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The Notebook: the Accidental Alzheimer's Awareness Campaign

By: Danielle Waldron

"The person with Alzheimer's disease is in a giant classroom every day, one in which he or she never has the exact answer" (Marley 2013). Everyone can relate to the feeling. That feeling when your teacher calls on you, and you either were not paying attention or just completely do not know the answer to her question; "the feeling of our collar tightening, voice faltering, palms sweating, and face blushing" (Marley 2013). Everyone remembers. It is embarrassing, painful, and awkward. Every single day, those with Alzheimer's disease deal with these emotions, making it distasteful and uncomfortable when media sources glamorize this illness for monetary gain.

In this day and age, people typically do not read scholarly journals everyday to learn about current societal concerns; nor do they frequent university auditoriums on Friday nights to educate themselves about diseases or other pertinent issues in society. They instead look to news stations, TV show, and movies to keep them informed about national and worldly affairs. Finding the truth through these semi-fictitious means, however, is nearly impossible. Movies in particular overwhelm their audiences with emotional and persuasive images, leaving them vulnerable to romanticized and unrealistic visions of the truth.

The popular film, *The Notebook*, sensationalizes and misrepresents the realities of the Alzheimer's disease. Many argue that *The Notebook* raises awareness of Alzheimer's disease to its audience, but in actuality, the film romanticizes and distorts many aspects of the illness. The film uses Alzheimer's disease as a creative vehicle, employing memory loss and flashbacks as elements to develop a love story between the two main characters, Noah and Allie. Although *The Notebook* embodies these entertaining qualities, in doing so, it depicts an unrealistic picture of Alzheimer's disease and communicates faulty information

about aging with Alzheimer's in America to audiences. The film presents a questionable portrayal of late stage Alzheimer's symptoms, an unrealistic level of nursing home care, and unusual patient and family satisfaction. In its portrayal of the medical community, the film undermines the doctor's authority and underestimates nurses. Comparing *The Notebook* to other films, such as *Grandpa, do you know who I am?* and *Friends with Benefits*, further demonstrate *The Notebook's* imperfections in presenting Alzheimer's disease's effect on the family dynamic. Despite these flaws, however, Facebook groups, universities and many others use *The Notebook* to advocate for Alzheimer's disease, resulting in widespread viewing of the film. People use *The Notebook* to increase awareness for Alzheimer's disease, but this usage begs the question: what *does* raising awareness even mean? Ironically, though organizations use *The Notebook* to raise this "awareness," the film does not convey the true realities of Alzheimer's disease, instead highlighting a naïve perception of the condition.

The Notebook innocently begins with Noah, the husband of Alzheimer's patient, Allie, reading their love story to her on the lawn at their nursing home. As the story progresses, the picture changes from the nursing home scene to a carnival scene, the first of many flashbacks in the film. At this carnival, Noah and Allie meet for the first time, and though they resist one another at first, the two fall madly in love over their summer together. Noah brings Allie to an old, abandoned house that he promises to renovate and make into their home someday. As many weeks pass by, Allie's parents develop a sincere hatred for Noah, and in turn, Allie and Noah abruptly break off their relationship. Many years slip by without any contact between the lovers, and then Allie meets Lon, her new love interest, in the hospital, where she works as a nurse, and he stays as a patient after

being injured in the war. Soon after, the two are engaged, but Allie comes across an article about Noah and the amazing house he has remodeled, as promised, in a magazine.

Meanwhile, the picture flashes back and forth between the couple's love story and Allie's experiences in the nursing home. Allie continues to listen to Noah as he reads their life story to her; at the climax of the film, she recognizes this story as her own. Back in time, Allie soon finds her way back to Noah and confronts him, asking why he never wrote to her after their break up. He replies, saying that he wrote everyday for a year. Shortly thereafter, Allie's mother gives Allie all 365 of Noah's letters that she had hidden away. After much fighting ensues between Lon, Noah, and Allie, Allie ultimately chooses to spend the rest of her life with Noah. Then the plot jumps back to the present day; Allie continues to suffer from dementia, recognizing Noah as her husband at times and thinking he is a stranger at other times. Noah also suffers from a heart attack, and the story comes to a close after Noah sneaks into Allie's room, and the two embrace one last time before their simultaneous deaths, side by side in sleep ("The Notebook," IMDb 2004).

Popularity & Reviews

The Notebook hit theaters on June 25, 2004 and was instantly very popular, making \$13,464,745 on its opening weekend (Box Office Mojo). The film played for 150 days in 2,303 theaters across the United States, ultimately earning more than \$81 million in ticket sales (Box Office Mojo). Nicholas Sparks is one of the most popular writers in the U.S., with 17 best sellers; eight have been made into film (Biography 2012). *The Notebook* ranked as the #1 Nicholas Sparks film (Box Office Mojo). More importantly, however, *The Notebook* affected the Alzheimer's community. Both the innate popularity of the film and its #7 ranking in the memory loss genre make *The Notebook* a doubly powerful movie. Millions of

people around the world saw the film, either in theaters or at home, giving *The Notebook* a distinct influence over Americans' views of Alzheimer's disease.

Film critics offered a range of viewpoints on *The Notebook*. Wesley Morris, a film critic from The Boston Globe reports, "Considering the sunny, relatively pleasurable romantic business that precedes it, the elderly stuff seems dark, morbid, and forced upon us" (Metacritic 2013). This reviewer critiques the depiction of elderly life in the film, considering it simply superfluous and not an integral part of the film. In another review, Joe Morgenstern of The Wall Street Journal calls *The Notebook* "A lovely surprise. Ripe with feeling and lush with physical beauty, it's a love story that swings confidently between age and youth" (Metacritic 2013). Morgenstern notes the film's effective depiction of Noah and Allie's love story, a romance that spans their lifetimes.

To portray this "love story that swings confidently between age and youth," the film's director, Nick Cassavetes, uses dementia as a vehicle, employing Alzheimer's flashbacks as shortcuts back to romantic scenes from the couple's past. Primarily, *The Notebook* relays a love story, and Cassavetes simply integrates Alzheimer's disease into the film as a unique way of telling this story. The emotional aspect of the Alzheimer's disease brings the film together, frustratingly using Alzheimer's as a means to an end. As these reviews suggest, critics view elderly care and dementia as secondary aspects of the film.

The general public, however, may not realize this misuse of Alzheimer's disease in *The Notebook*, making them vulnerable to the film's untruths. Countless organizations have hosted public viewings of *The Notebook* to raise awareness for Alzheimer's disease and dementia. This is intensely problematic, as the film does not accurately convey the realities of Alzheimer's disease to its audience. Groups of people, such as Eastern Maine

Walk to End Alzheimer's disease, post in their Facebook groups to publicize viewings of *The Notebook* in an attempt to raise Alzheimer's awareness (Facebook 2011). Their page reads:

Come support your community's efforts to END ALZHEIMER'S. Watch the movie, "The Notebook" and learn about the upcoming WALK TO END ALZHEIMER'S. Suggested \$5 donation. All proceeds benefit the Alzheimer's Association, Maine Chapter (<https://www.facebook.com/events/120198764721244/>).

Eastern Maine's Walk to End Alzheimer's disease does not stand alone in their attempts to raise awareness for the disease through *The Notebook*. Houston & Southeast Texas Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association also advertised a similar event on their Facebook page (Alzheimer's Action Day, Facebook 2012). At the University of Rhode Island, the Sigma Kappa sorority hosted a showing of the *The Notebook*. On the school's website, they wrote, "we would like to share this beloved movie with a meaningful message and also share the importance and awareness of this illness" (Sigma Kappa, URI 2013). Upon closer inspection, however, these Alzheimer's awareness advocates are actually unknowing victims. These advocacy groups believe they are raising awareness for Alzheimer's disease, but in fact are unwittingly promoting a romanticized portrayal of the condition.

Family Caregiving

For starters, the film generally romanticizes Noah's role and misrepresents how a caregiver actually deals with his or her partner's illness. In the film, Noah devotes his entire livelihood to Allie and her illness, serving as her primary family caregiver. Despite his children's pleadings that he return home, Noah lives in the nursing home with Allie. Though he ultimately has a heart attack and needs care himself, Noah's decides to stay in

the nursing home on his own initiative. His constant presence in Allie's life is sweet, but financially unrealistic. In today's world, nursing homes cannot afford to provide services or beds for spouses. In the film, Allie lives in a private room of a luxurious nursing home in rural South Carolina. According to the Genworth 2013 Cost of Care Report, the cost to live in a private nursing home room in SC would exceed \$73,365 a year; this is an astronomical cost, yet still significantly lower than the national average of \$83,950 a year (Genworth 2013). Thus, it is completely unrealistic that a husband could afford to stay in a nursing home with his wife in his own separate, private room as Noah does in the film.

A study from the University of Minnesota further contests the depiction of Noah in *The Notebook*. Published the same year as *The Notebook* hit theaters, Tornatore and Grant analyze the characteristics of family caregivers and patients with Alzheimer's disease in nursing homes (2004). They report fewer than 1 in 10 family caregivers are spouses and only 11% of caregivers visit their relatives in the nursing home everyday (Tornatore & Grant 2004). Thus, Noah's role in the film, as a spouse with twenty-four hour visitation rights is highly atypical of the majority of caregivers in today's world. In addition, the study reports that 44% of primary family caregivers have full time jobs and 18% work part time. Noah, however, does not work and instead spends his time simply reading to Allie. This further proves that Noah is an unlikely caregiver. In today's society, family caregivers are typically patients' children; 45% of all family caregivers are daughters and 29%, are sons (Tornatore & Grant 2004). In *The Notebook*, Allie's children only visit once and do not assume any responsibilities for her care. Neither is consistent with the lived experiences of Alzheimer's patients and their families.

Furthermore, director Nick Cassavettes' portrayal of Noah as a family caregiver within a nursing home setting does not account for the many caregivers who care for their relatives at home. In 2012, family providers reported 17.5 billion hours and \$216.5 billion of uncompensated care for their elderly relatives (Genworth 2013). *The Notebook*, however, does not include any reference to the large group of Alzheimer's disease home caregivers who make endless sacrifices for their ill relatives. MaryAnne Sterling, co-founder of Connected Health Resources, defines herself as a "silent victim" of Alzheimer's disease; she argues, family caregivers, like herself "are the most underutilized resource in the healthcare system, even though we are on the front lines of dementia. We are care coordinators, medical record keepers, medical decision makers, insurance navigators, and medication administrators" (2013). Ultimately, Noah as Allie's primary caregiver within a nursing home setting, in and of itself, misrepresents the true population and responsibilities of Alzheimer's caregivers in today's world.

Family and Caregiver Satisfaction with Care, Facilities, and Staff

Not only does Noah prove unrealistic as Allie's primary family caregiver, he also embodies a unique and somewhat unusual satisfaction with her Alzheimer's care. Tornatore and Grant conclude that caregivers of late stage dementia patients are more likely to be dissatisfied with nursing home care, often because they do not offer enough activities for these severely ill patients (2004). Noah, however, never once expresses any dissatisfaction with Allie's care, despite her late stage of Alzheimer's disease. Another study suggests there are four factors that increase health care proxy (HCP) satisfaction in the care of dementia patients: most notably, an in depth discussion of advanced directives, but also increased comfort of the patient, absence of a feeding tube, and living in a

specialized dementia care unit (Engel et al. 2006). In *The Notebook*, Noah does not engage in any end-of-life decision making conversations on Allie's behalf. Neglecting this issue, according to Engel, should be the root of a deep dissatisfaction and lack of confidence in her nursing home care (2006). Ultimately, the makers of *The Notebook* miss an opportunity here to discuss difficulties with end-of-life in America. Instead, Noah remains completely satisfied with Allie's care and expresses no concerns about her end-of-life healthcare decisions.

His innate satisfaction, though undermined in these capacities, might be explained by his constant presence in the nursing home. A positive correlation exists between frequent family caregiver visitation and satisfaction of care; this higher satisfaction of care can be attributed to the strengthened relationship between the family caregiver and nursing home support staff, which results when the two see each other more frequently (Tornatore & Grant 2004). Noah receives special treatment at the end of the film, when the nurse tells him he is not allowed to visit Allie at night, but in the next instant, tells him that she is going to go get a coffee and will be gone for a while, implying that he could visit while she was away. The picture then zooms into the nurse's already full cup of coffee sitting on her desk. This exceptional interaction between the nurse and Noah may help explain Noah's high satisfaction with Allie's care. In situations such as this, the nursing home offers Noah privileges because he is well known and in turn trusted more than other family caregivers.

The setting of Allie's nursing home in *The Notebook* is also very unusual and does not accurately represent care facilities in America today. In the film, the lavishly furnished nursing home, a gorgeous white building, sits on a picturesque lawn by a lake. Patients

regularly sit outside in the fresh air, watching the swans out on the water. When residents need to come inside to take their medications or eat dinner, without fail, the same nurse comes out to personally escort them to an equally beautiful interior facility. The typical nursing home in America today is much different. In actuality, 90% of nursing homes in the United States are understaffed, making appropriate care for each patient an unattainable ambition ('Nursing Home Statistics' 2013). In 2003, the year before the release of *The Notebook*, a shocking 20,673 "complaints of abuse, gross neglect, and exploitation on behalf of nursing homes" were reported ('Nursing Home Statistics' 2013). Even worse, only 1 in 14 elderly abuse incidents were reported to the police ('Nursing Home Statistics' 2013). In addition to elderly abuse incidents, high infection rates also affect residents in nursing homes. "Nursing home residents contract more than 1.5 million infections per year, and each resident faces a 5% to 10% risk per year of succumbing to infection" (Zimmerman 2002). Despite these horrendous conditions in the United States today, *The Notebook* producers still chose to portray Allie's nursing home as a picture perfect place to live, giving their audience a severely distorted picture of the system.

Families' Overall Experience with Alzheimer's Disease

Noah's passive and privileged dealings with end-of-life healthcare distinctly contrast from other stories of families' experiences with dementia and end-of-life care. In contrast, recent studies of family satisfaction with end-of-life care found that nearly one third of respondents expressed concerns that care staff did not treat their loved ones with respect within a nursing home facility (Teno et al. 2004). Further, more than one third believed the end-of-life care lacked emotional support (Teno et al. 2004). Families generally felt a communication disconnect to their loved one's medical providers (Teno et al. 2004).

Despite these widespread inadequacies in America today, *The Notebook* does not address any of these issues, choosing instead to present an incomplete picture of end-of-life care in the United States today.

The Notebook's portrayal of families' experiences with Alzheimer's disease also differs from other contemporary films, such as the treatment of Alzheimer's disease in the documentary, *Grandpa, do you know who I am?* In *The Notebook*, Noah desperately tries help Allie remember their love story. Everyday, he literally reads a journal of their love story aloud to her in an attempt to trigger her memory. Though romantic and heart-warming, families and children in the documentary take a different and arguably more realistic approach. In the film, Maria Shriver describes a specific episode she experiences with her father, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease ('Grandpa' 2009). While they sat in their back yard one evening, her father mistook the sound of rushing traffic for running water. Despite her attempts to correct him, her father insisted it was water. When she finally gave in and agreed that the sound was indeed running water, the two engaged in a memorable conversation about how peaceful water made them feel. After this instance, Maria Shriver realized that her relationship with her father had changed, and from that point on, she never corrected him again ('Grandpa' 2009). Noah, on the other hand, never reaches this epiphany, and instead, desperately tries to hold on to what used to be.

Other family members in the documentary, *Grandpa, do you know who I am?* also express similar viewpoints. This section of the documentary employs children's perspectives to illustrate the difficulties of living with a person with Alzheimer's disease. Fighting back tears, a fifteen year old grandchild of a woman with Alzheimer's says, "It's never gonna be any better. As long as you're here, that's all that matters" ('Grandpa' 2009).

Over and over again in the film, families humbly express similar perspectives. Noah, however, does not share in their views. Instead of moving forward and taking each day one at a time, Noah constantly looks backwards in time, yearning to resurrect the past. Overall, the children's raw emotions in the documentary are definitely more apparent than in *The Notebook*. In *The Notebook*, there is only one scene where Allie's children and grandchildren meet with her; it is very brief, and she does not recognize them at all. The atmosphere is very cold and stoic, which directly contrasts from the emotional scenes in the documentary.

Although they are very different, the documentary, 'Grandpa, do you know who I am?' and *The Notebook*, also share common themes. In the documentary, a little boy talks about his grandfather who suffers from Alzheimer's disease; he says, "Sometimes he does remember my name. Sometimes he doesn't" ('Grandpa' 2009). This real life reflection also proves true in *The Notebook*. Sometimes Allie remembers Noah, and sadly, sometimes she does not. Even further, in the documentary, a teenage girl describes her grandmother's aggressive outburst and recounts the devastation she feels after her grandmother violently slaps her ('Grandpa' 2009). The teen says her grandmother had never lashed out at her before and expresses deep sadness over the incident ('Grandpa' 2009). Likewise, in *The Notebook*, Allie also has a violent outburst. Soon after a moment of clarity, Allie screams and lashes out because she does not recognize Noah as her husband and thus, cannot understand his affections towards her. Just like the teen in the documentary, Noah definitely struggles in coping with this incident. In another instance, a seven year old, the oldest of his siblings admits, "I need to help because I'm the biggest one" ('Grandpa' 2009). Likewise, Noah definitely expresses undying love for Allie and feels the need to help her in

her struggles. Family members' passion, love, and commitment to their loved ones with Alzheimer's disease shine through in both the documentary and *The Notebook*. In these ways, *The Notebook* accurately portrays the realities of living with a person with Alzheimer's disease.

In contrast with the seriousness of *Grandpa, do you know who I am?* and the emotional aspects of *The Notebook*, *Friends with Benefits* uses humor and an uncomfortable element to depict Alzheimer's disease and its effect on the family. In the film, the main character, Dylan's father suffers from dementia; he often calls people by their wrong names, forgets important incidents such as his divorce, and most notably, refuses to wear pants (*Friends with Benefits* 2011). Though not the defining aspect of the film, *Friends with Benefits* highlights a family's experience with Alzheimer's disease. In the most memorable scene of the film, Dylan's father sits down in an airport restaurant and removes his pants, not remembering or understanding that wearing clothing is a societal must (*Friends with Benefits* 2011). Instead of reprimanding him, Dylan, also removes his pants in solidarity. As the two enjoy their steak dinners, they remain unfazed by the unrelenting, judgmental stares from others in the restaurant, happy to simply spend quality time together. Although the tone in this scene is playful, it still captures some unfortunate realities of Alzheimer's disease.

Though this depiction of Alzheimer's disease drastically differs from the portrayal of the disease in *The Notebook*, the two films also share similarities. When the whole family gathers for a dinner in *Friends with Benefits*, Dylan's father lashes out, creating a ruckus after his daughter informs him that his wife is not coming to dinner because she had divorced him many years ago (*Friends with Benefits* 2011). He does not remember this

time period in his life and understandably, becomes hysterical in the restaurant after learning about his divorce. This incident mirrors Allie's violent outburst in *The Notebook*. In addition, Dylan expresses deep concern over his father's illness, just as Noah experiences over Allie. While sitting on the Hollywood sign with his girlfriend, Dylan explains how his father's illness has effected him, revealing his true hurt (*Friends with Benefits* 2011). In these ways, *Friends with Benefits* parallels the representation of Alzheimer's disease in *The Notebook*.

Physician/Nurse Experience and Satisfaction with Nursing Home Care

In addition to ignoring the complexity of familial experiences with the disease, *The Notebook* also undermines the medical community. In *The Notebook*, when the physician meets with Noah to discuss his heart condition, the two get into an argument about Noah's attempts to trigger Allie's memory:

Noah: *I read to her, and she remembers-not always, but she remembers.*

Doctor: *The thing about dementia is it's irreversible. It's degenerative. After a certain point, victims don't come back.*

Noah: *That's what they keep telling me.*

Doctor: *Well, I just don't want you to get your hopes up.*

Noah: *But you know what they say, science goes only so far, and then comes God.*

This conversation demonstrates the tension between patients' expectations and medical reality. In this scene, filmmakers undermine the medical community's authority, making the doctor's advice seem ridiculous in light of Allie's ability to remember. This gives the audience a false sense of hope.

In addition, with the exception of one scene where a nurse helps to restrain Allie, *The Notebook* otherwise depicts nurses' jobs as easy. In the film, nurses simply tell patients when to visit the doctor, perform secretarial duties, and gather patients for dinner. Unlike the ease nurses experience in caring for Alzheimer's disease patients in *The Notebook*, in today's world nurses face many difficulties in caring for dementia patients across the world. In the United States, the national average for nurse turnover is 53% (Zimmerman 2002). In Australia, the turnover rate ranges from 40-96% annually (Brodaty et al. 2003). Nursing home staff report a myriad of reasons for leaving their jobs; "Stated reasons for leaving that were common to nurses in the USA, Canada, England, Scotland and Germany include emotional exhaustion and problems in work design" (Hayes 2006). Nurse's negative feelings towards patients, unusually long work hours, and tendencies to burnout cross international boundaries in a global nursing home staff epidemic. Zimmerman and her research team also found a correlation between increased nurse turnover rates and infection in nursing homes (2002). Further, according to Hayes, "Empirical evidence suggests that each additional patient per nurse is associated with a 23% increase in the odds of burnout and a 15% increase in the odds of job dissatisfaction" (2006). As discussed previously, nursing homes are often understaffed and unable to keep up with their patients' daily needs.

This pressure falls on nurses; the more patients these nurses care for, the more likely they are to burnout. According to the Australian based study, 77% of nurses report difficulties dealing with aggressive/hostile dementia patients, believing that patients' behaviors are deliberately inappropriate (Brodaty et al. 2003). Despite all these struggles, 91% of nurses agree with the statement; "I enjoy my work situation" (Brodaty et al. 2003).

Ultimately, nurses enjoy their work in nursing homes, but due to all of these constraints and obstacles, they burnout quickly, explaining their world-wide, rapid turnover rate.

Personal anecdotes from nurses mirror these statistical findings. A 21-year-old nurse from Maryland admits that her job is not easy; “While with this [elderly male] patient I am often groped, hollered at and even hit. Many of the patients I care for are very combative” (Kennard 2006). Despite incidents such as these, the nurse affirms, “Alzheimer’s has changed my life for the better” (Kennard 2006). Other nurses also second this nurse’s reflections. In describing her communication with her Alzheimer’s patients, Nurse Elaine Sanchez says, “If I insist that my reality is the only acceptable one, I have no success in gaining cooperation” (Sanchez 2012). Nurse Sanchez explains that it is *she* who fits into her *patients’* realities. When she steps into a patient’s room, she must figure out who she is that day: “a momma, or an aunt, a teacher at school, a store clerk, best friend on a park playground, or sometimes the bully who has harassed them on the way home from school or even the hussy who flirted with their husband at the dance” (Sanchez 2012). These nurses truly invest emotionally and commit themselves to caring for their patients.

Patients’ Dealings with the Condition

In addition to minimizing and giving audiences reason to question the medical community, *The Notebook* also communicates a slanted picture of patients’ dealings with Alzheimer’s disease. Not surprisingly, the National Institute on Aging also conveys more accurate information about Alzheimer’s disease symptoms than the film. This is problematic because *The Notebook* reaches a much wider audience than the National Institute on Aging’s website. Ultimately, Allie’s symptoms in *The Notebook* misrepresent the realities of late stage Alzheimer’s disease. At the end of her life, Allie displays

symptoms of moderate Alzheimer's disease instead of a more advanced stage of the disease. She clearly experiences memory loss, as she is unable to recognize Noah and her other family members, but she also has moments of clarity. Allie also exhibits physical symptoms, such as an inability to walk without assistance. These symptoms are consistent with moderate Alzheimer's disease (Alzheimer's Disease Fact Sheet 2012). Moderate Alzheimer's disease patients experience confusion and memory loss, exhibit impulsive behavior, and cannot learn new things (Alzheimer's Disease Fact Sheet 2012). Allie definitely displays these symptoms throughout the film, making her sudden death problematic. As a Health Central blog posting argues, "Allie only shows minimal symptoms of the dementia. She is perfectly coiffed and verbally eloquent. The only problem is that she can't remember her husband (Noah), her adult children and grandchildren, and her life's story" (Martin 2006). Seen in this light, *The Notebook* entirely twists the realities of Alzheimer's disease.

In stark contrast with this depiction, at the end-of-life, Alzheimer's patients in the real world cannot communicate, remain bedridden and sleep excessively, often falling ill with skin infections (Alzheimer's Disease Fact Sheet 2012). At the end of her life, "the fact that Allie is still well dressed, hair done perfectly, and lipstick meticulously applied is far from realistic" (Rinefiord 2013). Allie is spared the emotional distress, weight loss and seizures typical of Alzheimer's patients at the end-of-life (Alzheimer's Disease Fact Sheet 2012). These end-of-life symptoms make the ending of the film very unlikely. Further, Allie experiences a moment of clarity at the end of her life, recognizing Noah and falling asleep next to him, just moments before she passes away. This end-of-life portrayal is completely unrealistic. Sugarcoating Allie's end-of-life experience, shielding audience from

an ending infiltrated with infection, seizures and groaning as the culmination of their love story.

Ultimately, the film does not focus on Allie's struggle with the disease, emphasizing its attention more on Noah and the couple's love story. In reality, however, Alzheimer's disease patients encounter the unthinkable. Terry Moran reflects on her mother's story in an ABC News article:

My mom, Margaret Louise Moran, had 10 children and lots of grandchildren and she led a joyful and active life until she was stricken by Alzheimer's in her mid-60s. I saw her descend, in fear and rage, into the hell of forgetting and confusion and the total loss of identity the disease brings.

The worst thing for me, I think, was that I could tell my mother knew what was happening to her; she had watched it happen to her mother. She was terrified as the disease tore apart her mind. I remember sitting with her one morning, for hours, as she said over and over to me, "I want to kill myself. I am going to kill myself. I wish I could kill myself." For hours. My mom (Moran 2009).

This terrible disease causes genuinely happy people to want to kill themselves. It is an unimaginable condition to those who do not suffer from it. One woman with Alzheimer's disease had the courage to post about her encounter with the disease online. She writes:

I hate Alzheimer's, some days are good days, some are not. I am getting worse, I know it. Nights seem to be worse. Last night I laid in bed, I thought I was in a strange bed, I was scared. I was afraid that no one would ever come back to get me, that I had been left alone. I laid there for awhile and then I cried a little bit (Vaughan 2012).

Vaughan knows she is suffering from the disease, but remains helpless as the condition clouds her memory and reasoning. She admits to feeling like a burden to her daughter, Missy, wishing that Missy did not need to provide her with round-the-clock care. These real encounters with Alzheimer's disease reaffirm the idea that: nothing is glamorous or sweet about this condition. *The Notebook* sadly undermines the seriousness of Alzheimer's disease, making it glamorous in its portrayal on screen.

The Dilemma

Despite these inconsistencies between the realities of Alzheimer's disease and its portrayal in the film, ultimately, the purpose of *The Notebook* is not to educate its audience about dementia, but to *entertain*. *The Notebook* is a love story, not a documentary about Alzheimer's disease. Unfortunately, this is where the problem lies. People are learning from *The Notebook*. Regrettably, when viewers learn information or misinformation from a reputable media source, they tend to remember it, and worse; they are increasingly likely to remember false information as true over time (Barriga 2010). Viewers overvalue the portrayal of the disease in the film, mistaking *The Notebook's* romanticized version of Alzheimer's disease for the truth.

Audiences commonly report difficulties separating truth from fiction in films (Barriga 2010). As Barriga notes, in her experiment, participants watched movie clips containing false science facts; in some of these clips, science was primary to the plot and in others, peripheral. On a scale of 0-8, 8 representing those who realized all the film's inaccuracies and 0 being those who took all the incorrect facts at face value, participants averaged only a 2.84, exemplifying that viewers interpret fictional information as truth (Barriga 2010). Barriga reasoned, "when the science is presented as peripheral to the story

is based on the assumption that people are more influenced by misinformation when they are unable to compartmentalize it by clearly linking it to a story schema, and that information that is not central to the plot is harder to link to the story schema” (2010). Her reasoning, however, only supported the data on male viewings. Women, she argues, focus more on the peripheral information in science fiction films because they are generally uninterested in the main storyline.

These findings further complicate the implications for the unrealistic depiction of Alzheimer’s disease in *The Notebook*. Such experiments suggest audiences will remember untruths about Alzheimer’s disease portrayed in film. In short, Director Nick Cassavete’s attempt at a “fictional narrative” has serious implications. Although Cassavetes presents Alzheimer’s disease as peripheral to the plot in the film, many viewers will not identify the false narrative of Alzheimer’s disease. Ultimately, the audience may not be able to compartmentalize this misinformation about *The Notebook*, accepting its portrayal as the truth.

Others channel disappointment when they do not experience the same happy endings as presented in film. Put eloquently, “as someone who has experienced the hardships that come with Alzheimer’s disease, I take these stories for what they are: stories, romanticized, idealized, and poetic stories. Stories that could make me feel hopeful, at least for a while, that maybe my grandmother would find clarity” (Rinefierd 2013). These viewers appreciate the hopefulness portrayed in film, but realize a happy ending is sadly unrealistic.

Films that truly underline the realities of end-of-life experiences, however, reach a much more limited audience and convey a completely different storyline than *The*

Notebook. *Wit*, a film dedicated to the realities of dealing with cancer and pain, exposes its viewers to an emotional and gruesome end-of-life experience. *Wit*'s raw dealings with end-of-life health care drastically differ from Allie's end-of-life experience in *The Notebook*. The film, based off of a play by Margaret Edson, describes a patient's grueling struggle with stage four cancer. Viewers watch as Vivian Bearing's condition worsens; she grows weaker and her heart wrenching pain and loneliness is palpable. She engages in a DNR conversation with her nurse and decides against resuscitation, though the hospital staff mistakenly tries to resuscitate her in the end, a matter *The Notebook* entirely steers clear of. In sharp contrast with *Wit*, *The Notebook*'s primary concern is not end-of-life healthcare and the reality of suffering. If *The Notebook* focused more on the realities of Alzheimer's disease, it would lose its identity and its principle audience.

Maintaining an entertaining nature and relaying accurate medical information is a slippery slope. *Grey's Anatomy* episode "Pieces of Me," however, which aired back in 2008, provides a near perfect example for the steps entertainment companies should take in mediating health care and pop culture in their productions. To prepare for this episode, which conveyed facts about HIV to its audience, *Grey's* writers, vice president and director of entertainment media and partnerships, vice president and director of HIV policy, vice president and director of public opinion research, an OBG-YN, and a mother affected by HIV all collaborated to craft the balanced show (Rideout 2008). Using all of their input, "Stacy McKee, who wrote the episode, translated the facts about mother-to-child HIV transmission rates into an emotional and memorable storyline" (Rideout 2008). These cumulative efforts ultimately came to fruition.

In the episode, a young, pregnant woman with HIV quickly jumps to the conclusion

that she must abort her child because she does not want her baby to inherit HIV. The doctor, Izzy, responds to the woman's concern, saying, if she receives treatment; "There is a 98% chance your baby will be born perfectly healthy. *Ninety-eight percent.*" Later, the mom replies "A 98% chance?" and Izzy responds, "A 98% chance" (Rideout 2008). As evidenced in the Kaiser Family Foundation's study, *Grey's* audience internalized and remembered this information. Before the episode aired, only 15% of people surveyed knew that given treatment, HIV positive mothers had over a 90% chance of having a healthy child (Rideout 2008). After the episode aired, however, a shocking 61% of people reportedly knew this information: a 46% increase from before (Rideout 2008). Ultimately, "more than 8 million people learned this correct information about mother-to-child HIV transmission rates by watching the episode" (Rideout 2008).

"Piece of My Heart" exemplifies how a melding of entertainment and health information can both entertain and educate viewers. If Canessa and other producers of *The Notebook* had collaborated with medical professionals as *Grey's Anatomy* writers did, their film too could have had an immensely positive impact on the Alzheimer's community. In the wake of their findings, Kaiser Family Foundation suggest that "Monitoring the health-related content of such shows may be just as important as monitoring the news media when it comes to understanding what the public is seeing and hearing—and learning—about key health issues" (Rideout 2008). Their recommendation, however, is largely unrealistic. If every filmmaker or show writer put in the effort, time, and money into collaborating with the medical community as *Grey's* producers did in making this episode, viewers would undoubtedly learn more accurate information from the media, but film production would be very difficult. The high costs and little financial return associated

with these collaborative efforts do not incentivize filmmakers to raise genuine awareness for other medical conditions. Ultimately, *Grey's* success in relaying information about HIV transmission to their audience sets a high, almost unreachable standard; it raises acute awareness for HIV, but is near impossible to replicate.

Raising Awareness

Grey's efforts, other campaigns, walks, and public events all stride to raise awareness for conditions such as Alzheimer's disease. Their efforts, though genuine in nature, beg the question: What *is* raising awareness? Whatever *it* is, people everywhere are doing it. As one snarky blog posting reads: "Popular things to be aware of [include]: The Environment, Diseases like Cancer and AIDS, Africa, Poverty, Anorexia, Homophobia, Middle School Field Hockey/Lacrosse teams, Drug Rehab, and political prisoners" (Awareness 2008).

Pink Ribbons Inc., a documentary produced by Lea Pool, confronts this societal norm, answering the question, 'what is raising awareness?' in light of the breast cancer awareness movement (2012). As discussed in *Pink Ribbons Inc.*, the breast cancer awareness movement unfairly commercializes the disease; companies are exploiting breast cancer for monetary gain; some are even using pink ribbon logos to advertise their carcinogen containing products. As a stage-four cancer victim argues in the film, "Our disease is being used for people to profit-and that's not okay" (Pink Ribbons Inc. 2012). This breast cancer awareness movement infiltrating the country glamorizes breast cancer; the color pink makes the disease seem soft and pretty, characteristics that the disease is surely not. People have raised billions of dollars to support this campaign, thinking they are helping the cause. In actuality, however, despite this American mentality that money

buys everything, more money does not fix everything; just because Americans throw money at a cause, does not mean researchers will find a treatment sooner (Pink Ribbons Inc. 2012). Awareness campaigns embody camaraderie, a feeling many treasure and some loathe. As the stage-four cancer support group admits in *Pink Ribbons Inc.*, the notions of “joining the fight” and beating cancer, make those who succumb to their illness feel as if they have failed by losing their battle with the disease (2012). Breast cancer awareness, as described in Pink Ribbons Inc., ultimately commercializes the disease, raises unnecessary funding, and inflicts pain on those suffering most. Ultimately, raising awareness only makes people *feel* like they are doing something to help when a deadly disease consumes themselves and their loved ones.

Similarly, people are at a loss in what to do to help their loved ones afflicted by Alzheimer’s disease, and thus, resort to raising awareness as a coping mechanism. Groups continue to use *The Notebook* as a vehicle to raise awareness for Alzheimer’s disease, but ultimately the film commercializes the condition. Blind to this reality, Alzheimer’s disease advocates, such as Terry Moran, argue that, “the victims of Alzheimer’s cannot speak for themselves as the disease takes them from us. They cannot march or testify or write books,” making it essential that others join the fight (2009). She suggests people get tested to check if they are predisposed to Alzheimer’s disease; by sharing her own Alzheimer’s disease DNA test results on air, she encouraged others to get tested. America’s youth also play an important role in raising awareness. 13-year-old Synott advocates for victims like his grandmother, promising that, “When she can no longer speak about the disease, I will speak for her. I consider myself one of the youngest Alzheimer’s advocates. I will fight for her!” (World Alzheimer’s Month 2012). Advocates such as Synott and Terry feel as if

policy makers neglect Alzheimer's disease because victims often cannot stand up for themselves in the fight.

A popular blog tackles this notion of raising awareness head on. People "firmly believe that all of the world's problems can be solved through "awareness." Meaning the process of making other people aware of problems, and then magically someone else like the government will fix it" (Awareness 2008). Although tongue in cheek, the blog's message is clear. Like *Pink Ribbon's Inc.*, the posting rips the Band-Aid off the awareness movement, exposing how in many ways, raising awareness does nothing to help a cause. By raising awareness, "you get all the benefits of helping (self satisfaction, telling other people) but [there is] no need for difficult decisions or the ensuing criticism (how do you criticize awareness?)" (Awareness 2008). Some people argue that raising awareness ultimately does nothing.

Despite these legitimate concerns and critiques, people everywhere put their efforts into raising awareness. In relating their efforts back to *The Notebook*, perhaps, Alzheimer's advocates are simply satisfied having a film that recognizes their disease. Despite its many flaws, *The Notebook* introduces the idea of Alzheimer's and dementia to its audience: a means of raising awareness in the eyes of activists. A film review, which analyzes and compares a variety of films about Alzheimer's disease helps explain advocates' positions and reactions to the film:

Visual image is effective in conveying messages. It has been used effectively by professionals to sensitize the public about the impact this disease can have on the life of others-the moral and ethical issues in ongoing caregiving and management techniques (Dastoor 1991).

Ultimately, awareness campaigns and the representation of Alzheimer's disease in film give people a voice. Films such as *The Notebook* and other Alzheimer's awareness videos serve as "powerful outreach teaching tools, particularly for isolated families" (Dastoor 1991). As the personal memoirs discussed previously suggest, living with Alzheimer's disease can be an isolating and scary experience. Thus, raising awareness through film both promotes public understanding and reaches out to those affected by Alzheimer's disease. These two benefits of awareness attempts underline the importance of raising awareness in today's society.

Conclusion and Implications

Though not with malicious intent, *The Notebook* generated over \$81 million in profit by exploiting a deadly disease. The film ultimately glamorizes Alzheimer's disease, presenting the condition as soft and almost peaceful to hopeless romantics across the globe. Using Noah as the primary family caregiver, in and of itself, misrepresents the caregiving community, as less than 1 in 10 family caregivers are actually spouses (Tornature & Grant 2004). Further, the film's depictions of the nursing home facility and care staff also stretch credibility. *The Notebook* takes place in an exceptionally beautiful nursing home where it is seemingly normal for the patient to confront doctor's medical advice and nurses to act like secretaries. While other films emphasize familial encounters with Alzheimer's disease, *The Notebook*, minimizes this important aspect of living with Alzheimer's disease and distorts the patient's end-of-life experience.

Though created to entertain, the film's inaccuracies have serious implications for audience and advocates. In today's world, people desperately feel the need to identify with others, and as Dastoor argues, films reach out to those feeling isolated in their life

circumstances. *The Notebook* reaches out to the Alzheimer's community and has become an integral part of publicity campaigns. It introduces yet another remedy to those so desperately yearning to find a cure. Just as people think they are raising awareness for and combatting against Alzheimer's disease by "Drinking green tea, exercising their brain, walking briskly three times per week, taking their vitamin E, folic acid, fish oil, and B12 supplements, eating blueberries, and having an active social life," *The Notebook* presents yet another romanticized prescription in this fight against Alzheimer's disease (Male, PSA for Alzheimer's 2013). The film offers a recipe for a cure; by reading a woman's life story to her, she will trump medical realities and overcome her dementia. Ultimately, *The Notebook* gives false hope to audiences around the world, and Alzheimer's awareness campaigns have intertwined themselves into this exaggerated media movement in an attempt to raise Alzheimer's 'awareness.'

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