

Amy's Top 10 Books of 2007

So many books, so little time to read them in 2007. The waiting-to-read stack on my dresser is piled much higher than the stack of books I finished this year. And my wish list continues to lengthen at an alarming rate. Time just wasn't on my side in 2007 what with Dave accepting a position as associate professor at Kent State University, followed by the months of preparing the old Purcell homestead to sell, followed by the move to Akron, OH a mere six months later. Whirlwind is an understatement.

As I begin typing this on Christmas Day, we've been in our new home for exactly five months. I think I remember maybe two of the twelve months that have passed – the month we told everyone we would be moving (January), and then the month we moved (July).

And this being a year of transition and change, it only stands to reason the thread running through many of the books I read is none other than change, or how a transformation frays, breaks, or knots the thread that ties families, friends, couples together.

What hasn't changed – in many ways – are my tastes in literature. Some of my all-time favorite authors appear on this year's menu. Russo. Oates. O'Nan. Ford. Talk about comfort food! I suppose when everything else in your life is changing, the authors you know provide a safe haven and refuge ... sort of like a steamy bowl of Mac 'n' Cheese or homemade chocolate chip cookies or a hefty, party-size bag of salty potato chips. Rest assured, there are also some new names on the list that, if you'll allow me to run this food metaphor into the ground, will make you feel like you've stepped into the hip "It" restaurant in your city. Their themes and characters are as eclectic as they are extraordinary.

Usually I use this space to give friends and family a recap of our year but many of you have been keeping up with the days of our lives on my blog (www.amypurcell.com/blog) so I'll spare you all the repeats. We're getting enough of those due to the ongoing, unresolved Writers Guild strike.

Mainly, the blog has been an easy way to stay in touch with you, but it has also helped get me back in the habit of writing every day. Writing is a lot like exercise – when you're in shape, it feels great and you're motivated to continue improving. When you're out of shape, it's painful starting again and you can create a million excuses to skip it. I was stunned (and ashamed) when I went back through emails and notebooks, and realized I've had an agent for four years and haven't produced anything new for her to shop. Let's just say my fiction writing had gone flabby, and the blog has been a good warm up before I get down to jazzercizing my brain. (I did end the year on a good note though – one of my short stories was picked up and will be published in March 2008!)

I was equally stunned (and ashamed) to realize I read a mere 15 books this year, about half the number I normally read. I fear this list is weaker than other years (again with the exercise theme) but I hope you'll find something new to check out of the library or purchase at your favorite local bookstore. And since I'm still adding to my want-to-read stack, let me know what grabbed you or pleased you or haunted you or held your attention hostage for a few nights.

Even though life got in the way of reading and writing, it was for very good reason. Dr. David Purcell wowed his dissertation committee and landed a plum job at Kent State, which, in turn, allowed me to go part-time so I can spend the other half of the day writing. Even better, I was able to work out the gig with Luxottica Retail, where I've been working full-time for a few years. I am one lucky girl here in my work-from-home bunker, complete with my two trusty "Dogoyles" (Alice and Macy) who lie on either side of me and protect me from some unnamed beast – namely our mailwoman – while I'm working.

Dave and I are still amazed that the plan we worked toward for several years has actually had the outcome we expected. Given our streak of less than good luck in past years, we count our blessings every day and are grateful for the love and support of friends and family that helped get us here.

If this has also been a year of change – large or small -- for you, I hope it's all been in your favor. And may there be an outpouring of mind-blowing books in 2008! Here's what blew me away in 2007 ...

1. *Bridge of Sighs*, Richard Russo

I told a couple of friends that reading Richard Russo is like wrapping up in a warm blanket during a snowstorm. His writing is just soooooo comfortable, it feels like you're with your best childhood friend. This is the second year in a row that Russo hit #1 on my list. What's amazing to me is Russo is pigeon-holed as a "small town" writer, someone who focuses on the daily lives of characters in small town America. I couldn't disagree more. Russo tackles race and class issues full-force. He gives a voice to the often-ignored, often-voiceless working class in our country, and I admire him for that. It's far more interesting than following the trainwreck that is Britney Spears.

In *Bridge of Sighs*, Russo introduces us to Thomaston, a small town in upstate New York that is home to a dying leather tanning factory and Ikey Lubin's, the convenience market owned by the Lynch family. We meet Lou, Tessa, and their son Lou C. Lynch (called Lucy by others), a family struggling to live out the American dream as best they can.

We discover the first of many bridges in the story when Lucy falls victim to some grade-school bullies but I won't ruin the haunting, memorable scene that takes place there. After this episode, we follow Lucy through his childhood, meeting his best friend Bobby Marconi, his future wife Sarah, and Gabriel Mock, an older black man who paints the fence of Thomaston's city hall. We also watch Lucy's father -- a quintessential Russo character, optimistic yet a wee hapless and gullible -- lose his job as a milkman and then gain a run-down market across from their home. The Lynches make a go of the market while Lucy and Bobby grow up and grow apart due to circumstances that you can discover as you read this must-read.

Fast forward 50 or so years, and Lucy is heading to Italy in search of his lost friend Bobby, who is now an accomplished painter living in Venice. Coincidentally, his wife Sarah, who gave up painting to raise their family, recently created a painting the Bridge of Sighs, located in, coincidentally, Venice.

The Bridge of Sighs is an actual structure in Italy that connected the interrogating rooms of Venetian police with the prisons. Lord Byron gave the bridge its name, implying that inmates sighed as they took their final view of Venice. Legend also has it that eternal love waits for those who kiss at sunset in a gondola under the bridge.

All of the bridges and all of the painting themes come together nicely, in a very Russo way. And, as with every Russo book, I hated when this one ended. I wasn't ready to leave Thomaston and its characters behind. As one reviewer said, "Russo's ability to present individuals with dignity and grace make this a quietly astounding novel that should be on everyone's reading list."

I was fortunate to hear Richard Russo and Russell Banks speak in Cleveland this year. Check the blog for a full recap (<http://www.amypurcell.com/blog/?cat=6>). Russo said this was the most difficult book for him to write but you'd never know that when reading. The story rolls along so naturally and beautifully, you forget you're actually sitting in your own town and not Thomaston.

2. *Before You Know Kindness*, Chris Bohjalian

It's the end of summer, and the Seton family is descending up their country home in New Hampshire. But this time, there's a secret guest -- a gun in the trunk of John Seton's Volvo. He's recently (and secretly) been hunting but hasn't told his family since his brother-in-law, Spencer, is a staunch animal activist (think PETA) and vegetarian. Tensions abound as the group spends their days and nights together. Catherine Seton (Spencer's wife), is tiring of her husband's activism. John is harboring his secret love of hunting. And the two teenage daughters, Charlotte and Sarah are feeling neglected by their parents who are absorbed in their own troubles. Matriarch of the family, Nan Seton, does her best to tamp out any signs of tension but things eventually explode one night when Charlotte, daughter of Spencer and Catherine, finds the gun in John's car. After drinking at the country club, she finds the gun and accidentally shoots her father, the bullet landing a fraction of an inch from his heart. But, given the way she's been feeling, was it really an accident?

The build-up to the shooting is as intriguing as the fallout afterwards. Spencer can't forgive John for owning a hunting rifle, and the incident nearly tears the family apart. The secondary story of the relationship between Charlotte and her younger cousin is equal parts sugar and spice.

Bohjalian balances the two sides of the gun laws argument and offers us main characters who struggle with infidelity, unspoken family grievances, vegetarianism, and activism, subjects that could become moralistic or didactic or “preachy” in a lesser writer’s hands. The author never takes one side or the other; he simply presents both sides of the argument, and lets the reader decide.

The novel's title, borrowed from the poem "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye: "Before you know what kindness really is / you must lose things, / feel the future dissolve in a moment / like salt in a weakened broth."

Each character loses plenty before they discover what kindness really is, but there’s good news waiting at the end. Bohjalian treats his readers to the all-too-rare happy, hopeful ending, something unexpected given the politically-laden nature of the issues Bohjalian explores. This would be a great pick for book groups – lots of fodder for discussion.

3. *Population 485, Meeting Your Neighbors One Siren At A Time*, Michael Perry

I gave this book of essays to my friend Sharon for Christmas in 2006. I hadn’t read it but it seemed like something she would enjoy, being that Perry grew up in a small town like she did. It was a hit with Sharon and she demanded I read it, too. In fact, I borrowed the very copy I had given her.

This little gem glimmers from start to finish with heartfelt and heartbreaking compassion. As a volunteer firefighter in his tiny childhood town – thus the title of the book -- of New Auburn, Wisconsin, Perry witnesses his neighbors taking their first and last breaths. We ride along with Perry to collisions, fires, heart attacks, suicides, and false alarms. We meet a cast of characters most fiction writers only wished populated their stories. There’s fellow firefighter One-Eyed Beagle as well as Perry’s mother, brother, and all the people Perry helps along the way.

Perry isn’t a trained writer but that doesn’t matter. His style is smooth, authentic, and humorous (his discussion about puke being a constant on his calls is hilarious), and, like any formally-trained writer, he saves the best for last with a surprise ending in his final essay.

This would be a great gift for anyone you know who serves their community, be it as a firefighter, EMT, nurse, or social worker.

4. *Arsonist’s Guide to Writer’s Homes in New England*, Brock Clarke

If we were playing “six degrees of separation” I am one degree separated from Brock Clarke. Dave played basketball with him at the University of Cincinnati. This band of professorial basketball brothers got together on Wednesdays and Sundays for some cardiovascular activity followed by copious beer drinking, which sort of cancelled out any good the workout did. Dave and Brock battled for top honors as the slow, aging point guards but I’m thinking Dave won the battle on style points with his circa 1970s matching sweatband and wristbands. Brock wasn’t able to make it every week because, clearly, he was working on a fabulous novel that has received rave reviews.

His voice and style reminds me of JD Salinger crossed with Tom Robbins crossed with George Singleton. He could easily be lumped in with some other post-modern heroes like Dave Eggers, David Foster Wallace, and Jonathan Safran Foer, but since I detest most of those guys, I’m hoping Brock can stand on his own and evade the “PoMo” label.

Dry, witty, compassionate. It’s my favorite kind of writing – a combination of comedy and tragedy.

Sam Pulsifer is 40-something and has finally gotten his life together ... sort of. Not even his wife and kids know that, at age 18, Sam accidentally burned down the Emily Dickinson house in Amherst, Mass., killing a tour guide and her husband who were enjoying an intimate moment in one of the bedrooms. Sam wasn’t a youthful pyromaniac – he was simply visiting the house to confirm whether the horror stories his mother told him about it were true. After serving 10 years in prison, Sam leaves Amherst, marries Anne Marie, and has two children – a typical trajectory for most average Americans. Except no one knows about Sam’s 10-year gig in the slammer. Until Thomas Coleman, the son of the deceased couple, shows up at the door.

Coleman becomes the firestarter – the match, if you will – for the chain of events that unravels Sam’s secret and his stability along with it. Worse yet, someone has begun torching writers’ homes in the area and all fingers are pointing to Sam.

The plot walks a fine line between absurd and heartbreaking. Sam is one of those narrators you sympathize with but, at the same time, are also glad isn’t among your circle of friends. What makes Sam lovable is how he bumbles through his own story and keeps his sense of humor – humor being a major strength in Brock’s writing.

I found the beginning and middle more charming than the ending but, after reading the last page, I did think that the story ended the only way it could have. I’ll leave that surprise to you.

The other thing I found interesting was Sam’s (or Brock’s) searing hatred of memoirs. Next time Dave and Brock battle it out as point guards, I’ll have him ask if it’s Sam’s opinion or if this was the author’s way of sending the self-indulgent memoir up in flames.

5. *Broken for You*, Stephanie Kallos

This book landed on my list, courtesy of my Aunt Wendy, an avid reader blessed with great taste in prose and in husbands (my Uncle Dennis being one heck of a guy). While our tastes in books aren’t always aligned, Wendy’s list of reads usually offers me a few new authors to try. Kallos’ first novel was a hit.

75-year-old Margaret Hughes has a malignant brain tumor and needs help caring for her collection of porcelain pieces, most gathered by her late father on trips abroad when she was a child. Enter Wanda Schultz, a stage director who comes to Seattle in search of the boyfriend who left her. Wanda needs a place to live; Margaret needs help. Both women are a bit “broken”.

This whacky version of kismet leads to even whackier events. Before Margaret passes on, she’s decided she’s going to break her collection instead of sell it. That’s right – she’s going to set a hammer to it. Further into the book, we learn why Margaret wants to do this but I can’t give away that ghost here. After Wanda suffers an unfortunate accident and is rendered housebound, she learns that she is quite adept at not only breaking the pieces but also at gluing them back together, mixing and matching types of clay to form a totally different treasure.

Kallos uses the metaphor of broken porcelain to represent the broken people in her novel. Each one is trying to reassemble themselves as best they can, hopefully into something better. Told in alternating chapters, we also get a glimpse into their past histories and how they came to be “broken.” With all the talk of broken-ness, you might think the characters will end up shattered but this is a book about redemption and putting the pieces back together again. I applaud Kallos for providing us with a life-affirming read and stellar ending rather than a depressing one. Thanks for the recommendation, Wendy!

6. *The Good Wife*, Stewart O’Nan

Here we are, back in upstate New York again with another one of my favorite writers. Like Russo, Stewart O’Nan places his characters in economically depressed small towns or urban cores.

Last year, two of O’Nan’s books made my list (*Everyday People*, *Wish You Were Here*), and this story was waiting in the wings as we entered 2007. I didn’t want to overdose on O’Nan so I waited a few months before picking this up. During that time, I heard from a few fellow readers that they had picked up his novels on my recommendation but were less than thrilled. They didn’t enjoy his slow-moving plots and reverie. “I wanted more action,” one friend said. “I kept waiting for something big to happen,” another complained. Arguing that O’Nan’s action is internally-based -- within the characters’ minds and observations -- did no good. Nor did my argument that the beauty of O’Nan is that the smallest moments are actually big emotional gorillas.

I know when I’m outnumbered, so if you’re into action-packed drama, linear plots, and scenes that knock you over the head and scream, “THIS IS THE BIG MOMENT” O’Nan probably isn’t for you. He focuses on everyday life and his writing is considered “lyrical”, which means, I guess, he can be an acquired taste. But I love his lyricism and the way he makes every sentence count, even if it means the plot moves like the last drop of molasses sliding out of a glass jar.

In this story, O’Nan introduces us to pregnant Patty Dickerson, whose husband, Tommy, has been a thief for a long time, unbeknownst to his wife. Tommy gets mixed up in a robbery that leaves an old woman dead, and places him in prison for 25 years to life.

We follow Patty through 28 years of raising her son alone while she also tries to keep her relationship with her husband alive. Patty’s patience, love, and strength is tested to the limits, and the reader waffles from being on her side to thinking she’s just plain stupid for hanging onto her marriage. As Patty struggles to provide for herself and her son in their small town, the reader gets an inside look at the frustrating and humiliating treatment the penal system inflicts on families of prisoners.

At turns sad and hopeful, O’Nan offers up a story that shows us that love sometimes can conquer all, even in the strangest of circumstances.

7. *Crow Lake*, Mary Lawson

When the new library opened a mere five-minute walk from our house, I spent a few hours scouring the stacks for a title that wasn’t on my wish list. *Crow Lake* was on the “staff picks” shelf, and I assumed the Highland Square librarians wouldn’t steer me wrong. Besides, the author is Canadian, and those Canucks know how to write. Must be all that snow (and beer) and remoteness (and hockey).

What I like about Canadian writers is their sense of place (most famous of all Canadian writers Alice Munroe and Margaret Atwood come to mind). Lawson doesn’t disappoint in this realm either.

Kate Morrison lives in the Canadian hinterlands: “beyond it there was about three thousand miles of nothing and then the North Pole.” Like many of the books I read this year, this is another tale of small-town family strife, life-changing events, and how the family reconciles reality with the loss of dreams. Kate loses her parents early in life and is raised by her two brothers, one who sacrifices higher education to allow the other brother to move out beyond the confines of their remote town. The story is told by Kate, now a university professor and researcher, who is looking back on her childhood and contemplating whether to return home to visit her brothers after several years away. The emotional divide between the three siblings has grown over the years and, to Kate, *Crow Lake* seems so very small and insignificant. But her memories live large and the pull of “home” is too great.

The journey Kate makes through the past, her present feelings, and her present relationship is both quietly beautiful and filled with love, without becoming maudlin or melancholy. This is Lawson’s first novel and my only complaint is that she didn’t trust herself or her readers enough – she knocks us over the head with hints about the “dark secret” hidden in *Crow Lake*’s community. In the literary world, this it’s a big sin when the reader begins to feel strung along or manipulated because the writer is afraid readers will lose interest without the trail of breadcrumbs to follow. Lawson should trust her talents more.

8. *Middlesex*, Jeffrey Eugenides

Of all the books about change, transformation, and reconciling the past with the present on my list, *Middlesex* takes top prize for covering this theme in the most unique way. Cal Stephanides is born a male but raised as a female due to his externally deceptive genitalia. At age 15, Cal goes through a heart-wrenching discovery and identity shift, but we don’t get there until midway through the novel. The beginning is an unfolding of Stephanides family history, from his grandparents’ lives in a small Greek town through their immigration to the United States through Cal’s parents’ early years of marriage in Detroit, and finally, through Cal’s childhood.

At first, I was put off by the novel’s structure. Cal begins telling his life story by telling you he is a hermaphrodite (the old device of telling the whole story upfront and then backtracking), and then we’re suddenly transported to Greece decades earlier to meet his paternal grandparents – a brother and sister who marry secretly and trip the genetic wires that lead to Cal’s condition. Eugenides weaves an interesting tale but, as a reader, I was also wanting to learn more about Cal immediately. The author dangles one hell of a carrot in front of his readers. When we finally get to Cal’s discovery, things get incredibly interesting and awkward, but remain sweetly comic instead of veering off into talk-show drama land.

The "roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time" (as Cal puts it) is well worth the dips and turns and slow inclines followed by their heart-skipping descent in the final 130 pages.

9. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Lisa See (Audio version)

My friend Sandy Becker never steers me wrong when it comes to books. This is the third year one of her recommendations has made the list. Little did Sandy know that her recommendation would also steer me into an auto accident.

It's not often you have the pleasure of putting a book on your top 10 list that you were actually listening to while simultaneously being broadsided in a hit-and-run on I-71 North. The pleasure of that little disaster was all mine while listening to *Snow Flower*. I remember Lily, the narrator of this wonderful tale, describing the torturous practice of foot-binding and then, BAM!, I was spinning in the median, screaming plenty of expletives while my feet were firmly bound to the brakes. Fortunately, I wasn't injured but the rental car didn't fare so well. And the person who hit me never stopped. I guess you could say this book packs a punch, literally and figuratively.

Despite the wreck, I think the best way to experience this story of friendship, love, and betrayal, is by listening to it. Lily and Snow Flower live in rural Chinese villages in the 19th century, where marriages are arranged and girls' feet are bound in the horrific, traditional way that left many young girls disfigured or dead from infection. The description of foot-binding is a stomach-churner but it grounds the reader in the importance of the cultural rituals that also bound Lily and Snow Flower for life as laotongs, or "old sames", at the age of seven.

The girls' feet aren't the only things that are tied up – their marriages, their friendships, their families, and, ultimately, their loss of independence place them in an isolated and eternally-binding world of servitude to their husbands and their husbands' families. Women in China were not taught to read or write, with the exception of a secret language called *nu shu*, known only to women and kept from men at all costs. Lily and Snow Flower communicate in *nu shu* using their fan, writing notes back and forth to each other when they cannot be together.

As the years pass, the two women survive famine, war, loneliness, loss, and, in the case of Snow Flower, an abusive husband. Like many friendships, a grave misunderstanding arises and Lily and Snow Flower's bond threatens to tear apart.

This would be another book group favorite. It's tempting to compare it to that other wildly successful book group read, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, but it's such a different kind of story. In many ways, I liked this more because of the emotions See brings to her characters. *Geisha* was a great history lesson and so is *Snow Flower* but this story beats *Geisha* for emotional impact. I cried at the end, as did my mother who borrowed the audio version from me.

10. *them*, Joyce Carol Oates

Every year, I read a "definitely not for everyone" book. Surprisingly, this year it came from Joyce Carol Oates' canon. She's one of my all-time favorite writers and I still remember reading her short story *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?*, in my freshman Women in Literature class. That story sealed the deal for me. I knew I wanted to be a writer as a kid but when I read this story, I knew *for sure*. I probably have 18 stories sitting in old notebooks that are my attempts to recreate this short story.

That story begins: "Her name was Connie. She was fifteen and she had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right. Her mother, who noticed everything and knew everything and who hadn't much reason any longer to look at her own face, always scolded Connie about it."

them, which was published in the same year as *Where Are You Going ...* (1966) begins with Loretta, a teenager, looking at herself in a mirror. A few pages later, Loretta's boyfriend is murdered by her brother, and her life is forever placed on a downward spiral that continues to affect the Wendall family through subsequent generations. Loretta marries the lazy police officer who found her murdered boyfriend and, from there, we follow Loretta into marriage and the motherhood of Jules, Maureen, and Betty, who grow up with the thinnest of safety nets.

Oates sets the turbulent lives of the Wendalls against the equally turbulent 60s. Jules falls through the safety net early, runs away, and job-hops his way into various troubles. Betty, the youngest, is lost to the streets. It is Maureen who embodies the family's only hope of breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and violence. When Maureen caves in to the pressures and her stepfather finds out she's been selling herself for sex, he beats her severely, placing her in an emotionally withdrawn state for nearly a year.

Finally, Maureen returns to life and attends school where she fails miserably but continues to try making her way in the world.

The Wendalls are the "them" in our society – the troubled family that is talked about in hushed tones, as in "you know *them*", "you know how *they* are", and, "I wonder what ever happened to *them*." Statements like these are so degrading that Oates keeps the word lower-case in her title, a capital letter giving the pronoun power it couldn't have in the story of the Wendalls.

For the uninitiated, *them* is not the easiest introduction to Oates' writing and subject matter. She doesn't hold back when it comes to exposing the underbelly of poverty and family dysfunction. I love her for the rawness and for her razor-sharp observations but it's also the reason I couldn't stomach more than 5-10 pages of *them* each night. It scrapes your nerves and leaves you searching for a hug from someone you love. It makes you realize just how fortunate you are that you can get that hug when you need it because that's not always the case for people like the Wendalls, for people like *them*.

Best Non-Fiction

Eat, Pray, Love, Elizabeth Gilbert
Wild Trees, Richard Preston

Best Unfinished Work

Suite Francaise, Irene Nemirovsky

(This novel takes place during the wartime Nazi occupation of France. Irene Nemirovsky's unfinished manuscript was been published more than 60 years after her death. The facts behind the fiction only make it all the more intriguing.)

Book I Hate To Admit I Read But Love To Admit I Hated

Water for Elephants, Sara Gruen
(Don't even get me started on this tirade.)

First Trilogy I Ever Completed

The Sportswriter, Independence Day, Lay of the Land, Richard Ford

(Independence Day is the best of the bunch, and won the Pulitzer in 1996. It could be read without reading The Sportswriter first.)