



The Neuroscientist With Books in Her Trunk

Lisa Genova was not your average first-time novelist. Most people who sit down to write their first novel do not have a PhD in neuroscience from Harvard University. Lisa did. She earned it in 1998.

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She also had a very personal reason to write. Her grandmother had developed Alzheimer's disease. Lisa understood the science of what was happening inside her grandmother's brain better than almost anyone. What she never got to do was ask her grandmother how it actually felt from the inside.

So Lisa decided to imagine it.

She wrote a novel called "Still Alice." It is about Alice Howland, a brilliant Harvard professor who is diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease at the age of 50. The story is told from Alice's point of view, so the reader slowly loses track of things right along with her.

There was only one problem: the publishing world didn't think anyone would want to read it.

A Year of No

Lisa spent about a year sending her manuscript to literary agents. The rejection letters came back steadily. Some of the people who turned her down said the topic was too narrow and the audience for a book about Alzheimer's would be too small.

Finally, she decided she would publish the book herself.

When she told the last agent she had contacted about her plan, he warned her against it. Self-publishing, he told her, would kill her writing career.

Lisa did it anyway.

The Trunk of the Car

In 2007, Lisa self-published "Still Alice" through a company called iUniverse. Now she had a book. What she did not have was a publisher, a marketing department, or a single bookstore that had heard of her.

So she became all three.

Lisa went looking for her readers wherever she could find them. She connected with people living with Alzheimer's and with the families and support groups who cared for them. These were exactly the readers the agents said didn't exist, and they turned out to want this book very much.

She also sold copies herself, straight out of her car. As she later told *The Week*, only a year before her book hit the bestseller list, she had been selling it out of the trunk of her car.

Picture a Harvard neuroscientist standing beside her car, popping the trunk, and handing over a copy of her novel. It is not the image most people have of a literary career. But it worked.

A Friend With a Friend

Word of mouth started to spread. Along the way, Lisa met another local writer, Julia Fox Garrison, who had also gotten her start by self-publishing. Garrison introduced Lisa to a literary agent.

This agent did not tell her the audience was too small. Instead, the agent sold "Still Alice" to Simon & Schuster for six figures, as part of a two-book deal.

Remember the agent who said self-publishing would end her career? It turned out to be the beginning of it.

Still Alice, Still Selling

Simon & Schuster published "Still Alice" through its Pocket Books imprint in January 2009. The book debuted at number five on The New York Times bestseller list and stayed on the list for more than 40 weeks.

It has since been sold in about 30 countries and translated into more than 20 languages. By 2012, more than a million copies were in print.

Then came the movie. In the film version of "Still Alice," Julianne Moore played Alice Howland. Her performance won her the Academy Award for Best Actress.

In 2016, the Alzheimer's Association gave Lisa its Rita Hayworth Award. She has gone on to write several more novels about people living with neurological conditions, each one grounded in real science.

What We Can Learn From a Neuroscientist

The agents who turned Lisa down were not entirely wrong about one thing. "Still Alice" was written for a specific group of readers. Where they went wrong was in thinking that group was too small to matter.

Lisa knew her readers were out there, because she knew what Alzheimer's does to a family. Instead of waiting for permission, she went and found those readers one by one. They told their friends. And their friends told theirs.

So if someone tells you your audience is too small, take heart from Lisa. Find the people your book was written for. Talk to them directly. And keep a few extra copies in the trunk, just in case.

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