

Amy's Famous Top 10 Books - The 2005 Edition

Happy New Year!

For those of you who don't know the history, each year I send out my Top 10 Books List. The first couple of pages are usually a bunch of bollocks about Dave and I, and the type of year we had. Feel free to skip all that. What follows is a list of my 10 favorite books for the year and what I thought about them. We're not talking high literary criticism here. It's just one book-lover sharing her recommendations with friends, romans, countrymen, aliens, etc.

The MOST IMPORTANT piece of history is that, every year, we (meaning all of YOU) try to get the book list as far around the world as possible. One year, it hit Australia. That was a very good year. This year, I know for sure it'll make it to Ireland so the stakes are high! Your job * should you choose to accept it * is to forward this on to another bookoholic who lives far, far away from you.

Here's to another great year between the covers!

Amy

Hi, All:

Happy New Year! I hope 2005 was not only a good year of reading for you but also a good year all around. In the Purcell house, this was the year our pasts caught up with us. Not in the uh-oh-I'm-so-busted-the-secret-is-out sort of way that some people talk when a decades-ago transgression or lapse in judgment turns back up. For Dave and I, connecting with people and things of our past was an unexpected and surprising blessing.

Here are the highlights:

It's not every morning you get to hear your husband say his dead friend's adopted daughter has contacted him. Yeah, let that one settle in for a moment. And no, you are not viewing a current episode of Sylvia the Psychic on the Maury Povich Show. Dave's friend and former bandmate Fred died in a car accident on May 17, 1989. Fred left behind his wife, Mary, and his newborn daughter, Kirsten. Fred also left behind his best friend, Dave, his Carload of Sheep bandmates, and another daughter, Sarah, that he and Mary had given up for adoption three years prior.

Fast forward 19 years, several band line-ups, and at least 11 address changes for the Purcells. Sarah, now a freshman the University of Dayton, takes a break from studying and googles her biological father's name. The last time she did this – about five years prior – she came up empty. Sarah had tried going through the adoption agency for information but it was a closed adoption and a paperwork snafu had previously led to a dead end. But this time, a link to an article about this band called Pike 27 appears on her screen. And this articles says that Pike 27's lead singer, Dave Purcell, wrote this song called "5/17" in honor of Fred H., his former bandmate who died in a car wreck on May 17, 1989.

Sarah then clicks on the link to Pike 27's website which includes an email address which happens to be Dave's email address.

And then it's 6:30 a.m. and I'm getting out of the shower and Dave is screaming "You are NOT going to believe who just emailed me!!" Trust me, I didn't believe him. Who would? It's a fairytale beginning from there. Dave and Sarah meet (along with Sarah's brother who came along to ensure Dave wasn't some whacko freak musician) at Sitwell's in Clifton. He comes home and, through many tears, he tells me Sarah is so much like Fred, so much like Mary, so much of his past is rushing back to him. "It was like talking to Fred again," he says. Shortly thereafter, we go to Sarah's adoptive parents house for dinner. Dave tells some stories about Fred, and he and I remain stunned at how much the nature versus nurture argument is going in the favor of nature. Three minutes with Sarah and I can see her biological mother and father in the way she talks rapid-fire, the way she flips her hair (which is the same rusty red), the

smile, the lithe figure. Since then Sarah has met her biological mother, Mary, and her sister, Kirsten. All because one article in *Citybeat* (written, coincidentally, by Dave's good friend Sean) happened to mention one song that Dave just happened to write about a beloved friend, people have connected in ways that might never have been possible otherwise. As Dave's mother said when she heard the story, "It's nice to hear some good news for a change!" The power of Google ... and song lyrics ... and friendship ... and family.

My encounters with my past aren't nearly as dramatic but they were special all the same. I attended my 20th high school reunion. I wasn't too keyed up to go at first, but curiosity killed this kitty. And I had a blast. Way too much fun and way too many Miller Lites later, I was exchanging email addresses and phone numbers with some long-lost pals. And let me say these pals remember WAY too much about my grade school and high school hijinks. They remembered things I have so much forgotten that it was hard to believe they were actually talking about me.

One person in particular stood out – Susan Laumann (nee Denier). Susan and I were buds in grade school and high school but, like lots of friendships, you get busy and you grow more distant – whether in geographical distance or attitude or lifestyle – and eventually you lose contact with each other. The minute she came into the bar, we screamed like the little girls we used to be and couldn't stop talking about all the things we used to do together. I know it's cliché but it was as if time stood still. And you know, clichés are clichés because they're so true. I looked at Susan and all I could see was a girl in pigtails running around my backyard or riding her bike in front of me on Hanley Road as we made our way to the Whippy Dip for a soft-serve ice cream cone. We were so silly, we said to each other, laughing. And maybe we were. But that was the best part of it. We're going to meet for lunch soon and I can guarantee we'll scream again when we see each other. It's tradition. It's our past making itself known in the present.

The other piece of my past that came back was that I returned to Luxottica Retail (formerly known to many of you as LensCrafters when I first worked here). After being gone for almost three years, it felt like coming back home. It's a different place than when I left – bigger, busier, lots of unfamiliar faces among the familiar ones – but I'm loving it all the same.

There was also plenty to be excited about during the present in 2005. Dave passed his second and third (and final) qualifying exams with honors, making him an official PhD candidate (you're not considered "official" by the university until you jump through this grueling, three-tiered hoop). Now it's all-but-dissertation for him.

One of my short stories took second place in the Mercantile Library's short story contest. And I achieved my goal of submitting at least three stories for publication (the other two are still pending a permanent home) in 2005. I wrote some more on the novel but as most people know, I'm too superstitious to talk about it.

In the realm of incredibly good news, our friend Dawn defeated breast cancer with the strength, bravery, and positive attitude that I could only stand back and be in jaw-dropping awe of. She's been cancer-free for a few months and, at age 31, she's a heroine to all of us.

Soon these things will be part of our past and we'll enjoy those moments when something suddenly reminds us of the day Dave got his "high passing" grade or how a gaggle of girlfriends gathered around a fire pit and burned more than 30 bras in honor of Dawn's successful mastectomy and cancer-free lymph nodes. That's the great thing about the past – you can be in the frozen food aisle at Kroger and something about that pint of Ben & Jerry's might remind you of the time you broke up with your high school sweetheart and you and your best friend in high school consoled yourselves with bowls of vanilla ice cream, peanut butter, and chocolate sauce. (Trust me, it'll cure any relationship hangover).

Given how we hooked back up with our pasts this year, it should come as no surprise to me that my favorite books of 2005 include characters confronting their pasts and choosing what lessons they wanted to take away from it. It's certainly not a new theme – countless writers have excavated this terrain before.

But maybe that's why some many authors riff on this – maybe it's because we all confront pieces of our past at some point, and choose to keep or discard what it offers.

This year, I prefer to hold my past in the present for just a moment longer. To keep Sarah and Susan and that bowl of vanilla ice cream within arm's reach, for those days when I need something a little sweet, a little sentimental. I hope that all of you are also able to dip your spoons into your own bowls of ice cream and taste something splendid from your past.

Now, on to the present. Read these books or else. These are the 10 that stirred me this year (and one that made my blood boil in the wrong way). Many of you know the rules by now. For the newbies, there really are no rules, other than the ones I decide to assign.

This year, my faves are listed in order, 1st best to 10th best. They may or may not have made it on a bestseller list, their merits are worthy of defending, and they are the books that made me swoon. Definitely need that Swoon Factor.

Enjoy!

Amy

1. *Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini

Khaled had me at chapter one and kept me stunned until the end. Okay, I admit that there were a few times when the plot twists seemed a little too convenient but I took the bait willingly. Whenever those surprise turns came, I'd think, "Yes, of course! This has to be the way it is. It could be written no other way." I also admired the fact that Hosseini created such a remarkable book with a narrator that, at times, was incredibly unlikable.

This epic tale of two friends, of the father-son bond, of class differences, and mostly, of the betrayals that occur inside friendships takes us to Afghanistan and the United States. Amir is the wealthy son of Baba. Hassan is the son of Baba's servant and Amir's dearest friend until a brutal incident permanently changes their friendship. It is Amir who is haunted by guilt and his past, even after leaving his hometown Kabul for sunny California. When he finally has the chance to right the wrong, he...well, I can't tell you that part.

The philosophical underpinnings of the story can be summed up in something Amir says on page 202: "There is only what you do and what you don't do."

And let's just say there is a lot Amir does NOT do for Hassan.

There is much to love about *The Kite Runner* and one of the things I loved best was that I instantly felt I was reading a classic. No post-modern snark here. No attempts to break all the cardinal rules of novel writing like Dave Eggers, the author I love to hate. Hosseini followed rules that some of the greats like Tolstoy and Dickens and Austen and Fitzgerald pioneered. It all felt old-fashioned. The structure, the language, the characterization, the startling plot twists. I loved it!

There is also much to respect about the author of this wonderful book. First off, it's a debut novel. Impressive. Second, it's not every writer who can create a narrator who makes objectionable decisions, and still keep the reader's attention. Third, Hosseini introduces a beautiful portrait of pre-revolutionary Afghanistan in the 1970s, of opulent architecture, rich history, and warm-hearted people racing with kites in the streets. It seemed a far cry from the city many Americans would rather not admit we're bombing the heck out of these days. (Side note – I'm not saying we shouldn't have gone after Osama after 9/11 or that the Taliban are a bunch of Care Bears, I'm just saying war is ugly, and lives and culture and history are lost in war).

Here, on page one, is a beautiful line about the past: “That was a long time ago, but it’s wrong what they say about the past, I’ve learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years.”

Indeed.

2. *Family Pictures*, Sue Miller

I’ve become a Sue Miller devotee. Miller has surpassed my put-me-on-a-desert-island-with-their-books authors likes Joyce Carol Oates (her early stuff), Amy Hempel, Alice McDermott, and Tolstoy ... almost.

Not only did I read *Family Pictures*, I re-read it. In the same year. Maybe it was the fact that it included a big, sprawling imperfect yet lovable family that, on one hand, was nothing like my own big, sprawling, imperfect family yet, on the other hand, was *something* like them. Maybe it was the tenderness with which Miller handled Randall, the autistic son and brother, and the family’s varying reactions to Randall’s behavior. Maybe it was Miller’s ability to take a deep dive into each character’s psyche without striking an off-key, melodramatic chord that so impressed me. All I know is I kept returning to passages in this book and saying to myself “Will I ever write something that incredible?!?!?”

Speaking of incredible, Lainey is the wonderful if slightly eccentric mother of the Eberhardt clan. David, the father, is affable yet realistic in the way he lays out life’s lessons for his children, of which there are six. The novel spans 40 years and we are treated to several points of view – Lainey’s, David’s, Mack’s and Nina’s. However, Nina, one of the last three daughters to be born (the “last straws” as their father calls them, which makes more sense as the story evolves) bookends the novel with her perspective on how the family survived -- or didn’t -- and how they healed their hearts. Though we never hear from him directly, the core of the family is Randall, the third child born to the Eberhardts. What we as readers are treated to is a meandering journey into the family’s collective psyche.

Miller demonstrates so clearly what it’s like to be in a family where both good and bad things happen, where there is always love but that love might never be spoken of. She also reveals how, regardless of family bonds, we are all individuals who experience “the family” in different ways.

Let me share two of my favorite paragraphs, the first comes at the very beginning of the book, the second in the last chapter. Nina is the narrator in both:

“This is the way I remember it. But I’m wrong. That’s the way it is in a family, isn’t it? The stories get passed around, polished, embellished. Liddie’s version or Mack’s version changes as it becomes my version. And when I tell them, it’s not just that the events are different but they all mean something different too. Something I want them to mean. Or need them to. And of course, there’s also the factor of time. Of how your perspective, your way of telling the story – of seeing it – changes as time passes. As you change.

“I moved finally to the corner of the room where I’d stuck up my peculiar arrangement and looked again at all the images. And as I scanned them this time, I realized I was seeing them differently; not as alternative explanations of my family’s meaning, competing with each other for dominance; but as one of the puzzles in which you are given different elements and asked to guess their connection, how they all fit together. And out of the blue I understood that the family photograph held the answer. That it was really a portrait of a kind of reckless courage, a testament to the great loving carelessness at the heart of every family’s life, even ours. That each child represented such risk, such blind daring on its parents’ parts – such possibility for anguish and pain – that each one’s existence was a kind of miracle.

3. *The Shadow of the Wind*, Carlos Ruiz Zafon

This is the kind of book you need to be in the right mood to read. It’s more classic, less mindless beach read. Like *The Kite Runner*, the style and the plotline harkens back to an era where sprawling tales required the reader to suspend their disbelief a little more than what’s needed for a typical downtrodden-woman-rises-from-the-ashes Oprah pick. It has something for everyone – gothic mystery, a little horror, romance, a landscape that would rival any great Western. No matter the genre you prefer, you won’t be

disappointed. And the translation to English offers up some cute and even hilarious similes (snow is “God’s dandruff”; servants obey orders with “the efficiency of a body of well-trained insects”).

My fellow bookaholics Tom Baker and Sandy Becker recommended *The Shadow of the Wind* to me within in the same month. I respect their tastes so I was more than happy to bring it along with me on our Florida vacation. Which meant I read the least beach-y type of book on this list while I was on the beach. How’s that for ironic?

Here’s a snippet from *The Washington Post* book review: “The time is the 1950s; the place, Barcelona. Daniel Sempere, the son of a widowed bookstore owner, is 10 when he discovers a novel, *The Shadow of the Wind*, by Julián Carax. The novel is rare, the author obscure, and rumors tell of a horribly disfigured man who has been burning every copy he can find of Carax’s novels. The man calls himself Laín Coubert --the name of the devil in one of Carax’s novels. As he grows up, Daniel’s fascination with the mysterious Carax links him to a blind femme fatale, Clara Barceló; another fan, a leftist jack-of-all-trades, Fermín Romero de Torres; his best friend’s sister, the delectable Beatriz Aguilar; and, as he begins investigating the life and death of Carax, a cast of characters with secrets to hide. Officially, Carax’s dead body was dumped in an alley in 1936. But discrepancies in this story surface.

“As Daniel’s quest continues, frightening parallels between his own life and Carax’s begin to emerge. The colorful cast of characters, the plot turns and the straining for effect only give the book the feel of par literature or the Hollywood version of a great 19th-century novel.”

Every book lover will sigh lovingly over the passage when Daniel’s father is taking him to The Cemetery of Forgotten Books where Daniel finds the rare Carax novel: “Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul. The soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and lived and dreamed with it. Every time a book changes hands, every time someone runs his eyes down its pages, its spirit grows and strengthens.”

Commence sighing.

4. *Patron Saint of Liars*, Ann Patchett

This was the first book I read in 2005 and it was a good way to start off a good year of reading.

Rose suddenly leaves her husband and drives from California to Habit, Kentucky to live at St. Elizabeth’s while she’s pregnant. The home for pregnant women is populated with nervous teens half her age, many of them placed there to keep their secret from their family and community. Though not blood relatives, the women find common bonds in their situations, and create a makeshift family for the months they are there. But Rose is an outcast of sorts. She spends most of her time avoiding any thought of her “condition” while the other girls talk of babies and baby things endlessly. As the other girls plot how they will keep their children once they are born, Rose knows she will give hers away. Or so she thinks.

Rose befriends the quirky but compassionate Sister Angeline who has been banished to kitchen duty at St. Elizabeth’s because she has a psychic knack for knowing if the women are going to have boys or girls, easy or complicated births, healthy or – in some cases – dead babies. Son, the groundskeeper, also hangs out in the kitchen with Rose and Evangeline, and becomes a lifeline of sorts for Rose. Midway through the story, we learn that Son was in the war. He talks of how “All the guys in our company thought we would know each other forever...we thought we would build our houses in the same towns and talk at night the way we talked now.” His war memory mirrors life at St. Elizabeth’s with its group of women soldiering through pregnancy, fighting the constant enemies of fear, loneliness, and the final truth of giving their children up for adoption.

Except for Rose. She ends up keeping her baby, Cecilia. And Rose marries Son, a man she doesn’t really love. The reader first hears Rose’s point of view, then Son’s, followed by Cecelia’s as she struggles to connect with her elusive mother.

What's interesting to me is that Rose isn't always likeable. She comes off a little cold, but then you're not sure if it's coldness or pure honesty. Patchett's Rose also looks at the less-talked-about side of pregnancy and motherhood, the side that admits the fear attached to it, the way the body becomes another body altogether, the way the mother isn't always so sure she wants to do this thing called motherhood. Patchett peppers the story with enough humor and light that it's incredibly readable and memorable.

If you like Anne Tyler or Barbara Kingsolver's early works, you'll love this one.

5. *Small Island*, Andrea Levy

Eric Bruggeman, another book-loving friend of mine, recommended this one. Eric was in the sociology program with Dave, and his recommendations, while eclectic, always seem to have political, social or cultural undertones. *Small Island* fits the political and social bill, and I learned a piece of history I was unaware of – that Jamaicans fought with their British counterparts during World War II and that their American Allies brought their racist attitudes to the British Empire.

There's a war within a war within a war in Levy's novel, which, very deservedly, received the Orange Prize and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award.

The year is 1948. Jamaican Gilbert Joseph serves in the Royal Air Force (RAF) and meets Queenie, a woman whose own husband has gone off to a war post in India. When Gilbert returns to his native "small island" country, he finds it too small for him. But to return to England, he has to marry Hortense Roberts — she's got enough money for his passage. The pair move in with Queenie Bligh, Gilbert's old friend, in a ramshackle room barely big enough to fit a bed (another "small island" for Gilbert).

Queenie's husband Bernard finally turns up and is less than amused at finding black immigrants in his house. Sounds like a pretty simple man versus man versus hatred and racism plot but Levy transforms the story into something beautiful, painful, and powerful. The story unfolds from four points of view – Gilbert, Queenie, Hortense, and Bernard. What we see that each narrator can't is how truth can be subjective and that we all are guilty of rationalizing situations.

The story might start slow for you but stick with it until you find Queenie and Gilbert in the movie theater. The scene here is written with more tension and emotion than I've ever felt watching some of the footage from the civil rights confrontations in Montgomery, Alabama. And the novel keeps picking up speed from there. Best of all, there is some flat-out hysterical dialogue and internal monologue in almost every chapter.

6. *Little Children*, Tom Perrotta

Suburban angst at its finest. This is *Desperate Housewives* before there was *Desperate Housewives*. And Perrotta's desperate suburbanites are far more compelling than the tv show. Of course, Dave would tell you that nothing could be more compelling than watching Eva Longoria strut around wearing nothing more than a pout and a t-shirt the size of a handkerchief.

In this version of the secrets of suburbia, we meet Sarah, an unhappy mother and wife whose husband is addicted Internet porn. There's also Todd, a stay-at-home dad known to neighborhood housewives as the Prom King. Todd is supposed to be taking the bar exam but instead opts – unbeknownst to his wife – for football games with his guy friends and an affair with Sarah. There's also Mary Ann, who gives DH's Brie a run for her money on being uptight. And then there's Ronnie, a pedophile whose return from prison throws the neighborhood into an uproar.

As you read the book, you wonder who acts more like children, the kids or the parents. Reviews call *Little Children* "compassionate satire." And Perrotta does treat his characters with empathy. There is plenty of regret, unfulfilled desire, and broken promises to keep you reading. It's like your high school prom all over. And you find yourself empathizing with Ronnie, one of the only characters truly trying to change and better himself instead of moaning about the mistakes or missed opportunities of his past.

7. *The Bright Forever*, Lee Martin

Let's give it up for an Ohio State professor! The author of *The Bright Forever* currently teaches creative writing at The Ohio State University and I had the pleasure of taking two writing workshops with him over the past two years. Martin is a quiet, unassuming guy. If you saw him walking down the street, you'd immediately think he was a math teacher or scientist or a veteran marathoner. After meeting him, it's clear he has a runner's mind – disciplined, calculating, driven. So it's all the more pleasurable when he tosses out a humorous zinger. It both surprised and delighted me that this seemingly serious guy teaching us about the importance of place and setting could be so danged funny in class. That same delighted surprise can be felt when reading *The Bright Forever*, Martin's second novel.

Written from multiple points of view, Martin pieces together one zinger of a tragedy. On a summer evening in rural Indiana, nine-year-old Katie Mackey rides her bicycle to the library and never comes home. Martin carefully lays out the mesmerizing plot, gradually peeling back the secrets held by those involved: Henry Dees, the reclusive math tutor who sometimes lurks in the Mackeys' house; Clare Mains, the widow shunned for remarrying out of loneliness; her husband, Raymond R., whose drug binges and blackouts occupy stretches of unaccounted-for time; Katie's parents, tortured by their own pasta; and Katie's brother, 17-year-old Gilley, who seizes the chance to gain his father's approval by seeking revenge on the person who killed Katie.

Martin's novel is hard to put down. In some ways, it reminded me of *That Night*, one of my all-time favorite novels (by Alice McDermott). I'd say more but I don't want to give it all away.

8. *God's Politics, Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, Jim Wallis

Before anyone writes this off as just another screed or book-long complaint from a bleeding-heart liberal, I can assure you that Jim Wallis presents one of the more fair and balanced treatises on our current religious-political climate than many others. Regardless of which side you're on, Wallis makes you think. Wallis's arguments come from the heart and also from a social justice angle – something that sometimes gets lost in all of the rhetoric about who's right and who's wrong in our world. Wallis reminds all of us that Jesus mentions helping the poor in the bible more than he mentions anything else. "God isn't a Republican or Democrat and neither party can claim him for their very own. God Bless America is found nowhere in the Bible," Wallis explains.

Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, offers up what he sees as the true mission of Christianity -- righting social ills and working for peace regardless of our political affiliations. As Wallis reminds us, Jesus teaches us to see the beam in our own eye, and not just the mote in our adversary's eye. Which means self-reflection. Which means listening to opposing viewpoints. Which means dialogue with others. All of which is lacking in our divided country right now.

God's Politics is a sermon worth listening to no matter your religious or political affiliation.

9. *Unfinished Season*, Ward Just

This book had been sitting on my list unread and then Kevin Boyle, a friend at work, recommended it. The opening scene of Wils Ravan, the narrator, watching his father ice skate, was so beautiful and touching, I would have been satisfied if that had been the entire novel.

Just's 14th novel could be written off as just another coming of age tale but it's so much more and written so much better. Wils is 19 and about to graduate from high school but he's telling the story forty years later so there's plenty of room for analysis and self-reflection about what happened during that summer in the 1950s. And it seems that, even as an older man, Wils still can't make sense of it. During that summer, his parents' marriage has seen better days and his father is obsessed with defeating the union organizers who are on strike at his printing factory. Wils takes a job as a copy boy at a Chicago tabloid where he's exposed to the kind of corruption and yellow journalism I learned about when I was studying journalism at Ohio U. On the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum, Wils attends debutante parties on the North Shore and meets Aurora Brule, the daughter of an eccentric psychiatrist, Jack Brule. Aurora and Wils fall in love while the past secrets that Jack has been hiding are exposed, the

consequences of which are tragic. This is one time where the past coming back to haunt the characters isn't a good thing at all.

What I liked most about this story was its underlying (actually, sometimes it was pretty flagrant) focus on issues of class and power. Wils's well-to-do father is struggling against the union, and Wils is caught between the working-class world of his job and the debutante nightlife. And this is why Just's novel is so much more than a typical boy-meets-girl-and-enters-adulthood read. It's clear the men Wils meets at the tabloid live remarkably different lives than Wils's North Shore friends. And it's clear that the newspaper men, who ultimately run across the Brules and others, have no sympathy for the tragedies that happen to the privileged class.

Just was a former journalist at *The Washington Post*. And since most writers "write what they know," one has to wonder if some of Wil's experiences were actually some of Just's past.

10A. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicles*, Haruki Murakami

Two books tied for 10th best. I couldn't decide. And *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicles* will not be the book for everyone. It's a little weird, a little long, and a lot of fun. But you have to enjoy speculative, almost fantastical fiction. You have to enjoy not ever truly understanding everything about the story. You have to allow yourself to believe that Toru Okada climbs down into that dark, dried up well and crosses over to an alternate reality. Otherwise, you'll never make it past page 400.

You could say Toru Okada is having a bad week when we meet him. He has no job, his cat has disappeared, and then his wife doesn't come home from work. As he searches for his cat and his wife, he meets folks who exemplify the word bizarre – there are two psychic sisters, an odd teenager, an old soldier who witnessed brutal torture during World War II, and a few others.

Part mystery, part meta-fiction, part post-modern drama, Murakami weaves a strange tale of loss, accountability, and history. We are taken to the bottom of the well, to Siberia, and to Japan's occupation of Manchuria in the past. So much happens, it's difficult to summarize. But if you're willing to go along for a ride that can be as dizzying as a spin on the Tilt-A-Whirl, you won't be disappointed. Just don't expect to have all the answers at the end.

10B. *Curious Dog in the Incident of the Nighttime*, Mark Haddon

I read this in two evenings. It's a quick read but that doesn't mean it's easy or light. Christopher Boone, the 15-year-old narrator, lets the reader step inside his autistic thoughts. Many of which include math problems, repetition, and detail that most other characters would never bother with. Christopher finds a dead poodle in his neighbor's yard and is falsely accused of the crime. However he decides to track down the killer, despite his father's warning not to get involved. As the mystery leads him to the secrets of his parents' broken marriage, he begins to navigate the social and emotional complexities of the world that stereotypically remain closed to an autistic person.

Christopher is an odd duck, that's for sure. But you have so much sympathy for what this kid is going through. He is so literal-minded it makes you think about how many of us talk in confusing, cryptic metaphors. I also have to love the character development – for Christopher, "4 yellow cars in a row made it a Black Day, which is a day when I don't speak to anyone and sit on my own reading books and don't eat my lunch and Take No Risks." A boy after my own heart. Little known fact about Amy – if I have a not-so-fun night in a particular outfit, you will not be seeing that outfit anymore. And who doesn't make wishes every time they pass under a train trestle when a train is moving across the tracks.

Though Christopher insists, "This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them," the novel is filled with laugh-out-loud humor.

This was one time I didn't mind the author breaking some of the typical plot structure conventions. It only added to the story's flavor.

Some others to consider:

The classic I read this year: *Little Women*

Best Short Story Collection: *Dog of the Marriage*, Amy Hempel

Cheesy Beach Read: *Eleven on Top*, Janet Evanovich

Biggest Clunker: *My Sister's Keeper*, Jodi Picoult (don't get me started on this one!)