

## Hollywood “Awakens” Its Curiosity

**Daniella Brutman\***

Department of Biology  
Lake Forest College  
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

There are dozens of neurological diseases plaguing the minds of both children and adults. Hollywood is beginning to depict the epic consequences that these diseases can have on both the individuals inflicted with the disease and people around them. These movies raise public interest and awareness, which causes a great push for new advancements. In Lions Gate Studio's *Away From Her*, directed by Sarah Polley in 2007, Fiona Anderson, played by Julie Christie, suffers from Alzheimer's disease. This movie follows her through her battle with Alzheimer's and depicts the role that her family, specifically her husband, played by Gordon Pinsent, plays in her disease. Conversely, in Matalon Studio's *Awakenings*, directed by Penny Marshall in 1990, Dr. Sayer, played by Robin Williams, studies the effects of some type of encephalitis lethargica, which is similar to an extreme case of Parkinson's disease. Unlike *Away From Her*, this movie focuses on portraying the relationship between the doctor and patient through the portrayal of Dr. Sayer's struggle with a new drug and his relationship with Robert De Niro's character, Leonard. Both *Away From Her* and *Awakenings* attempt to educate their viewers on the devastating effects of various neurological diseases. While *Awakenings* focuses more on science, *Away From Her* focuses on the death of a relationship. If you are only planning on watching one of these movies, it is my suggestion that you view *Awakenings* because it will grab your attention on an emotional and intellectual level.

Imagine forgetting the simplest of things. Facts such as where to put the mail; ideas like how to say a word as simple as “wine”; memories like living in the same cottage for over twenty years. Most importantly, imagine forgetting people, like a husband who has been by your side through thick and thin. That is the life of Fiona Anderson, an Alzheimer's patient beginning to slowly lose herself in *Away From Her*. At first, Fiona begins to lose her short term memory. She slowly forgets where she places her keys, what she just did, and, at one point, even the past couple of years of her life. Pretty soon, some of her long term memory begins to fade and she has trouble recognizing the love of her life. *Away From Her*, focuses on Fiona's altering relationship with her husband. As Fiona's memory begins to fade, she becomes a different person than the woman that her husband married, and their relationship begins to suffer. As Fiona detaches herself from her husband, she forms a close relationship with another patient named Aubrey. Fiona slowly separates herself from all of her previous commitments because she is no longer attached to her old life. On good days, Fiona recognizes and acknowledges her relationship with her husband. On most days however, her husband is forced to leave the assisted living facility disappointed and feeling abandoned because she ignores him. Because of this, he wholeheartedly indulges in adultery. Yet as a viewer, you are left wondering who to sympathize with: the abandoned yet imperfect husband, or the wife that loses herself?

In *Awakenings*, Leonard, staring into a mirror, realizes that he is no longer a young man, and how quickly

time flew by. Leonard, like many others in *Awakenings*, spent years in a frozen state just waiting for someone like Dr. Sayer to come along and take an interest in helping him. Dr. Sayer takes a job as a physician in a psychiatric hospital expecting to be disappointed due to the lack of research involved. Yet, as time goes by, Sayer realizes that there is a mystery sitting right in front of him. He begins to take interest in a group of patients with a mysterious disease he later finds to be encephalitis lethargica. Sayer begins to experiment with a new drug, L-Dopa, on Leonard, a man frozen in a lethargic state for over twenty years. Leonard soon experiences an “awakening” and regains his life. The hospital soon sees dozens more awakenings as all of the encephalitis lethargica patients are treated with similar doses of L-Dopa. This movie makes you feel every new emotion as the patients do. It is for this reason that I felt my heart tearing up as the patients began to feel the negative effects of the new treatment. This movie, based on true events, leaves you wanting to know more, wanting to learn more about the mysteries behind Leonard's condition.

While both of these movies are excellent choices for your next movie night, *Awakenings* does more to teach the viewer about the science behind the movie and really captures your attention for its entire length. *Away From Her* does not really explain the science behind Alzheimer's. Tangles and plaques are only mentioned briefly at one point in the movie. Instead, the movie focuses more attention on Fiona's husband, and the way that their relationship alters as her disease progresses. This movie progresses more slowly as compared to *Awakenings* and it is harder for the viewer to become interested in the movie. *Away From Her* focuses too much attention on Fiona's husband and not enough on what is interesting: Fiona's struggle with Alzheimer's Disease. *Awakenings* does a much better job of explaining the science behind encephalitis lethargica. Someone who knows nothing about this neurological disease can leave this movie with a general understanding of how L-Dopa can be used as an artificial hormone to decrease the symptoms of this disease. More importantly, one can understand the effects that overmedication can have on our bodies. Dr. Sayer spends a great deal of time explaining the disease and the possibility of L-Dopa as a treatment, causing the viewer to not only learn about the disease, but also to feel what the patients are going through. By understanding the disease, viewers are able to actually place themselves in Dr. Sayer's shoes and follow him through his journey. Also, unlike *Away From Her*, *Awakenings* is a very fast paced scientific mystery and the viewer is constantly left anticipating the next event. Furthermore, one can anticipate what is to come for the patients after the movie ends. If given the choice, I would choose to watch *Awakenings* every time.

*Note: Eukaryon is published by students at Lake Forest College, who are solely responsible for its content. The views expressed in Eukaryon do not necessarily reflect those of the College. Articles published within Eukaryon should not be cited in bibliographies. Material contained herein should be treated as personal communication and should be cited as such only with the consent of the author.*

\*This author wrote the paper for FIYS 106: Medical Mysteries taught by Dr. Shubhik DebBurman.