

## Amy's 2006 Top Picks

The Year of the Dog was a Dog of a Year. And I'm not talking cute and cuddly. I'm talking about the lesser-used definition of dog. As in "one inferior of its kind" or "an investment not worth its price." While we had our fair share of good times and memorable moments, the loss of my grandmother (in February) and, unexpectedly, my dad (in March) cast a broad shadow across the year.

In their own ways, Grandma and Dad helped me develop a love for reading. My grandma made regular visits to the "liberry" (that's how she pronounced it and we found no reason to correct her) before Alzheimer's interfered with her ability to read. When I was a kid, there was always a book, usually a romance or a mystery, on the endtable in the "TV room," right next to the candy dish chock-full of gumdrops, butterscotches, Brach's Starlite Mints, and those orange marshmallow circus peanuts, which I can't see or eat without thinking of the nights I spent there. I can still picture Grandma -- her hair rolled in curlers, her long nightgown and robe tucked neatly under her legs, the smell of popcorn coming from the kitchen -- reading in her chair.

My dad, on the other hand, was a newspaper guy. Specifically, the sports page each morning, along with his cup of instant Folger's coffee. (Believe me, I tried to get him to drink better coffee but his habit had been established long before Starbucks invaded every street corner). When I was a kid, Dad read the paper in the privacy of our basement bathroom. I think it was the only quiet time and quiet place he could find in a house of five children. He was also an avid reader of instructions for assembling things, much to my dismay. Whenever he came to our house to fix this or that disaster, he'd be reading every line, every step, while I'd be stamping my feet saying, "hurry and get that thing-a-ma-hopper fixed up." Patience being one of those virtues I clearly didn't inherit from him. The last conversation I had with him was about instructions. On a piece of newspaper that had been laying on the bed, he drew out, with a shaky hand, instructions for putting a lock on one of our doors. I still have that drawing and won't ever forget how much it probably meant to him to know he was still helping Dave and I make progress on the house even if he couldn't do the work himself. I only hope he knew how much it meant to me.

So, as Spring sprung and the shadow kept pace with me, I retreated between the covers of books. Reading is my Great Escape. It's my way of checking out of reality and checking in to another place, another character, another year. Sure, I read to learn and expand my worldview, but mostly I read to collapse into an alternate universe, where the author and her characters are searching for answers to life's big questions instead of me.

This dog of a year, some of my book selections mirrored my mood or the questions that were rattling about in my head. These books were, at the core, about loss and renewal of some sort -- a person, a dream, a bad habit or idea. While reading didn't necessarily stop the question-rattling, I found new best friends in Richard Russo, Joan Didion, Stewart O'Nan, Alice McDermott, and others. Authors who offered up answers to their characters and, ultimately, for their readers. O'Nan and McDermott tackled the question of what it means to be family, especially in the face of loss. O'Nan also took on the question of what it means to be a connected community, even when we'd rather cut those connections. Didion stared death in the face in a best-selling book that was both difficult and soothing to read. And Russo and Singleton, thank goodness, made me laugh out loud. They reminded me that life may get serious but you can still laugh your way through it.

And like I learned in my Number 5 Pick, *Thread of Grace*, "No matter how dark the tapestry God weaves for us, there's always a thread of grace." I found that grace in my real-life friends, who were as supportive as they've ever been (thanks to you all!!). I found grace in working on my fiction projects and being healthy enough to run the half marathon again this year. And Dave and I were certainly handed a thread of grace when he received the offer from Kent State University to be their assistant professor of sociology come Fall 2007. For those of you who haven't heard already, we'll be moving to the Akron-Kent-Cleveland area late this summer.

Dave and I also discovered nature's grace in our new favorite state, Oregon. We spent a week exploring endless miles of the [coast](#), the [desert](#), and the [lush mountains](#) -- all available for the taking in one state if you're willing to drive some 600+ miles. As we were driving down a two-way highway with the Pacific Ocean crashing against the jagged rocks on our right and the tall pines of the mountains on our left, I exclaimed that "The Earth is pretty awesome!" When you're surrounded by so much raw, untouched land, you're reminded that there are forces at work much bigger and more powerful than yourself. The sun

rises and sets every day without anyone asking it to do so. Seeds scatter in the wind and emerge as stunning wildflowers. Old trees silently generate another ring on their trunks. Nature reminds us that there are beginnings, middles, and ends, just like all good books. And just like all good books, the paths to these milestones are always unique, never direct. Like with books, the journey through it matters more than the destination. My book-life and real-life journeys in 2006 took me to physical and emotional places I'll always remember, no matter how bittersweet. Now these places are part of my experience, my beginning, middle, and end to a particular chapter in the Book of Amy. I hope your personal book was filled with good beginnings, middles, and ends this past year, and that 2007 brings you more memorable experiences in all of the above.



**Above:** Happy Amy after shopping at the world-famous Powell's Books (the largest new and used bookstore in the world!) in Portland, OR. Visit [www.powells.com](http://www.powells.com). Happy Dave after a very strenuous, very uphill, but very-worth-it hike on the Tam McArthur Trail in Three Sisters, OR. That's Mt. Jefferson in the distance.  
**Below:** The last time I visited Grandma before she passed away. Grandma is surrounded by fellow avid readers in the family including my Aunt Wendy, my sister Mary, and my mom. And that's sweaty me shortly after the Flying Pig Half Marathon, which I ran in honor of Dad.



## Amy's 2006 Top Picks

### 1. *Straight Man*, Richard Russo

I was introduced to the Wonderful World of Russo through his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Empire Falls*. From there, I moved on to *Nobody's Fool*, and have *Mohawk* in my reading bullpen right now. But Russo's *Straight Man* might end up being my favorite of his, and certainly is my favorite read of the year. It's one of those rarest of rare novels – one that makes you laugh loud and laugh often.

Maybe it's the fact that my husband is in academia right now, and the novel is the story of academic politics in a rural Pennsylvania college town. Maybe it's because I could turn to Dave and read to him some hilarious scene, and he'd confirm that "yep, that's the way it works" in the ivory tower. Or maybe it's nothing more than the daffy-looking duck on the book cover. Ducks fall into the penguin category for me. They're goofy, scatter-brained, the Lucille Balls of the animal kingdom, and I wanted to know how the duck factored into this straight man's punchline. Because, obviously, when the title of the novel is "Straight Man," someone or some duck is getting a pie in the face.

That someone is William Henry Devereaux, Jr., the reluctant chairman of West Central Pennsylvania State University's English department. Here's a character with more than a few problems on his hands. The entire English department is at war, professors are nervously awaiting tenure in this underfunded college, Henry is having a mid-life crisis, and he can't seem to pee regularly anymore. In the course of a single uproarious week, Devereaux has his nose skewered by an angry colleague's spiral notebook, imagines his wife having an affair with the dean, wonders if a young adjunct is trying to seduce him, wonders if a needy student is stalking him, and then threatens (jokingly but is taken seriously by everyone else) to execute the goose on local television if his department doesn't receive their budget demands. The thing is, Hank causes most of his own problems and absurdity, which makes him all the more comical.

Russo's charm is that, by page one, he gives us characters (better described by one reviewer as lovable losers) whom we feel we've known forever. There's no warming up to them. They arrive fully baked and ready for a pleasurable devouring. They're real people with real problems – no matter how petty or outlandish you judge these problems to be – in real settings. In fact, there were times I compared a few of the characters to people I've worked with before. They're just that familiar. But in a good way. As Russo himself said in an interview: "In general, I think people like having their experience of life validated; they like to think they count and they're glad you've noticed them, even if you get things wrong."

I like Russo, too, because he takes his time. His tone and pace match the lazy-town locales he selects. No first-world worries on these pages, no plots with au pairs sleeping on the job or characters who debate about which wine best accompanies the foie gras (duck liver pun intended, even though I'm firmly against the practice of eating the stuff).

And this story is not all guffaws and giggles. The secondary thread about Hank's relationships with his father, his wife, and his daughter make for touching – even semi-dark – reading. But I've always argued that the best writing is tragi-comic. Russo strikes the perfect balance. In a 2004 Commencement Address at Colby College, the author said: "Indeed, the inability to laugh, at the world and at ourselves, is a sign, at least to my way of thinking, of mental illness."

I'm so glad Russo has the gift to keep us all sane.

### 2A. *Wish You Were Here*, Stewart O'Nan

### 2B. *Everyday People*, Stewart O'Nan

O'Nan was my discovery of 2006. His name had been on my list for awhile but I kept ignoring it, saying I'd get to the guy who was selected by [Granta](#) as one of America's Best Young Novelists when I had time to read a...well..."young" author. Color me envious of his early success. Or color me skeptical of anyone touted as the next best thing since Dave Eggers or David Foster Wallace or Jonathan Safran Foer, all of whom write postmodern meta-fiction that makes me want to set libraries on fire just for carrying their books. Dave can attest to the Wallace Incident of 1996 whereupon I threw his 1,000-plus page [Infinite Jest](#) across the room in a fit of disgust after just 50 pages. We didn't need a repeat of that petulant scene. So, being noncommittal about it, I checked O'Nan's *Wish You Were Here* out of the library, just in case I needed to return it unfinished and *then* set the library on fire.\*

I started and finished *Wish You Were Here* on the Oregon Trail and liked it so much, I picked up *Everyday People* at Powell's Books in Portland for the trip home.

*Wish You Were Here* is an appropriate vacation read since it takes place at the Maxwell family's summer vacation cottage in Chautauqua, NY. Emily Maxwell gathers her family there one time before she sells the place. Her husband, Henry, has been dead a year now, and she's ready to let the lakeside retreat go (sort of). Arlene, her stoic, overly practical sister-in-law isn't so game on selling. Daughter Meg, a recovering alcoholic recently separated from her husband, brings her children from Detroit along with her past struggles to understand her mother. Emily's son, Ken, who has quit his job and mortgaged his future to pursue photography, is accompanied by his children and his wife, Lisa, who looks forward to the day the home and these family vacations are ancient history.

Chapter by chapter, the eight characters (including the children) take turns unloading memories and emotional baggage, as well as, for some of them, regret that the cottage (and their past) are slipping away. The result is a novel where you side with one character for a couple of chapters and then turn your empathy toward another.

O'Nan's descriptions of place and action are masterful in their simplicity, yet he plumbs the depths of each character's heart to uncover the family turmoil left after Henry's wake – everyone searching for their new role in a family without a father. When my dad passed away, a wise friend told me that my family would be fundamentally changed by the loss, not in a terrible way but in a way that each family member would experience differently. O'Nan brings this reality to bear in his story without melodrama and without making the reading too melancholy (he is of Irish descent so it would be easy to get maudlin, it's in his DNA, after all).

After leaving the tranquil, white middle class setting of upstate New York in *Wish You Were Here*, I headed to the black working class community of East Liberty, Pennsylvania in O'Nan's *Everyday People*, which I purchased at the best bookstore ever, Powell's Books, in Portland, OR. Here's a writer who writes as authentically about well-off white people as he writes about a block-full of neighbors who are dodging gunfire and struggling to pay the bills.

Like *Wish You Were Here*, *Everyday People* takes places over the course of a week, and O'Nan reminds us that a lot happens behind closed doors in seven day's time. At the center of the novel is Chris "Crest" Tolbert, an 18-year-old graffiti artist left paralyzed and haunted by the loss of his best friend after a recent accident on a highway overpass. Also in the Tolbert home is Chris's brother Eugene, an ex-con who is trying to stay straight, their hard-working mother, and his father, Harold, who must choose between his love for his family and his newfound love for a gay man down the block. From there, O'Nan opens doors throughout the neighborhood to reveal the lives of a dozen friends and family, and how these lives intersect, for better and worse.

Again, the chapters are written from each character's point of view, an incredible feat, considering each voice is so real and fully drawn. Never do you get the feeling O'Nan cheated a character or left him or her half-rendered. O'Nan could have easily compromised his characters by relying on negative stereotypes reinforced (wrongly) by the media – the gangsta teens, the welfare moms, the nearly homeless. Instead, he chooses to show real characters dealing with real issues – how to move through loss and love and make the right choices – no matter your color of skin, no matter your zip code.

If you enjoyed the movie, "Crash", you'll love *Everyday People*.

**\*Note:** All aforementioned comments about me setting libraries on fire are merely for dramatic effect. No need to alert Homeland Security.

### 3. *Beloved*, Toni Morrison

Early in the year, the *New York Times*' Book Review editor sent out a short letter to a few hundred prominent writers, critics, editors and other literati, asking them to identify "the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years." *Beloved* was #1 on the list. It started a firestorm among...well...among anyone paying attention to such lists. So, I thought it was high time to re-read it. I first cracked *Beloved's* cover in a Women's Literature course at Ohio U in 1988. I think I enjoyed it more in the re-reading than I did in class. If you haven't read it, you should. If you don't know the plot, find out what it's about. If you're in a predominantly female book group, this will make a great choice for 2007. If you're a fan of Oprah, you know she loves this one. If you're a mother, pick it up. If you like ghost stories, it's for you. If you need to remind yourself how awful slavery was (and still is in the idea of anyone wielding absolute power over anyone else), check it out of the library. If you've already read it, it'll do you some good to return to it. 'Nuff said.

### 4. *After This*, Alice McDermott

Alice McDermott is one of the authors who dominates my list any year she produces a novel. She made it with *Charming Billy* and with *Child of My Heart*. Had I been making lists when I read *That Night, At Weddings and Wakes*, and *A Bigamist's Daughter* she would have made it then, too. It's safe to say that she takes up prime real estate on my bookshelves.

Consider these lines:

*Despite the heat, there was a white pillbox pinned to the back of her head. She wore a floral shirtwaist dress and the flesh beneath her arm moved like a pink hammock filled with something heavy.*

*"Who," he asked with his finger in the air, "who do you think you'll have on your side when your mother and I are gone? Who do you think you'll be able to turn to when you're as old as I am and there's something you need – a buck or two, a piece of advice, maybe just someone you can ask, Remember when? Your friends? Your Little League team?" Their father waved his broad hand. "They'll be scattered to the four winds." He paused, as if waiting for them to speak. And then he said, "Your family, that's who you'll have. If you're lucky. Your two sisters. Each other. That's who you'll have."*

I've said before that no one establishes physical and emotional place as well as McDermott. If you only read these lines, you might guess that the novel is set in the post-war 50s (pillbox hat, shirtwaist dress), and there's a strong father who knows how to lay down a guilt trip, which may lead you to guess we're dealing with another one of McDermott's Irish Catholic families here. You'd be correct on both accounts.

In *After This*, we meet the Keanes as the world is changing from the innocent 50s to the social and political upheavals of the 60s and 70s. The Keane children fare differently during these decades: quiet Jacob heads to Vietnam as his brother Michael and sister Annie take detours through the sexual revolution. Clare, the youngest, finds herself caring for her aging parents and hanging on to innocent (and heartbreaking) ideal that nothing about her family has to change even when the rest of the world is. Parents John and Mary Keane continue to rely on their Catholic faith to stabilize their marriage as the family encounters tragic loss, innocent mistakes (Clare gets pregnant), and regret over missed opportunities. And then there is Pauline, Mary's long-suffering, peevish friend whom most of the family tolerates at best.

As she reveals the interior of the Keane's family dynamic, the title rings in the reader's mind – what will they do *after this*, how will they manager after this thing that has happened? And isn't that one of the most universal of all questions we ask about people after they've encountered a windfall or a downfall? What comes after this?

Each chapter could be a complete story – or the starting point of another novel – in and of itself. She takes the small moments in life – a trip to the world's fair, a picnic on the beach, a Sunday morning mass – and makes them mammoth. It's like the world stops and sighs and says "Yes, that's it. I get it now." The book begins with a woman exiting church and ends with a woman entering church, a symbol for the faith that embraces and encloses the family. Here's the thing about Alice: the power is in the quietude, in the unwritten and unsaid. She bravely lets you fill in the blanks. I hope there is much much more from McDermott after this.

### **5. *Thread of Grace*, Mary Doria Russel**

Recommended by Sandy Becker, a co-worker and avid reader with impeccable taste, I decided this would be a great book to read and discuss with my mom and sisters. Sandy's recommendation didn't let any of us down, and we all learned about a forgotten piece of World War II in the process.

It's been awhile since I've read a novel where I needed to refer to the list of characters constantly. Not because Russel doesn't do her job in making the characters distinct, but because there are so many people and plots to follow. War is complicated so it only stands to reason that the storyline would be equally complex. Action-packed from page one, the reader is treated to harrowing escapes, ambushes, disguised getaways, and heroic rescues.

Set in Italy during the final days of World War II, Russel tells the story of the network of Italian citizens who saved the lives of 43,000 Jews. We begin following 14-year-old Claudette Blum and her father as they trek with thousands of other Jewish refugees over the Alps to Italy, where they hope to find safety. The Blums soon discover that Italy is anything but peaceful. With the help of local Italians, they all go into hiding to survive. From here, the spotlight shifts to Renzo Leoni, a WWI veteran with a bad knee and an even worse drinking problem. Renzo is both hero and fool, tragic and comic, Don Quixote and Groucho Marx. He drives the story and dons many disguises to save the day for others while also saving himself, a Jew and a leader of Italy's partisans. Through Renzo, we meet a German defector who spent time as a "doctor" (read: monster and murderer) in the concentration camps, and is now seeking absolution. We meet a sympathizing priest, a few protective Italian mothers who fight the good fight, and plenty of Nazis who make us cringe.

In Shakespearan fashion, everyone is connected to everyone and, eventually, there's a big scene where the truth is revealed for all characters. There's a lot to learn here and a lot of ethical questions to consider. If you had been there, would your door have opened to the Jewish refugees, even if it put you in harm's way? Would you have gone with the partisans or followed Italy's then-crumbling party line? It's tempting to think we would have all done the right thing – that we would have become the thread of grace.

### **6. *East of the Mountains*, David Guterson**

One of the first books I read for the year, it seemed appropriate that several months later we vacationed in the very area of Oregon where the story takes place. The premise is simple: Ben Givens has been diagnosed with terminal cancer and takes one last journey through the Cascade Range before he commits suicide. After receiving his diagnosis, this retired heart surgeon decides to take matters into his own hands and end his life on his own terms. He'll make it appear as though he died accidentally on his quail-hunting trip. So, he leaves a vague note about his trip for his daughter, and sets out with his two dogs for one last hunt. Mishaps and detours ensue, and Ben gets farther away from his goal. He meets a drifter who offers him advice and marijuana. He befriends a young couple that sends him into a reverie about he and his late wife. His dogs have a wicked encounter with a pack of wolfhounds, which forces Ben to leave the woods to find help for one of his injured dogs. And then he finds himself helping someone else in a run-down apple-picking camp.

Guterson gets away with a generous use of the flashback, something most writers are taught to use sparingly. But, in the case of Ben, it works. Who wouldn't be reflecting on their life at the very moment they're contemplating ending it? Regardless of your stance on assisted suicide in the face of terminal illness, you'll find yourself pulling for Ben, empathizing with him, and understanding why he wants to end his life (to save his family from the indignities and pain that awaits him, to save himself from the fear he's already experiencing) and why he can't. You'll also find yourself questioning whether you believe Ben was all that serious about his plan in the first place.

Symbolism and metaphor abound in this story, and it'd be a provocative selection for reading groups. Some may find it entirely cliché. Others may look beyond that and focus on the more interesting question – is it ever right to play god, especially in the face of terminal cancer? One reviewer pointed out that Christian theology holds that, at the second coming, Christ will arrive from the east. Here, east is a symbol of the second coming of hope, and that life is as mysterious as the faith we have in it.

## 7. *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion

I read this two months after my dad passed away. It was my futile attempt to find some answers to the aforementioned question the Keane family struggles with: “what do we do after this?” (See #5). This isn’t a self-help book or a step-by-step approach to grieving. It’s more of a philosophical, stream-of-conscious portrait of the year in the life of a widow. Didion is not afraid to tell readers she talks out loud to a husband who isn’t there, that she expects him to walk back in the door and sit down for dinner, that she wonders if she can magically reverse the sequence of events the day he had a massive heart attack at home and bring him back to life. Didion reminds us that magical thinking isn’t child’s play. Adults are fully capable of suspending reality and opting for fantasy to get them through the day.

Didion also digs into the myth that there is magical moment when you’re supposed to dust yourself off and “move on.” Grief has a mind of its own. I’ve decided grief is like a faucet. On most days, you can turn it on and off as needed, and it respects your wishes. But then there are those days when it leaks or drips, when it bursts at the most inconvenient time, or when it needs to be rigged with a towel or rubberband or wrench to catch the mess.

Sad stuff aside, at its center, the book is a love story. I thought many times of my own mom and dad. Like Didion and Dunne, my parents were almost never apart during their 40-plus years together. Their lives revolved around each other. How, then, do you all of the sudden, revolve alone? Didion makes it clear that it’s not easy. In her own story of life without her other half, she also reveals one of the truisms of our society: at a time when we most desperately need people, we find ourselves alone in our grief, left to figure it out on our own because even the most supportive friends and family aren’t able to truly understand our experience.

You’d think this kind of topic would have a limited audience but Didion’s book hung on the best-seller list for quite awhile. Perhaps it’s because she touches on a subject so universal, yet so incredibly private and personal, that every reader was hoping she’d provide the magical answer they’d been searching for as well.

## 8. *Novel*, George Singleton

Every year, there’s a book on my list with the “not for everyone” disclaimer. *Novel* would be it. I read an article about Singleton in *Poets & Writers* magazine. He seemed like a funny guy and the reporter seemed to think he wrote even funnier novels. An English professor Dave plays basketball with also mentioned he knew Singleton and was a fan of his work. All signs were pointing to Singleton being the [Charles Bukowski](#) for the 2000s. (For those unfamiliar with Bukowski, he was a hard-drinking-former-postal-worker-turned-writer who makes George Carlin sound like devout – and sober – priest.)

Might as well begin at the beginning so I picked up his first novel, sardonically titled *Novel*. Set in the town of Gruel, South Carolina, a man named Novel (his brother’s name is James; his sister’s is Joyce), decides to write his autobiography. As he struggles to recount his life story, he finds himself the star of a decades-old town secret. From there, we’ve got lots of Southern-fried craziness (exploitation of stereotypes for dramatic effect abound), lots of drinking, lots of art forgery, and plenty of scenes in pool rooms and motels to remind you we’re nowhere near a coastal, cosmopolitan city.

More than anything, this is a sarcastic send-up of the memoir, which, to be a blockbuster today, features dysfunctional families, nightmarish childhoods, bizarre people, and nearly unbelievable memories. Maybe *Novel* is where [James Frey](#), who lied to the world in *A Million Little Pieces*, got some of his ideas.

The thing that makes *Novel* my not-for-everyone selection of the year is that you won’t find a traditional plot here. Nor will you find many likeable characters – laughable, sure, but not really likeable. And you may only understand half of what’s going on beneath the gags. You have to leave your Serious Literary Reader Card in your wallet and remind yourself that it’s okay for a farce to be wrapped in a novel’s clothing. It’s like one of those stories told by someone who is laughing out loud the entire time they’re telling it while you’re not even able to muster up a chuckle. And then that person notices your non-response and says, “Trust me, you *had to be there*. It was hysterical.” *Novel* is that kind of book. I got a decent laugh from it but can see just as many readers asking, “Am I *there* yet?”

## 9. *Memory of Running*, Ron McLarty

If you liked [A Confederacy of Dunces](#), you’ll find *The Memory of Running* a familiar, yet easier, read. Our hero here, Smithson Ide, is almost a little too sweet and likeable to compare to Dunces’s Ignatius Reilly. However, similarities abound. Smithson is middle-aged, significantly overweight, and going nowhere in a

dead-end job just like Ignatius. Yet, unlike Ignatius, Smithson is actually called to act after his parents die in a car crash and that his mentally-ill sister Bethany has also perished in California. Smithson retrieves his old Raleigh bicycle in the garage of his parents' East Coast home and begins a cross-country journey to reclaim his sister's body. Remember here that Smithson weighs nearly 300 pounds so this is a great advertisement for a Raleigh bike's durability.

From there, chapters move from past to present as Smithson simultaneously moves across the country and the landscape of his childhood memories. We learn of his sister's descent into madness and how he tried to protect her from herself and others. Smithy also bumps (okay, sometimes he even runs over them) into bizarre characters with stories stranger than his own.

Smithy is equal parts Ignatius, [Holden Caulfield](#), and even Huck Finn. At turns funny and heartbreaking, you can't help but hope Smithy reaches his destination in some satisfying way. The good news is, this is McLarty's debut effort. He's no spring chicken though. You may know McLarty as an award-winning actor who's appeared regularly on *The Practice*, *Law & Order*, and *Sex and the City*. I'm hoping his sophomore stint is as equally warm and charming.

### **10. *Death of a Salesman (audio)*, Arthur Miller**

Arthur Miller described this as "the tragedy of a man who gave his life, or sold it, in pursuit of the American Dream." As relevant today as it was nearly 60 years ago, *Salesman* remains one of the classics in American theater, and, while thoroughly depressing, it was a treat to listen to this play during my daily commute. I even admit to sitting in the parking lot with the car idling to compose myself after listening to the end ... three times.

It's not like I didn't know what I was getting into. Most Americans are familiar with Willy Loman and his pursuit to be "well-liked." Most know he fails miserably and even in his final act in life, he desperately tries to prove his version of the American Dream a reality. It's a heartbreaker, this play. The material is not an uplifting-pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps tale of success. In stark contrast, Willy Loman is the poster child for what happens when the American Dream goes Nightmare.

Many think Miller was attempting to debunk the idea that the American Dream can ever be reality. Certainly, his character Willy was unable to see through his own illusions of the Dream. Willy's tragic flaw, of course, is in failing to question whether the dream (and his theory of being well-liked) is valid.

But when you've got no other reality to cling to, when you're living on borrowed pennies like Willy was, when you can't make ends meet and you don't want your kids to think you're a failure, is it so wrong to dream big? Is it so wrong to have delusions of grandeur? Isn't it human nature to want to be as successful as those rich folks across the street? Wasn't the American Dream created to be the benchmark of success?

There are plenty of Willys in the world who want to be well-liked or want to be seen as livin' the Dream. It's unfortunate that the Dream, in reality, is an unobtainable slice of America for so many. I'll end here, lest we get into a rousing political and ethical debate on the plight of America's working class.

### **Other Audio**

*The Mysteries of Glass*, Sue Gee

*The Thirteenth Tale*, Diane Setterfield

### **For Your Consideration:**

The classic I revisited: *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov

The Pulitzer I re-read: *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley

Best Short Story Collection: *Music Through The Floor*, Eric Puchner

Easy Cheesy Read: *Family Tree*, Carole Cadwalladr

Best Non-Fiction: *Marley & Me*, John Grogan

Biggest Clunker: *Black Swan Green*, David Mitchell (I bought into the hype and shouldn't have)