demographic. While perhaps not "average," Alice's situation is representative of a significant group whose dementia disrupts careers, finances, and family life at a radically different life stage than typically portrayed. Her profession highlights the unique devastation of early-onset on active, working lives.

Her life is structured, organized, and defined by precision. She thrives on intellectual challenges and expects high performance from herself and others (her running routines, lecture preparations). Her sense of self relies heavily on control over her schedule, her research, her words, her understanding of the world. This makes her vulnerability to Alzheimer's particularly devastating. While loving, her relationships (especially with Lydia and initially John) can be marked by intellectual distance or judgment. Her primary mode of interaction is often mental rather than purely emotional. The novel gradually follows the loss of her reasoning abilities – forgetting words mid-lecture (Stanford, UCLA p. 228), getting lost on campus (p. 47), failing to recognize her daughter (p. 80), forgetting Christmas gifts (p. 248). Each incident is a terrifying loss of control and a blow to her professional and social identity "She didn't know who she was supposed to be... I am not Alice. I am not Alice." p. 228). She grieves the vanishing of her mind and her former self "I miss myself... I miss being whole." p. 253). As a linguistics expert, the loss of language is profoundly ironic and painful. She moves from complex lectures to struggling with basic words "She couldn't find the word 'run'. It was gone." p. 271, culminating in the simple, primal phrase "Love" as her main connection (p. 292). She retains an instinctive ability to sense emotions in others, like Lydia's sadness, and respond with comfort, even without remembering the context. As complex thought fades, she finds moments of

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contentment in sensory experiences and simple presence watching birds, feeling the sun "It was a beautiful day." p. 292. This suggests an essential self rooted in being, not thinking. She naturally grasps the idea that her worth isn't tied to utility. Watching a butterfly, she thinks, "It didn't do anything important... It just was... maybe just being here, being alive, was enough." (p. 271) Lydia becomes crucial in affirming this: "You don't have to be brilliant or remember everything to be important. You matter to me just because you're you." (p. 285). This external proof highlights her inherent worth beyond perception or function. John's initial struggle from losing his intellectual partner. He grieves the loss of "Professor Howland." His journey involves learning to see and value the person who remains "He missed her. The person he loved. And he saw that person, diminished but still present, looking back at him." (p. 295) Alice shifts from being John's equal partner to someone requiring care, forcing a revaluation of their relationship and his understanding of her identity.

Alice Howland is a tragic yet profound exploration of identity Genova uses her decline not just to depict the horrors of Alzheimer's, but to divide the very nature of self. The novel argues that while Alice loses the self constructed around intellect, achievement, and control, other facets persist. Love, fear, joy, grief, and the capacity for connection form a resilient core of self that Alzheimer's attacks more slowly. Alice's inherent worth and dignity are not diminished by her loss of productivity or reasoning. She remains Alice – loved, valuable, and human – simply by existing. The title's irony (she is losing her intellectual self) is countered by its truth (her essential personhood, her emotional core, her relational identity as mother/wife/loved one persist). The final scene, where she forgets her diagnosis but responds to love (p. 292), powerfully encapsulates this paradox. She is diminished, transformed, but undeniably, still Alice.

IV. THE THEME OF IDENTITY IN *STILL ALICE*

"Her identity was, for better or worse, wrapped up in a mind that had always been capable and reliable." (Genova, p. 68) One of the most powerful themes in Genova's novel, *Still Alice*, is the struggle with identity. The changes that occur in Alice and in her husband and children are changes of identity as Alice experiences a loss of self. Her descriptions of the losses of time, memory, purpose, and the ability to communicate, among others, are very well done and deeply moving. The first-person perspective taken by Alice helps the reader to understand the expanse of her experience with Alzheimer's. The perspective also changes as Alice loses the language involved in regulating what is at first an understandable "function." The changes in her ability to express deeper thoughts and feelings and to know who she is as a person create profound frustration and sorrow. How she copes and how she now spends her time are vivid descriptions of grief and the tragic consequences of a loss of identity (Ruf, 2015).

Lisa Genova's *Still Alice* offers a profound and devastating exploration of identity disintegration through the lens of early-onset Alzheimer's disease. Charles, commented in (The Washington Post), highlighting the novel's ability to generate profound empathy for the Alzheimer's experience, calling it "heartbreaking" and "illuminating."

Alice Howland's identity is deeply rooted in her intellect. She is a renowned Harvard professor of cognitive psychology, a respected researcher, an expert in linguistics, and a powerful communicator. Her sense of self is inextricably tied to her ability to think, reason, remember, analyze, and articulate complex ideas. While Burke, comments on the neoliberal values (using Alice's high status to challenge worth, productivity), her work also engages with the choice of portraying such an exceptional figure. This choice inherently raises questions about representativeness and whose dementia stories are centered. Burke argues Genova uses Alice's specific identity to powerfully deconstruct societal links between worth, productivity, and cognitive ability. The novel affirms personhood beyond utility through the persistence of Alice's emotional core and relational identity, particularly through Lydia. "Genova's novel... insists on the significance of forms of being and relation that are not predicated on cognitive capacity or productivity". Alice is delivering a keynote lecture at Stanford University, a prestigious event she has done countless times. Mid-sentence, she completely loses her train of thought. She stares at her notes, but the

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words become meaningless symbols. She cannot recall the central concept of her own life's research, the topic she is supposed to be the expert on.

> **She stood there, mute, stranded, frantically searching the coastline of her mind for the words, for the ideas, for *herself*. Where was she? She looked out at the audience. Hundreds of eyes stared back at her, waiting. She felt the heat of humiliation flood her face. She couldn't find her place. She couldn't find the words. She couldn't find the thoughts. She felt like someone else was living her life, pretending to be her, and she was trapped inside, watching. Like an imposter. She didn't feel like herself, whoever that was anymore.** (Genova, 228)

The inability to recall her own research strikes at the heart of her professional identity as a cognitive psychologist and linguistics expert. Her value, confidence, and sense of self are built on this foundation. Also, the public humiliation and the failure happens on a prominent stage, amplifying the loss. The audience's expectation of "Professor Howland" clashes violently with her internal reality. Thus, she feels like an imposter trapped inside, watching someone else perform her life. This perfectly captures the disconnect between her former cognitively capable self and the current self-experiencing failure. The loss of self, where "She didn't feel like herself, whoever that was anymore" underscores the existential crisis. Her identity is dissolving because the cognitive abilities that defined it are failing. The question "whoever that was" highlights the terrifying loss of self-knowledge. This moment is a essential point where Alice (and the reader) confronts the brutal reality that Alzheimer's isn't just stealing memories; it's erasing the very person she was – the Harvard professor, the expert, the articulate thinker. Her identity is her mind, and it's under siege. Alzheimer's directly attacks the very faculties that define her. Forgetting words, losing track of lectures, getting lost on her own campus, being unable to follow complex arguments – each cognitive loss is not just an inconvenience; it's an existential deletion of who she is. Her professional identity crumbles first and most visibly. Therefore, identity relies on a continuous, coherent narrative of the self-built from memories. Alice loses access to her personal history – memories of her children's childhoods, her career milestones, her relationship with her husband. Without this internal story, her sense of continuity and self-coherence fragments. She forgets who people are to her (e.g., mistaking her daughter for a stranger) and what things mean to her (e.g., the significance of her own research). This separates her connection to her past self and the relationships that shaped her, leaving her adrift in the present moment without context.

As Alice's internal sense of self weakens, she increasingly feels like she is performing the role of "Alice." She watches herself go through the motions of her life (lecturing, mothering, socializing) but feels disconnected from the actions and the person performing them ("trapped inside, watching"). She feels like an imposter in her own life. Her identities as "Professor Howland," "Dr. Howland," "John's wife," and even "Mom" become unsustainable as she can no longer fulfill the expectations of these roles. Society's recognition and validation of these roles vanish, further undermining her external sense of self. Just like when John convinces Alice to attend a departmental faculty meeting, hoping it will be good for her. Instead, she becomes overwhelmed and confused. Worse, she realizes her colleagues no longer treat her as a peer but as an irrelevant burden.

> **She tried to follow the conversation, but she couldn't grasp the thread... She looked around the table. No one was looking at her. No one was asking for her opinion. They were treating her as if she weren't there, as if she were already gone. She wasn't Alice Howland anymore, not to them. She was John's wife with Alzheimer's... She felt invisible. She was invisible." (Genova, p. 253)**

Alice attends the meeting attempting to inhabit her former role as "Professor Howland" and valued

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colleague. But, society (her colleagues) actively strips her of that role – they ignore her, don't solicit her input, and finally, reduce her to "John's wife with Alzheimer's." Her feeling of being "invisible" underscores the loss of social recognition essential to maintaining that professional identity. She is physically present but socially ignored from the role she once held. These scenes powerfully show Alice trying to act out her established social roles (Professor, Mother, Colleague) but failing because Alzheimer's destroys the cognitive abilities required to sustain them. Worse, she becomes acutely aware of the disconnect between the role she's expected to play and her internal reality, feeling like an "imposter," a "failure," or "invisible." The external validation and recognition associated with these roles vanish, accelerating the disintegration of her identity as defined by her place in the social world.

Genova carefully shows that while cognitive abilities and autobiographical memory fade, elements of Alice's emotional core and deeply ingrained personality traits persist longer. Her love for her family, especially her children, remains a powerful, although sometimes confused, force. Moments of joy, fear, frustration, and connection still occur, suggesting an essential "self" existing beneath the cognitive scaffolding. The true horror for Alice lies in her awareness of the loss, especially in the early and middle stages. She understands she is losing herself, which causes profound terror, grief, and shame. This awareness itself is a key part of her identity during this phase – the "self" that observes the disintegration.

Lisa Genova powerfully illustrates that while Alzheimer's disease devastates Alice's cognitive abilities (memory, language, reasoning), her fundamental emotional core – her capacity for deep love, fear, joy, grief, and connection – persists much longer. This creates a profound dissonance: Alice increasingly loses the cognitive tools to understand, express, or contextualize her feelings, but the feelings themselves remain potent and real. Her "self" isn't entirely erased; the emotional essence endures even as the reasoning framework crumbles. That is clear when Alice finds an old photo of her daughters as young children. While she struggles mentally to place the photo or name her daughters, the feeling of love and connection is overwhelming and intact.

> **She picked it up. Three little girls, laughing, arms slung around each other's shoulders, squinting in the sun. She didn't know who they were, but she loved them. She studied their faces, and she loved them. The feeling was huge, bigger than her, bigger than the room, bigger than her life. It was love, pure and certain, and it took her breath away. She couldn't name them, but she knew them. She knew them with her heart. She didn't remember their names or when the picture was taken or where, but she knew she loved them. She held the picture to her chest.** (Genova, p. 275)

Alice often experiences intense anxiety and fear she cannot explain or locate the source of. The feeling of fear persists even when the reason for it is cognitively inaccessible.

> **She was afraid, but she didn't know why. The fear had no name, no face, no story. It was just there, like the air, all around her, thick and suffocating. She stood very still, waiting for it to pass, but it didn't. It pressed in on her. She was lost. She didn't know where she was or how she'd gotten there. She didn't know what to do. The panic was real. The terror was real. Even if she couldn't remember why**." (Genova, p. 238)

Alice retains moments of awareness about her losses, leading to profound grief. While she may forget specific details, the feeling of loss and sadness lingers. Genova uses these moments to argue that identity isn't solely cognitive. Alice's journey shows that the capacity for deep feeling – love, fear, grief, empathy – forms a resilient core of the self that Alzheimer's attacks more slowly and less completely than mental faculties. The tragedy lies in Alice's increasing inability to understand, express, or contextualize these powerful, persistent emotions due to cognitive loss, leading to profound isolation

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and frustration, even as the feelings themselves prove her humanity endures.

The novel forces Alice and the reader to confront a fundamental question: Does her intrinsic value as a person, her identity as "Alice," disappear because she can no longer think, remember, or contribute in ways society values?

Through characters like Lydia ,who sees and loves Alice beyond her intellect, and Alice's own poignant final message to her future self "live in the moment", Genova argues for the existence of a self-worth that transcends cognitive ability. Alice's identity, in its most essential, perhaps primal form, resides in her capacity to *experience* and *feel*, and in the love others hold for her, even when she cannot fully reciprocate cognitively. The novel powerfully argues that Alice's essential identity her inherent worth and personhood exists independently of her cognitive achievements ,Harvard professorship, research, her productivity, her usefulness to others, or even her ability to remember her own accomplishments. While Alzheimer's strips away the markers of her successful life (career, intellect, independence), it does not erase her fundamental self. Her value is intrinsic, not contingent on what she can do or provide. This is most poignantly affirmed through relationships and moments of pure being. For example, when Lydia, Alice's youngest daughter and often the most distant initially, becomes the one who most consistently sees and values Alice for who she is, not what she can no longer do. She connects with Alice's emotional core and presence, not her fading intellect or past achievements. “Mom, you are not your disease.
You’re still you. I see you. I hear you. You’re my mother.
You don’t have to be brilliant or remember everything to be important. You matter to me just because you’re you.’ (Genova, p. 285) Lydia explicitly rejects the equation of Alice with her Alzheimer's "not your disease". She affirms that Alice's core identity "you," "my mother" persists. Thus, she states Alice's importance is not based on intellect or memory "brilliant," "remember everything" but on her inherent being "just because you’re you". This directly challenges utilitarian views of identity. Even as Alice loses grasp of her past accomplishments and current capabilities, she retains an intuitive sense that her existence holds value beyond utility. This is often expressed as a quiet feeling of being, or a resistance to being defined solely by loss.

> **She watched a yellow butterfly land on a purple flower. It fluttered its wings, drank, and flew away. It didn't do anything important. It didn't cure cancer or win a Nobel Prize. It just was. And it was beautiful. She felt like that butterfly sometimes. Not doing anything important anymore. But maybe just being here, being alive, was enough." (Genova, p. 271)**

Genova often uses nature imagery for this theme. A closely related moment is "She sat on the bench and watched the birds. She didn't know their names or where they flew from or to. She just watched them. She felt peaceful. She felt like she belonged here, simply sitting, simply being." (Genova, p. 294) Alice instinctively compares herself to the butterfly or the act of simply watching birds entities whose value lies purely in their existence and essence "just was," "beautiful," "simply being", not in achievement or function "didn't do anything important," "didn't cure cancer". She finds peace in the idea that "being alive, was enough," asserting an intrinsic worth separate from productivity. While John struggles significantly with the loss of his intellectual partner and equal, a significant moment occurs where he expresses grief for Alice herself, not just her former capabilities.

> **"He took her hand. ‘I miss you, Alice.’**
> **She looked at him, confused. ‘I’m right here.’**
> **‘I know,’ he said. ‘I miss you.’**
> **He wasn't talking about her cooking or her driving or her ability to debate cognitive theory. He missed her. The person he loved. And he saw that person, diminished but still present, looking back at him." (Genova, p. 295)**

John's repeated "I miss you" while Alice is physically present signifies a grief for her essential self and their

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connection, transcending the loss of her specific skills or role as a colleague. The narration clarifies he misses "her," the person, recognizing her presence "diminished but still present" even amidst profound cognitive loss. This affirms her identity beyond usefulness. *Still Alice* challenges societal notions that equate a person's worth with their productivity, intellect, or utility. Through Lydia's affirmation, Alice's moments of peaceful being, John's grief for the person, the caregiver's focus on relational presence, and Alice's detachment from her own past achievements, Genova argues that identity and inherent worth reside in the core self – the capacity for love, the simple fact of existence, and the unique essence of a person – which persists even when cognitive abilities, achievements, and utility fade. Alice remains Alice, valuable because she is Alice, not for what she accomplishes.

Still Alice powerfully demonstrates how fragile our constructed identities are. They depend on the proper functioning of our brains. Genova removes the framework (memory, language, executive function) to reveal how much of "who we are" is vulnerable to biological catastrophe. This is terrifying but also a call to recognize the preciousness and contingency of our sense of self. As Alice increasingly forgets her own prestigious awards and publications. The fact that she can forget them highlights how these tributes, while part of her life story, are not the foundation of her identity. "She pulled a book off the shelf. Cognitive Psychology and Linguistic Structure. By Alice Howland. She didn't remember writing it. She flipped through the pages. The words looked complicated, dense. She couldn't understand them. She put the book back on the shelf. It felt like it belonged to someone else." (Genova, p. 260) Her important work, the peak of her professional achievement, becomes mentally inaccessible and feels alien "belonged to someone else". This detachment underscores that while her achievements are lost to her, she still exists. Her identity isn't fixed in the book; the book has become disconnected from the living person holding it. *Still Alice* challenges societal notions that equate a person's worth with their productivity, intellect, or utility. Through Lydia's confirmation, Alice's moments of peaceful being, John's grief for the person, the caregiver's focus on relational presence, and Alice's detachment from her own past achievements, Genova argues that identity and inherent worth reside in the core self – the capacity for love, the simple fact of existence, and the unique essence of a person – which persists even when intellectual abilities, achievements, and utility fade. Alice remains Alice, valuable because she is Alice, not for what she accomplishes. Genova's exploration of identity in *Still Alice* is multi-layered and deeply moving. Genova, from an interviews on NPR interviews around the book's releases, says: "I wanted to write a story that would put you inside the mind of someone with Alzheimer's... to understand what it feels like, not just what it looks like from the outside."

V. CONCLUSION

Genova argues that identity is not merely a mental edifice. Even as Alice's memories fade and her intellect dims, a core self persists. This self is felt in emotion, the enduring love for her family, the flashes of joy, the deep-seated fear. It's present in instinct and sensory experience, the comfort of familiar qualities, the primeval response to music, the feeling of the sun. It resides in embodied existence, the simple act of being present in a moment.

Identity is also shown to be fundamentally social. While Alice loses the ability to intellectually grasp her role as mother or wife, the bonds themselves hold meaning. Lydia's patient presence, John's conflicted care (even when flawed), and the moments of pure, wordless connection demonstrate that part of who Alice is exists within the love and recognition offered by others, even when she cannot cognitively respond in expected ways.

The title itself is powerful to the theme of the novel. Alice is 'still Alice'. Not the Alice of Harvard, not the Alice with perfect recall, but an Alice whose essential humanity, capacity for feeling, and right to dignity remain intact. Her identity evolves, becoming less defined by past achievements and more anchored in the immediate, sensory, and emotional present. The powerful final scene, where Alice recognizes the pure, uncomplicated love deriving from Lydia, underscores this. It's a moment of profound being,

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stripped of intellectual context, yet undeniably authentic and identity-affirming.

Genova concludes that while Alzheimer's ravages the mind and strips away the trappings of a life built on intellect, it does not defeat the person. Identity is revealed to be more resilient and multifaceted than we often acknowledge, rooted in feeling, connection, instinct, and the persistent spark of consciousness, however dimmed. *Still Alice* challenges us to expand our definition of self beyond cognition and to recognize the enduring, irreducible humanity that persists even when the mirror of memory shatters. It is a poignant testament to the idea that we are, fundamentally, more than the sum of our memories or our intellect; we are the persistent flame of awareness and connection that flickers even in the gathering darkness.

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