



# A STUDY IN PERSEVERANCE

*Best-selling author, and local Cape Codder, Lisa Genova owns the story-telling space between intellect and intrigue.*

BY GREG O'BRIEN

To say that *New York Times* best-selling author Lisa Genova is bright is to say that the sun sheds light on a clear day. But in life, as in weather, particularly on Cape Cod, there are cloudy days when one doesn't know what to expect. And so, one has to persevere.

After plying through some heart-rending personal issues early on, Genova—a Harvard-trained neuroscientist, author of the acclaimed best-selling Alzheimer's novel *Still Alice*, four other remarkable neuro novels, three of them also best-sellers, and a non-fiction book on memory—decisively found her niche: contemporary fiction inspired by neurological conditions and our shared human condition.

Her extensively researched fiction focuses on people living with neurological diseases, disorders, and mental illness, people who tend to be ignored, feared, or misunderstood for what is happening in their brains, portrayed within a narrative that is accessible to the general public. Through fiction, she has dedicated her career to describing with passion and accuracy the journeys of those affected by brain diseases and conditions, thereby educating, demystifying, destigmatizing, and inspiring support for care and scientific research.

Her novels include: *Left Neglected*, a novel about a woman who suffers from a neurological condition called "Left Neglect" (also termed hemispatial or unilateral neglect), caused by a traumatic brain injury; *Love Anthony*, about a non-verbal boy with autism; *Inside the O'Briens*, a novel about members of the O'Brien family facing inherited Huntington's disease; *Every Note Played*, a novel about a concert pianist diagnosed with ALS; and the non-fiction *Remember: The Science of Memory and the Art of Forgetting*.

Her next novel, *More or Less Maddy*, is about a young woman dealing with bipolar disorder and will be published January 14, 2025. Four of her novels are currently being adapted for the screen.

Genova, who has lived in Chatham since 2007, is a fulfilled writer,



speaker, and mother of three—Alena, 24, Ethan, 16, and Stella, 13. Genova indeed has been blessed with a highly functioning "left brain," allied with logic and analytical thinking, and the creative genius of a "right brain." *Still Alice*, Genova's first novel about the cruelties of Alzheimer's has sold millions of copies worldwide and has been translated in 37 languages. In 2014, it was adapted into a movie that won a Best Actress Oscar for Julianne Moore in the lead role of Alice Howland, a 50-year-old cognitive psychology professor at Harvard in the confusing throes of Alzheimer's. Alec Baldwin played her husband, and Alice's three grown children, wrestling with

this black hole of a disease, were played by actors Kristen Stewart, Kate Bosworth, and Hunter Parrish. It was produced by Neon Park Productions and Killer Films.

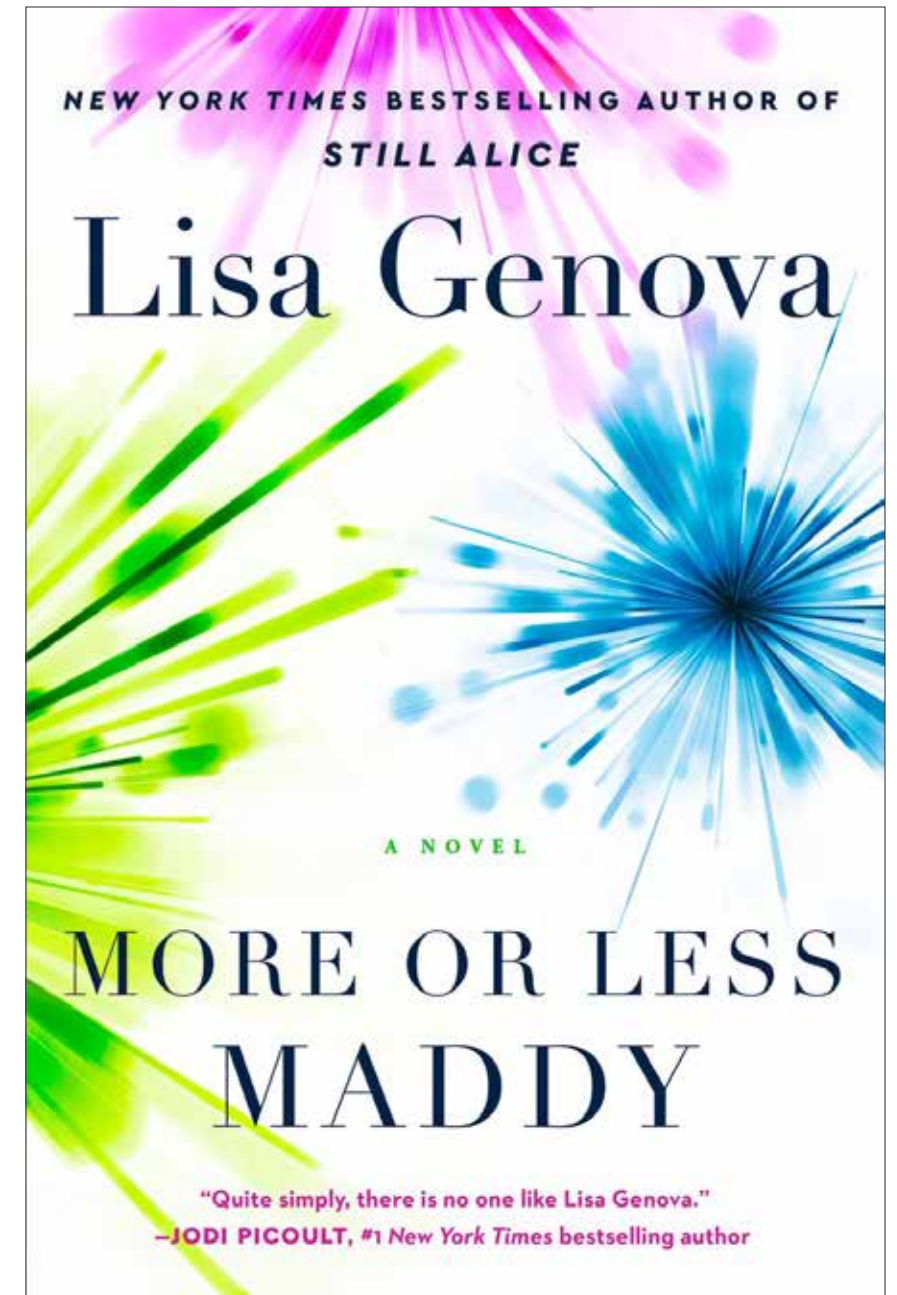
Speaking about brain health, memory, and the conditions she writes about, she has appeared on *The Today Show*, CNN, *PBS News Hour*, NPR, the *Diane Rehm Show*, and many others. Her first *TED* talk, "What You Can Do To Prevent Alzheimer's" has been seen more than eight million times. And her most recent *TED* talk, "How Memory Works—and Why Forgetting is Totally OK" was the sixth most watched *TED* talk of 2021. A sought-after speaker and edutainer, she has headlined in speaker series alongside Barack Obama, Joe Biden, Gloria Steinem, Jay Leno, Malala Yousafzai, and Goldie Hawn.

Genova started studying biological psychology, now termed neuroscience, at Bates College, a nationally recognized private college of sciences and liberal arts in Lewiston, Maine, graduating valedictorian, *summa cum laude*. "I always loved math and science," she says. "I particularly loved biology—how we are put together, how the workings of the brain affect behavior." Genova's senior thesis in 1992 at Bates was titled: "Global Cerebral Ischemia Impairs Spatial Working Memory but not Spatial Mapping in rats."

### Say what???

Ischemia, says Genova, occurs when blood flow to an organ (in this case, the brain) is impaired.

"I didn't want to be a cardiologist; I didn't want to study kidneys. The biology of the brain coordinates our ability to think, remember, desire, feel, move," she stresses. "I've always been fascinated by the brain, and I spent my entire education and training trying to understand how it works—and how it sometimes breaks."



And nowhere better than at Harvard where in 1998 she earned a PhD in neuroscience. Genova researched the molecular neurobiology of addiction at Mass General Hospital East, Yale Medical School, and the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. She taught neuroanatomy at Harvard Medical School in 1996. After she graduated, all was on track in her life. "I was a neuroscientist ready to put on a white coat and continue working in a lab. What I really wanted to do was to be a

neuroscience professor at a small liberal arts school like Bates, but those jobs were hard to come by."

Instead, Genova took a job as a health care industry strategy consultant for a firm called Health Advances in Wellesley. She was married then to a Boston area attorney; they had been together since she was 18. In 2000, Genova was pregnant with her first child, Alena, now a Georgetown graduate with a Masters in social work, and working in Manhattan as a therapist. Apples don't fall far from trees in an orchard.

Yet clouds on the horizon were rising. Genova took time off to care for her daughter when she was born, at a time when the marriage started falling apart. It was mutual; the couple divorced in 2004—a split, she says, that created great angst in her. Genova, 33 at the time, continued taking care of Alena as she tried to figure out the jigsaw pieces of her life now, asking herself repeatedly: “Now what do I do?”

“Divorce pushed me into such an uncomfortable place,” she says. “I was a divorced, unemployed, single Mom. I felt unacceptable and ashamed. I framed the divorce as a failure.” In retrospect, Genova wishes she could go back in time and tell that 33-year-old, “You’re okay. You’re acceptable. You’ll be fine.”

*And she was.*

Often in life, good comes out of pain, out of a personal ordeal.

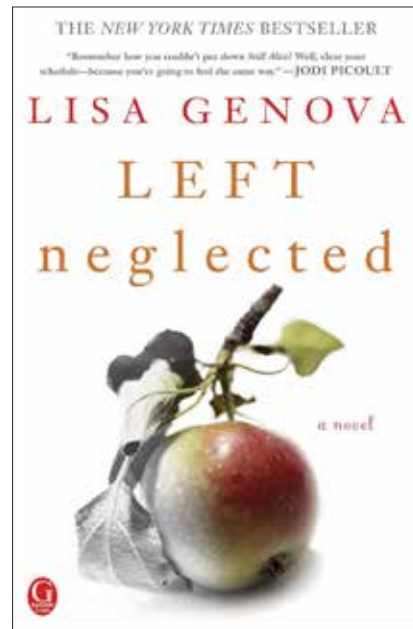
Genova freed herself of worrying about her uncertain future and of what others thought of her by asking herself: “If I could do anything I wanted, what would that be?” Her answer was clear as a brilliant day in July on the Outer Cape.

*“Write the novel!”*

Genova, of fine Italian lineage, grew up in Waltham, Massachusetts. One of the most influential individuals in Genova’s life was her paternal grandmother, Angie, “Nana,” as she called her.

“Nana was smart, tons of fun; she swam at the Boys Club every day, was in a bowling league, played bridge, gardened. She was so independent and never remarried after her husband, my grandfather, died,” Genova says.

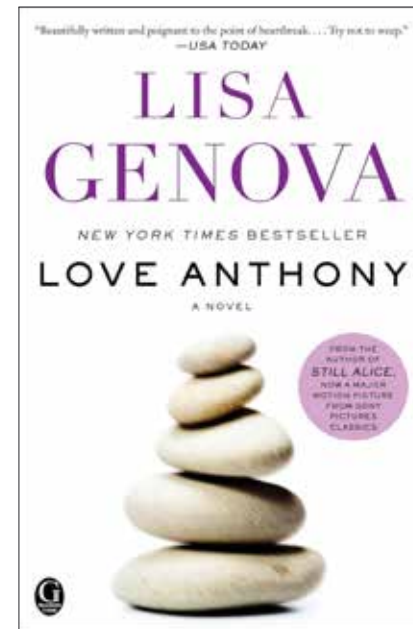
But over time, there were changes in her. “At first, we all blew it off, assuming her forgetfulness was a normal part of normal aging. But then one night Nana walked to the bowling alley, thinking it was the middle of the day. She didn’t know



where her bowling team was. She was disoriented and confused and began calling people in the middle of the night.” At that point the family had her tested. The result: an Alzheimer’s diagnosis.

Genova continued spending time with her beloved Nana, but the visits were often filled with angst as Genova experienced the progression of Alzheimer’s. “I wish I had understood then what I know now. Nana started talking to baby dolls and no longer recognized me. It was very unsettling and heartbreaking. I felt great sympathy, but not empathy. I didn’t know how to simply be with her, to agree to her reality and join her there.”

As the neuroscientist in her family, Genova did everything she could to understand Alzheimer’s while her grandmother was alive. She read the research papers, medical texts, and books like *The 36-Hour Day*. But even armed with her PhD in neuroscience from Harvard and all this education, she kept wondering, *What does it feel like to have this disease?* “And I thought, story is a place where we have the opportunity to walk in someone else’s shoes. Someday I should write a novel about a woman with Alzheimer’s and tell



it from her perspective.”

Someday had arrived. On the surface, writing a novel wasn’t the most responsible thing to do, given Genova did not have the security of a neuroscience job. Yet it was a roll of the dice that produced great fruit that dramatically changed her life in all good ways. But as Genova reflects, “Many times I’ve wondered if I didn’t get divorced, would I have written *Still Alice*, along with the other books. I don’t know if I would have done it...”

Given her neuroscience background, Alzheimer’s research was a matter of instinct. Genova then connected with the chief of neurology at Brigham & Women’s Hospital, a neurologist at Mass General, and many other medical professionals to research the clinical picture. She then found 27 individuals in the early stage of Alzheimer’s who could still communicate about the felt experiences of their disease—individuals in their 40s, 50s, and 60s.

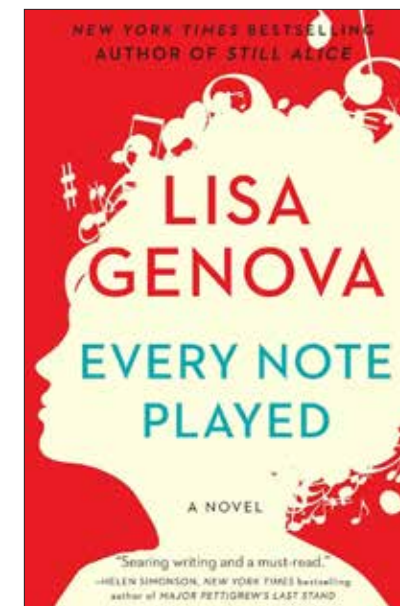
“I wanted to write a novel about what it feels like to live with this disease,” she says. “And I wanted to humanize this disease. At the time, most people pictured Alzheimer’s as a disease of the dying elderly. I

wanted to show what living with Alzheimer’s can look like.”

Genova, who spent much time over the years with her grandmother, had witnessed her Nana’s personal journey into Alzheimer’s, context later incorporated into the later chapters of *Still Alice*. Her grandmother died at 89, likely hiding the earliest stages of disease, as many do, for probably a decade, Genova adds.

It took a year and a half to write *Still Alice*, she says. She then reached out to agents, looking for a publisher—another challenge for a first-time novelist.

Genova, who walks in the principles of perseverance, sent out a hundred queries to literary agents. No bites at first...“Lotsa ‘No Thank You’s,’” Genova says. But she refused to give up. With no other options, Genova decided to self-publish *Still Alice* in the summer of 2007. *Still Alice* was then available through Amazon and Barnes & Noble. Genova also bought boxloads of the books to keep in the trunk of her car. She gave them away to top Alzheimer’s experts, book clubs hoping for blog reviews, at local bookstores on commission, and donated a dollar to the Alzheimer’s Association for every book sold.



“I was giving away books out of my car trunk!” she says on reflection.

Genova, savvy at heart, then hired a book publicity firm, Kelly & Hall of Marblehead, who got a copy of *Still Alice* into the hands of noted *Boston Globe* columnist Beverly Beckham, who read the book on a train from Boston to New York City, who had the initial intention of just glancing at it and putting the book down. But Beckham loved *Still Alice* and wrote an incredible review in the *Sunday Globe*.

“After I read *Still Alice*, I wanted to stand up and tell a train full of strangers: “You have to get this book!” Beckham wrote in her column.

It was a launching moment for Genova. “Beverly changed my life!”

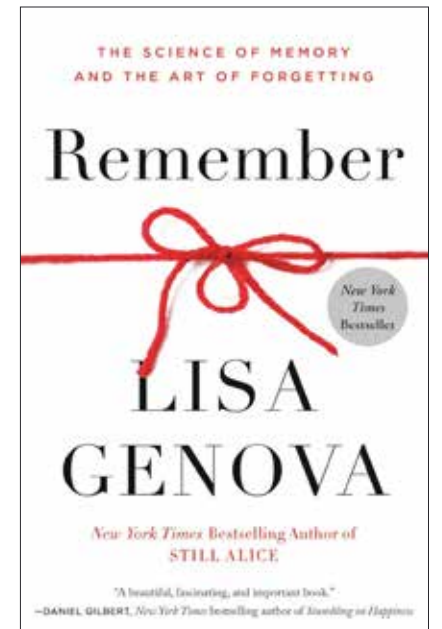
The tumblers now were in place, as if the universe wanted *Still Alice* to succeed. Local author Julia Fox Garrison then read Beckham’s column and reached out to her, thanking Beckham for writing the piece. Beckham put Garrison in touch with Genova. Garrison then introduced Genova to her agent, who then became Genova’s agent.

The stars were fully aligned, and the winds of change were moving swiftly. Hold tight and grab the Dramamine!

A few days later, *Still Alice* went to auction with three major publishers. Simon Schuster won the auction in May 2008, and republished *Still Alice* January 2009. *Still Alice* in short order became a *New York Times* bestseller, and it graced that list for 59 weeks.

“Now I could feed my children,” Genova laughs.

*Still Alice* then caught the attention of independent film producers in London, James Brown and Lex Lutzus, who hired screen writers/directors Wash Westmoreland and Richard Glatzer. After reading the book, actress Julianne Moore signed on for the lead role of Alice



Howland, followed by an all-star cast. The film was released in 2014. Sadly, Glatzer suffered from ALS, and died two weeks after Julianne Moore won her Oscar. His battle with ALS became the inspiration for Genova’s novel *Every Note Played*.

New to the Hollywood scene, Genova, attended many red-carpet events, including the Academy Awards.

“It was surreal,” she recalls. “The enormity of it!” When the Best Actress was announced, Genova thought of her Nana and that all this started with her.

“I could hear my Nana’s giggle... and I started crying.” 🎧

**Greg O’Brien is a longtime Cape Cod Life contributor. He is a career journalist, writing regionally and nationally, and is the author of the award-winning *On Pluto: Inside the Mind of Alzheimer’s*, and co-producer of the Alzheimer’s documentary “Have You Heard About Greg” airing nationally on PBS. O’Brien also is a good friend of Lisa Genova’s; she titled her Huntington’s Disease novel, *Inside the O’Briens*, after Greg, who hails from long Irish lineage.**