



Inside the O'Briens by Lisa Genova

About the author:

Lisa Genova is the New York Times bestselling author of *Inside the O'Briens*, *Love Anthony*, *Left Neglected*, and *Still Alice*. Her first novel, *Still Alice*, has been adapted into a film starring Julianne Moore, Alec Baldwin, and Kristen Stewart. Lisa graduated valedictorian from Bates College with a degree in biopsychology and holds a PhD in neuroscience from Harvard University. She travels worldwide speaking about Alzheimer's disease, traumatic brain injury, and autism. She lives with her family in Massachusetts.

Source: Simon & Schuster Canada (<http://www.simonandschuster.ca/>)

About this book:

As a police officer from an Irish Catholic neighborhood in Boston, Joe O'Brien has always prided himself on his self-control. And with four adult kids still living under his roof, he needs it. There's JJ, the upstanding fireman hoping to start his own family; Patrick, the rowdy bartender; Meghan, the accomplished but uptight ballet dancer; and Katie, the restless yoga instructor just trying to get them all to take her seriously. Joe loves being their rock, but when he begins to experience bouts of disorganized thinking, temper outbursts, and strange, involuntary movements, his fiercely protective wife, Rosie, drags him to a neurologist. There, they are handed a diagnosis that will change their family forever: Huntington's disease.

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Each of the O'Brien children has a 50 percent chance of inheriting this lethal neurodegenerative disease. A simple blood test can reveal their genetic fate. As Katie observes the devastating symptoms in her once invincible father escalate, she struggles with the questions this test will impose on her future. She and her siblings must reach deep inside for the courage to reexamine their values and their dreams as they learn to lead lives defined by gratitude and love. With *Inside the O'Briens*, Lisa Genova has once again delivered a novel as powerful and unforgettable as the human truths at its core.

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Discussion Questions:

1. In chapter 1, Joe mentions the "Charlestown code of silence." Discuss how Boston acts as a kind of character in the novel. How does its unique culture seep into the O'Brien family relations and how they interact with their community? How is your community different?
2. In the beginning of the novel, Joe is horrified to recognize his mother, Ruth, in his reflection. Why do you think that is such a painful realization? How do his feelings about Ruth change? Discuss the complex ties we all have with our parents.
3. Joe is fiercely proud of his job as a police officer, but admits that he sometimes feels constrained by the uniform and the trappings that come with assuming that identity. How do you think that internal conflict ripples through his children and

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their professional choices? Who do you think is most like him? Who is most different?

4. Katie is compelled to leave, yet still feels tethered. Discuss the role that family and tradition play in the novel. When is tradition helpful, and when does it hold us back?

5. In the ways they can see, through external physical traits and personality, Katie and JJ come from their dad. Does this mean they also have his Huntington's? Discuss the interplay of nature versus nurture in the narrative. How does each sibling define themselves in both relation and opposition to their family?

6. Even in their darkest moments, the O'Brien family finds reasons to be grateful. Name some of them. Do these reasons change over the course of the story? How? Do you specifically relate to any?

7. As a cop, it is essential that Joe make split-second decisions in high-stress environments. He takes pleasure in it. But later into his diagnosis, as his body goes to war with his mind, we see him starting to think in the long-term. Discuss the dichotomy of instinctual versus analytical thinking in the novel. When do they contradict each other? When do they complement each other?

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8. Joe is a born storyteller but Rosie is “intensely private” about her family, especially when it comes to difficult topics. How do they compromise these two opposing impulses throughout the narrative?

9. Ultimately, Joe becomes an unreliable narrator. He can’t predict his moods or even his movements. How does he use the reflections of people and his surrounding environment to monitor himself? Who do you think he depends on most, and why?

10. Discuss what Catholicism means to the O’Brien family, specifically the theme of purgatory as it attends to the implications of the Huntington’s genetic test. Do you think religion informs their decision-making? How?

11. Joe is well versed in both the immediate and reverberating effects of trauma, having served in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon terrorist attack. He is aware that every day on the job might be his last. How is that specific dread different from the terrible anticipation of a Huntington’s diagnosis? How is it similar? Do you think Joe can still find honor in death from his disease? If so, how?

12. The O’Brien and extended Charlestown community is incredibly tight-knit. But when does that closeness cross the line into exclusivity? Discuss Katie’s relationship with Felix. Why do you think she hesitates to introduce him to her family? How does their reaction surprise her?

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13. In chapter 31, Katie guides her dad through a yoga routine and tells him to “be the thermostat, not the temperature.” What do you think she means? And how does it influence Joe’s decision to change his mantra from “stay in the fight” to “stay in the pose”?

14. In the novel, we learn one HD symptom is “chorea”—jerky, involuntary movements—and is derived from the Greek word for dance. Discuss the role of movement throughout the story, in both its liberating and debilitating forms. Why do you think Meghan decides to leave the Boston Ballet to work with a more experimental dance company in London?

15. In chapter 34, Katie frets about the effect a HD diagnosis would have on Felix’s future. Discuss the feeling of accountability that often comes with living with a terminal illness. At what point do we all have to relinquish the illusion of having control over someone else’s life?

16. Discuss Joe’s realization that his mother, Ruth, communicated gratitude and love to her children when she was in end-stage HD. How does that trickle down through him and onto Katie? Do you think Katie moves to Portland? Would you?

Source: Simon & Schuster Canada

http://www.simonandschuster.ca/books/Inside-the-OBriens/Lisa-Genova/9781476717791/reading_group_guide#rgg

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