

About Alice Study Guide

About Alice by Calvin Trillin

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Plot Summary

About Alice by Calvin Trillin is a touching memoir about the author's wife, Alice. After his wife's death, the author received many touching notes of condolences from friends and readers alike. Trillin answers these notes with this poignant look at the woman with whom he shared nearly forty years of his life. The book is both humorous and moving, allowing the reader a peek at the woman Trillin feels was his companion, his teacher and his muse.

Calvin Trillin opens his memoir by quoting a few of the condolence notes his friends and readers sent to him after his wife died six years earlier. Even though Trillin is touched by these notes, he realizes that most of these people did not know the real Alice. Alice appeared in many of his writings, which gave the impression that Alice was a straight-laced, opinionated woman, but, in reality, there were so many facets to her personality that Trillin cannot describe them all. Trillin met Alice at a party and spent the evening trying to impress her. Trillin admits that he continued to try to attempt to impress Alice for the rest of their marriage, even though Alice often teased him by saying that Trillin was never again as funny as that first night.

Alice was a beautiful woman, who often benefited from her looks. Alice never got a speeding ticket as a young woman, and it seemed that at every party they attended together, Alice was cornered by one man or another. However, Alice suffered because of her beauty as well. Trillin felt Alice was never completely happy with who she was as a person due to her difficult childhood. Alice's father was an optimistic man who lived beyond his means and never fully appreciated the difficulties of life. Alice was forced to mature at a faster rate and was often left with feelings of insecurity. As an adult, Alice had to care for her parents as though she had become the parent. Although Alice was happy to care for her parents, Trillin felt it cost her small pieces of her self esteem.

Alice was highly educated in the written word and pursued a career in education. Due to this, Trillin would often have Alice critique his writing. Although warned that this would cause tension in his marriage, Trillin continued to ask Alice's help because a small part of him felt as though every time she approved of his work, he moved up a peg in her estimation of him. Trillin wrote for Alice, and Alice was his muse. Additionally, Trillin felt it lucky that he was a writer, so he did not depend on Alice to impress co-workers or bosses. Trillin thought that if he were a corporate employee, he would be stuck at middle management his entire career because Alice had strong political convictions and she never shied from sharing them, no matter who she might offend.

Alice did not worry about finances and did not care about material objects; however, Alice often spent money more freely than Trillin. Alice felt that a nice home was essential to happiness, and she enjoyed expensive clothing. Trillin and Alice would occasionally argue over money matters, usually when she wanted to spend more and Trillin did not. However, Alice always had a way of convincing Trillin to agree with her, often by pointing out just how lucky they were compared to others.



In 1976, Alice was diagnosed with lung cancer. Alice's chances of survival at the time were slim. Years later, Alice wrote an article expressing her fears of dying and leaving Trillin to raise their children alone. Trillin agreed with her assessment of the situation, knowing that without their mother his daughters would not have become the women they eventually became. When it appeared the cancer had come back in the early nineties, Alice felt it would be okay to leave her daughters because they had already benefited from her wealth of wisdom. However, the idea of leaving them before seeing them happily married made Alice change her mind. Luckily, the cancer had not come back. However, several years after their youngest daughter had married and weeks before the oldest was to walk down the aisle, Alice learned she had heart disease. The radiation therapy she had received for her lung cancer had damaged her heart. Alice survived surgery in order to see her eldest daughter get married, then died four months later. Trillin knew Alice would have viewed the extra twenty-five years they had together as a gift. That was the Alice Trillin he knew.



Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary and Analysis

About Alice by Calvin Trillin is a touching memoir about the author's wife, Alice. After his wife's death, the author received many touching notes of condolences from friends and readers alike. Trillin answers these notes with this poignant look at the woman with whom he shared nearly forty years of his life. The book is both humorous and moving, allowing the reader a peek at the woman Trillin felt was his companion, his teacher, and his muse.

Calvin Trillin found the many condolence letters he received from his readers after his wife's death touching. So many people felt they knew his wife because of his writings. However, Trillin believed none of these people truly knew Alice and that she would have been amused by their assertion that they had. Alice was a force in Trillin's life, and, as a result, he often wrote about her in his books and articles. Despite his best efforts, or perhaps because of them, Alice came across in these works as "a dietician in sensible shoes" (pg. 5). However, this description did not fit the woman Alice truly was. In fact, at a lecture Trillin once gave, Alice took off her shoe and waved it at the crowd to prove she did not wear sensible shoes. In reality, Alice was full of childish wonderment and was often the center of attention, unable to just listen to a conversation but always had to be involved.

Trillin met Alice at a party for a now-defunct magazine. Trillin recalls Alice wearing a hat, but Alice always swore she had never owned a hat such as the one he described to her. Trillin thought Alice was the most appealing woman in the room and was drawn to her as much for her presence as her beauty. However, Trillin was not able to talk to Alice much that night. A few weeks later, Trillin met Alice at another party and spent the night attempting to entertain her with jokes. Alice would later tell him that he was never as funny again as he was that night. Trillin admits he was trying to impress her that night and that he continued to try to impress her throughout their marriage, mostly through his writing. Everything he wrote was for her, he said.

Trillin never realized that being pretty could be a hardship on a woman until he married Alice. Alice never got a speeding ticket and was always cornered at parties by what Trillin referred to as "guys smoking pipes" (pg. 18). However, there was also a downside to Alice's beauty. There were a certain group of men who were hostile to Alice because of her looks. Trillin theorized that these men were mean because they knew they would be rejected by a woman such as Alice and wanted to wound first. Other women were also hostile to Alice at times, as though jealous of her beauty.

Alice was uncomfortable with her beauty a great deal of the time. Trillin felt this was due to her unhappiness with her self-identity during a difficult childhood. Alice's parents lived beyond their means most of Alice's childhood. As a result, Alice matured more quickly than other children her age and was left with a sense of insecurity. When Alice was an



adult, her parents struggled with their health as well as their finances, forcing her to take on the role of parent in their relationship. Alice took on this role without complaining because Alice was the kind of woman who would help anyone who asked. Once, a friend of the Trillins' asked Alice to be a model for an article about the fashion of normal women. Alice was reluctant, but finally agreed because, in a strange way, she felt as though it gave her credibility when dealing with the nurses and doctors who cared for her parents on a daily basis.

Calvin Trillin begins this memoir by expressing his belief that none of his reader really knew Alice as a person, but they somehow knew how deeply he loved her, which is the first indication that this book emphasizes the theme of love. Trillin is surprised by the fact that his readers understood his love for Alice, because it seems to him that he had always presented a false impression of Alice in his work. Trillin's descriptions of his wife were never complete nor accurate. Trillin's motivation in writing this memoir seems to be an attempt to correct this inaccuracy. Trillin describes how he met his wife at a party and how desperately he wanted to impress her. Trillin entertained her that night in a way that he was never able to match again in their married life. Trillin also admits that he continued to impress her the rest of their lives, mostly through his writings, which he confessed he did mainly for her.

Trillin writes about Alice's childhood and how he felt it shaped who she was. Alice was a beautiful woman, and while she often benefited from her looks, she often suffered hostility as well. There were people who would treat her badly for various reasons, but it was always rooted in her looks. Trillin felt his wife suffered in these episodes because she had a childhood that caused her to lose her innocence at an early age. Alice was insecure and believed it was her duty to save people, all as a result of her father's decision to live in a fantasy world where nothing bad happened, despite the many setbacks he suffered throughout his life. These things made Alice who she was, and Trillin both admired and grieved for Alice.



Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary and Analysis

Trillin often shared his work with his wife, against the advice of a co-worker from Trillin's early years with *The New Yorker*. Trillin knew that because of Alice's background as an English professor, she would give him an honest assessment of his writing. While this would often lead to arguments in any other marriage, Trillin felt it made him a stronger writer. Trillin wrote for Alice. Alice wrote herself as well. Alice also held various jobs that involved the written word, including a stint at City College with a program called Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge. In this program, Alice worked with Mina Shaughnessy, a well-known writer and educator. Mina taught Alice about self-respect, especially when Mina suffered from cervical cancer and made a point of dressing for all of her medical-therapy sessions. When Alice herself suffered from lung cancer, she took Mina's lessons to heart and managed to keep her spirits high through the entire ordeal.

Alice had strong political opinions, most having to do with the poverty, children and cigarettes. These opinions would often lead to loud arguments at dinner parties. Trillin often joked that if he had needed Alice to help him rise in a corporation, he would have been permanently stuck in middle management. Alice's parents smoked when she was a child, and she believed that her exposure to their smoke is what caused her to suffer from lung cancer. Therefore, one of Alice's pet peeves was people who gave children the impression that smoking was glamorous or healthy. Alice made a point of joining any political action that banned smoking in public places. Alice also made it clear to her daughters they should never smoke, a promise her daughters keep.

When Alice married Trillin, she accepted that she had married a man who was destined to always be poor. However, Alice insisted on buying a home when they first married, causing her new husband to work overtime in order to keep up with the bills. Trillin felt he was the cautious one when it came to their finances because he paid the mortgage. Alice was the one who longed for luxury. Alice did not require many material things, but a nice home and nice clothes were important to her. Alice and Trillin fought over money when Trillin was reluctant to spend more money than he felt was necessary. On a trip to Japan, Trillin was happy to stay in an inexpensive, Spartan room, but Alice wanted something better. Another time, they had the floor replaced in their bedroom, and the contractor asked for more money than his estimate. Alice felt the man deserved it, but again Trillin felt differently; however, as always, Trillin gave in to Alice.

Alice had a strong background in writing and was an English professor and also a published author in her own right. Trillin often had Alice critique his writing, despite being told this would cause tension in his marriage. Trillin did not see it that way. Trillin saw his work as a way to impress his wife, and he never stopped attempting to improve his work in order to raise his stature in his wife's eyes. Trillin thought it was a good thing he was a writer and not a corporate employee, since his wife's political views would likely have



ruined his chances of career advancement. Alice had strong political views, and she never shied away from expressing them.

Alice had a bout of lung cancer in the mid-seventies when their children were young. Alice faced the ordeal with an optimism that Trillin admired and expressed as a recurring theme in the book about strength of character. Alice had witnessed a friend of hers fight cancer with grace and style and tried to emulate the woman. Alice's fight with cancer seemed to define who she was better than anything else Trillin describes, but he spends little time on that episode in their lives, perhaps because the memory of nearly losing his wife early in their life together continues to be difficult, even six years after her death.

Perhaps because of her difficult childhood, Alice was a little loose with money. Trillin grew up with a strict grocer father who taught him to pinch every penny. However, Alice liked to live in a semblance of luxury. Trillin and Alice rarely fought over money, but there were times when Alice would encourage Trillin to spend more for her comfort or for the needs of someone less fortunate than they. As Alice would tell Trillin, they were lucky, so they should share the wealth.



Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary and Analysis

Alice was close to her children and adamant that she and Trillin attend all school events and other important moments in their children's lives. When Alice thought her cancer had come back in the early nineties, her first thought was that at least her children were grown and had benefited from her wealth of knowledge. However, Alice realized she had yet to see her daughters marry, and she did not want to miss that. Trillin agreed with Alice's assessment of the situation. Had Alice died during her first bout with lung cancer, he would have been lost. However, his daughters would have suffered the most. Both girls grew up to have careers in social work, a fact that Trillin believes would not have happened if not for Alice. Alice was not always close to her children, but she gave them a sense of morality that Trillin believed made them into the young women they became, a morality he could not have offered on his own.

Trillin remembers little about his conversation with the doctors after Alice's surgery in 1976, except the assertion that Alice only had a small chance of survival. That fear constantly stayed in Trillin's thoughts for several years until slowly their lives returned to normal. Alice went back to work on a show she and a partner had developed for PBS. Later, in a book she wrote based on a letter she wrote to the son of a friend, Alice would describe her fight with cancer as a battle against a dragon that never really dies. In 2001, Alice's dragon came back to life in a surprising way. Just months after their youngest daughter's wedding and weeks before the other daughter marries, Alice was diagnosed with heart disease. Alice had to undergo an emergency bypass. During the surgery, the doctors discovered extensive damage, which Alice had suffered as a result of radiation treatments in 1976. Alice's recovery would be difficult, but she was well enough to attend her daughter's wedding. However, Alice dies four months later.

Alice was a wonderful mom, and Trillin credits her with shaping their daughters into the good women they become. Alice had an optimistic view of the world and a heart of gold, which is why Trillin felt his children turned to careers in social work. Trillin also felt he could not have taken care of his daughters on his own if Alice had died in 1976. Alice's bout with cancer was serious, bad enough that the doctors told Trillin she only had a slim chance of survival. Trillin does not dwell on this time in this chapter, leaving the reader with the impression that it was a difficult time he still feels emotional about. However, Alice did survive and was able to accomplish everything with her daughters she had wanted to, including making sure they both married good men. Unfortunately, Alice's disease caught up with her when the radiation treatment she undertook proved to have damaged her heart. Alice got another twenty-five years, but her cancer did take her life. Trillin asserts that Alice would have looked upon this as a gift, and he leaves the reader with the suggestion that he saw every minute with Alice as the real gift. This final assessment underscores the theme of a celebration of life, the ultimate theme of the novel.



Characters

Calvin Trillin

Alice Trillin

Abigail

Sara

Dick Francis

Nora Ephron

Mina Shaughnessy

Alice's Father

Alice's Mother

Calvin's Readers



Objects/Places

Condolence Notes

Calvin Trillin received many condolence notes when his wife died. Many of these notes came from his readers who did not know Alice but felt as if they did because of his descriptions of her in his work.

Important Stuff Envelope

Alice kept letters she had written, letters written to her, and newspaper clippings in an envelope that was marked Important Stuff.

SEEK

Alice worked at City College with the SEEK program at one time. SEEK, or Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge, was a program designed to help unprepared college students succeed.

Lung Cancer

Lung cancer is cancer of the lung tissue. Alice suffered lung cancer and underwent radiation treatments that damaged her heart, leading to her death twenty-five years later.

Alice's Tax

Alice's Tax was a tax plan Alice came up with that stated that at a certain income level, all of a person's money would go directly to the government in order to help feed starving children.

Errors and Expectations

Errors and Expectations is a book written by Mina Shaughnessy. Mina, Alice's friend, also worked with SEEK. It was Mina who showed Alice how to cope with cancer with dignity.

Monocle

Monocle is the name of the political satire magazine that hosted the party where Trillin and Alice met the first time.



Times Magazine

Alice once appeared in a fashion spread in the *Times Magazine* alongside an article written by her husband. Alice gave extra copies of the magazine to her father hoping that because Alice had appeared in such a publication, it would give her more respect with the nurses and doctors at her father's nursing home.

The New Yorker

The New Yorker is a publication which employed Calvin Trillin since 1963.

Bruno's Letter

Bruno's Letter is a book Alice wrote based on a letter she had written to a friend's son during her bout with cancer when she learned that he, too, suffered from the disease.

Tokyo, Japan

On a trip to Tokyo, Trillin booked a room in a hotel that appeared to be clean and cheap. However, upon arrival he and Alice found the room to be small and spartan. Alice was unhappy with the room, sparking one of their few fights over money.

Greenwich Village

Greenwich Village is where Alice and Calvin bought their first home, a brownstone.



Themes

Love

This memoir is filled with love from beginning to end. Calvin Trillin loved his wife, Alice, and from Trillin's description of Alice, the reader can feel assured that the feeling was mutual. Their marriage did not deteriorate over the years. On the contrary, it appears from the words which Trillin uses to discuss Alice that their marriage only grew stronger over the years. They worked together, played together and raised two daughters together. The conflicts of everyday life brought them closer together with every passing year. They were friends as much as they were lovers, confident in their trust in each other. There was little about Alice that Trillin did not like, and he expresses that fact with every beautifully written word within this memoir.

Calvin Trillin writes about his wife because he wants the world to know the same woman he knew. Trillin could see how his faithful readers believed they knew Alice through his books and articles. However, Trillin knew this Alice was not the real Alice. After her death, Trillin wanted to share her beauty, strength and character with the world, so that she would not be forgotten. To guarantee that Alice's impact on Calvin's life will not be forgotten is the ultimate gift of love he could offer. This memoir is as much a love story as it is a biographical work.

Celebration of Life

As much as this memoir is about love, it is also a celebration of life. Trillin uses this opportunity to celebrate the life of a woman he loved and admired. Alice lived life to the fullest. Alice was not afraid to enter into a debate and express opinions she knew could make someone angry. Alice did not hesitate to help people in need. Alice also did not back down in a fight when she knew she was right. Alice was a force, not only in Trillin's life, but in the lives of everyone who knew her. As exemplified by the letters Trillin received after her death, Alice touched everyone she met and a few people she never met.

Alice was diagnosed with lung cancer in 1976. The doctors gave her a ten percent chance of living. Alice defied the odds and lived another twenty-five years, years in which she helped hundreds of people through her work and her volunteer activities. Alice also spent those years raising her two daughters and helping shape them into the strong, responsible women they are today. Alice saw these years as a gift. The cancer finally killed her. The radiation that was used to save her life was the same radiation that destroyed her heart and took her life. However, she had another twenty-five years to finish her work, and she cherished every minute of it, just as Trillin treasured every moment with her.



Strength of Character

The majority of this memoir is about the real Alice, the Alice Calvin knew and rarely shared with the rest of the world. The memoir is not about Alice's death; it is not about illness and struggle. This memoir is about love; it is about a celebration of life and the strength of character in one woman. This memoir is about Alice. Trillin describes Alice's character from the moment they met to his opinions on what she would say if she could be with him now. Trillin describes the life that flowed through Alice that attracted him from the very beginning. Trillin talks about the impact her beauty had on her personality. Trillin also talks about the difficult relationship Alice had with her parents. Trillin expresses how Alice overcame all the ugliness in her life with positive thoughts and strength of character, which helped Alice avoid the darkest depressions to which any person with less strength might fall victim.

Trillin uses little stories of unimportant events to express the beauty of Alice. Everyday Alice seemed capable of saying something or doing something that impressed Trillin to the degree that he felt it necessary to spend his life attempting to impress her. Trillin, in some ways, felt inferior to Alice, as though he could not understand why a woman such as she would be with a man such as Calvin. It was her strength that made him feel this way. Trillin admits he would have been lost had she died in 1976, and that their children would not have become the women they did without Alice. This is a powerful statement that underscores this theme of strength of character. There are not many people in the world who can have as complete an impact on so many people's lives as did Alice.



Style

Perspective

Calvin Trillin's perspective is that of a grieving husband. He writes this book in order to share with the world the Alice he knew, rather than leaving his readers with the impression they already had from previous writings, which are not accurate. The Alice in Trillin's writings is a straight-laced, opinionated lady. This is only a small part of the woman Trillin loved. To Trillin, she was opinionated, but she was also beautiful, talented and a wonderful mother. Alice was a force in Trillin's life, and he feels as though she made him a better man just by sharing her life with him.

Trillin uses this memoir as a way of not only sharing Alice with the world, but also to remember her the way he knew her. Trillin loved his wife, and that love comes out in every word he writes. Trillin's perspective is not that of a grieving husband so much as that of a man who knows he was lucky to share his life with a truly great woman. Trillin believes Alice was a great woman and he wants to world to know the woman he knew.

Tone

The tone of the novel is upbeat despite the sad overtones. Trillin talks about Alice as if she were in the next room, describing her character, as well as their marriage, as though it were a work in progress. Trillin rarely mentions Alice's death and when he discusses her illness, he spends little time on the unpleasantness of the situation and more on Alice's optimistic view of the entire situation. The book is about Alice, about her views of the world, her behaviors, and her childhood. The book gives the impression it was designed in order to describe the indescribable and to explain a perfect marriage that ended much too soon.

The tone works because it keeps the subject of the memoir strictly to Alice, not to her illness or her death. The tone enriches the text by making it clear to the reader from the first sentence that it is not a story of grief, but a celebration of life. Trillin uses his tone to enhance his point without taking anything away from his story, creating a work that is symbiotic within itself.

Structure

The memoir is divided into eight chapters. Each chapter describes a different time or development within Alice's life or the Trillin marriage. Each chapter is prefaced with a quotation from a literary work, most often from Trillin's work itself. These quotations often describe the contents of the chapter. For example, one quotation is from a poem Trillin wrote when people expressed disbelief at Alice's age. Trillin uses this quotation to begin the chapter in which he discusses Alice's beauty and the effect it had on her life.

The memoir follows a linear timeline, beginning with the night Trillin met Alice and ending with her death. Trillin does move back and forth in time occasionally, using examples of events that happened at a later time in order to better describe a certain behavior or event in Alice's life that took place earlier. Trillin begins the book in the present time, describing the condolence letters he received after his wife's death. However, these movements out of chronological sequence do not disturb the basic timeline, they only enrich the timeline.



Quotes

"There was one condolence letter that made me laugh. Naturally, a lot of them made me cry. Some of those, oddly enough, were from people who had never met Alice. They had become familiar with her as a character in books and articles I had written—light books and magazine pieces about traveling or eating or family life." Chapter 1, pg. 4

"When I saw Alice at that Monocle party, she was wearing a hat. At least, I've always remembered her as wearing a hat. She later insisted she never owned a hat of the sort I described." Chapter 2, pg. 12

"She was, as Roger Wilkins later wrote, so very pretty, but that wasn't the first thing that struck me about her; it might have come as much as two or three seconds later. My first impression was that she looked more alive than anyone I'd ever seen. She seemed to glow."

Chapter 2, pg. 13

"I've always thought that it must be sadder to be a businessman without money than, say, a poet without money or a coal miner without money. You've failed at the very game you signed up to play." Chapter 3, pg. 22

"At Alice's memorial service, our friend Nora Ephron described those under Alice's protection as 'anyone she loved, or liked, or knew, or didn't know but knew someone who did, or didn't know from a hole in a wall but had just gotten a telephone call from because they'd found the number in the telephone book.'" Chapter 3, pg. 26

"Alice's response to having cancer was a reminder that an intellectual is not just someone who might be able to translate 'heuristics' or someone who liked to spend her summers reading nineteenth-century novels or a pile of biographies of physicists. It's someone whose instinct is to analyze anything that happens and try to make some sense out of it." Chapter 4, pg. 39

"If we'd had the misfortune to live in a milieu that called on me to work my way up in a corporation and on Alice to be the supportive and diplomatic and perfectly behaved corporate wife, I sometimes told her, I would never have emerged from middle management."

Chapter 5, pg. 42

"It's true that she tended to be the instigator of our family's money-spending schemes, but most luxuries didn't interest her. She didn't want expensive jewelry. She never wore perfume, expensive or otherwise. She couldn't imagine anything dumber than spending a lot of money on a flashy car or boat." Chapter 6, pg. 50

"It has occurred to me—again, I've done no systematic study—that among married couples the person who actually makes out the mortgage check is likely to be more



cautious about spending money than the person who doesn't. No matter where the money comes from, according to this untested theory, there is something sobering about sending away that much of it every month in the knowledge that, rain or shine, you'll have to come up with the same amount of money the next month and the month after that." Chapter 6, pg.54

"When it came to trying to decide which theories of child-rearing were highly beneficial and which were absolutely ruinous to the future of your child—a subject of considerable discussion among some parents we knew—we agreed on a simple notion: your children are either the center of your life or they're not, and the rest is commentary." Chapter 7, pg. 60

"When Alice's dragon came, it approached from a direction we hadn't even been guarding." Chapter 8, pg. 73

"The doctors said that her heart had been destroyed by radiation. In other words, you could say that she died of the treatment rather than the disease. Presumably, though, it was also the treatment that, against horrifying odds, gave her twenty-five years of life. I know what Alice, the incorrigible and ridiculous optimist, would have said about a deal that allowed her to see her girls grow up: 'Twenty-five years! I'm so lucky!' I try to think of it in those terms, too. Some days I can and some days I can't." Chapter 8, pg. 78



Topics for Discussion

What appears to be Calvin Trillin's biggest motivation in writing this book? How does he describe his desire to write the book? Is this book about dying and grief? Is this book about life? If so, how?

Why does Calvin Trillin discuss Alice's looks? What do her looks have to do with her personality? Do you think she took advantage of her looks in certain situations? Does this change your opinion of her? Could this situation have something to do with why Calvin Trillin mentions her looks?

How did Alice's childhood affect her as an adult? Do you think Alice would have been a different type of person if her childhood had been different? How did having to care for her parents as an adult affect Alice? Do you think helping her parents made Alice a more generous person or do you think she helped them because she was already a generous person?

Discuss Alice's theories of parenthood. Do you think Alice was right about the influence parents have on their children? Do you believe it is essential for a parent to make his or her child the center of their world? Why or why not? Do you believe Alice was a good mother?

Discuss Alice's influence on Calvin Trillin's work. Do you think Alice made Calvin a better writer? If so, do you think it is because of her education or because of his desire to impress her? If you do not think Alice improved Calvin's writing, why do you think Calvin continued to show his work to Alice despite her criticism?

What caused Alice's death? Do you think she would have died if not for the cancer? Do you think if Alice had gotten cancer later in life, the same results would have taken place? Why would Alice have looked upon the twenty-five years between her cancer and her death as a gift? Do you think this is an accurate way to think of the situation?

Discuss the tone of the book. How does the tone set the mood of the book? Is it the tone you would have expected from the book's description? What surprises you about the tone? Does the book live up to expectations?