

**Amy's Top 10 Books for 2015**  
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Some of my earliest best friends were books. *The Poky Little Puppy*, *Make Way for Ducklings*, *Madeleine*, *Harry the Dirty Dog*, *Frederick*, and, later, the adventures of *Nancy Drew*, *Amelia Bedelia*, *Encyclopedia Brown*, everything by Judy Blume.

Today, I still think of books as my constant companions. There's not a room in our house that isn't filled with books. There's an overcrowded bookcase in the dining room, books on the end table near the sofa in the living room, more books at my bedside and in my writing room, and even more books in the spare bedrooms and the attic. Some would say I have a bit of a book problem; I like to think of it as being surrounded by good friends. They're my comfort food, my kick in the ass, my security blanket, my inspiration.

Like so many who have been following my list for more than 15 years now (crazy it's been this long, right?), I turn to stories for a variety of reasons: to explore new territory, to feed my curiosity, to reinforce or call into question my values and beliefs, to walk in someone else's shoes, to laugh, to relax and escape my own reality for a couple of hours. Stories transport us and transform us. On average, I read about 20 – 25 books a year. Add a few more for the years I was getting my bachelor's and master's degrees, and I'm probably heading toward reading 1,000 books, maybe a smidge more. That's a lot of transporting and transforming, and a lot of time, but I have no regrets. It's been time well spent, with a few rare exceptions when a story didn't capture my interest.

At the end of each year, I look back at what I've read and what my interest and imagination the most, and, amazingly, I find so much synergy between what was happening in my real life and the characters in my reading life. A common theme between fiction and reality always reveals itself.

This year, the theme that clearly presented itself was The Comeback. Dave and I experienced a series of comebacks in 2015. It was a year of returning full-force to the things we loved the most. We hit some obstacles along the way, but that's what makes a comeback all the more meaningful. My top 10 list is filled with comeback characters but before I go there, a few notes about us.

First, Dave. As many know, Dave gave up a tenured position at Kent State University so we could return to Cincinnati for my job and to be closer to our fantastic crew of friends and family. We knew it was the right move but making the right move isn't always easy. For Dave, it came with the challenge of transitioning out of academia and re-imagining his career path, one that would continue to feed his mind and his passions. He gave a couple of positions a shot but, for various reasons, they weren't the right fit. Finally, in late August, Dave landed at spot at the world-class Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center's Anderson Research Center. He's doing important research that ultimately helps children receive better, safer care not only at Children's but at other children's hospitals around the country. The position feeds his research muscle and sociological imagination. After a challenging year of searching, this was a comeback worthy of the best fighters. As they say, you can't keep a good man down.

Dave and his band of brothers, [Pike 27](#), also recorded an excellent five-song EP, [Calling Out](#). There were plenty of joyous comeback moments for the band, from Dave returning to music after a brief hiatus to an incredibly fun EP release gig to the most serious and important comeback of all – drummer Dave Killen's fight with cancer in the last half of the year. We're thrilled to report that Dave Killen delivered a knockout punch to cancer and received an all-clear report a couple of months ago. He's regaining his strength after a stem cell transplant and the band is rethinking its strategy for the coming year.

Second, Macy. As many know, Macy lost her best pal, Alice, in the summer of 2014 and, a few months after Alice passed, we adopted Seamus, an Australian Shepherd with boundless energy and unconditional love for everyone he meets. While Macy accepted this new bundle of joy into our house, she wasn't entirely thrilled about it. She didn't seem to want or need his company. Content to nap in her brown chair, she pretty much ignored any playful advances Seamus made. Because I'd been worried about Macy's grief over losing Alice, I'd read *How Animals Grieve* by anthropologist, Barbara J. King. Crying through every chapter, I learned about behavior changes in animals that are mourning. Most importantly, I learned that older dogs need more time to adjust. Eventually that adjustment would kick in, seemingly overnight, according to King.

Around spring time, we witnessed that overnight change. Suddenly, Macy wanted to play more again – with Seamus, with tennis balls, with us. She sought out Seamus's company and trotted like a puppy on our long walks together. It was as if she were seven again instead of 13. Macy and Seamus became the fastest of friends after that and it's been great watching Macy have a comeback of her own.

Finally, my comeback. After several years of focusing my creative time and energy on my day job, I saw an opportunity to get back to my true love: fiction writing. On a whim – and I mean a total whim – I applied for the Sewanee Writer's Conference, knowing I'd never get in to such a respected and competitive conference. The morning I learned I was accepted, I read and re-read the email; surely it was a mistake. No way would I be spending two weeks among great authors like Alice McDermott, Tim O'Brien, Tony Earley and more, but there I was at the end of July on the University of the South's campus eating breakfast and lunch, sipping beers, and sitting in workshops and open mics and after-parties with so many gifted and talented writers. I made some fabulous new friends and connections that I never would have made otherwise, and had an unforgettable workshop and one on one session with Alice McDermott, one of my all-time favorite writers. And I met with my agent who encouraged me to finish out my novel, work on those short stories that have been getting lonely in their unopened files, and get some pages to her sooner rather than later.

Sewanee was the kick in the writing ass I needed. While some of the feedback I received wasn't the easiest to accept, it's exactly what I needed to hear. Once I accepted that I had a lot of work ahead of me, I came off the mat swinging. And here's the synergistic, kismet kind of moment: at the same time the conference was taking place, an opportunity at Luxottica opened up that would allow me to take a couple of steps down in responsibility. After much thought, I took it. It wasn't an easy decision, but I can already feel the payoffs. I have a little more time (not a ton, but enough) and I have more headspace to dream, imagine, write paragraphs that don't sound like press releases or news articles (though I often threaten to write a novel in press release form).

What I know for certain is that I'm at the very beginning of my comeback to fiction and I'm looking forward to an even stronger comeback in 2016. My comeback to fiction writing coincided with a comeback to running. I put in two half marathons and several miles in between. Being a productive runner has typically corresponded to productive spells of writing. Even though I'm slower than I used to be, it felt good to clock those miles and I plan to clock even more in the coming year.

In between fighting all of these good fights, we had a ton of fun, went whale watching in Nova Scotia, ran two half marathons, saw some awesome concerts with old friends, made some new friends, and continued to soak up all that Cincinnati has to offer us. I also read more than 25 books, two of which were more than 600 pages – *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace and *Purity* by Jonathan Frazen. Let me say something about *Infinite Jest*. My first attempt at reading this monster was in 1996 when the book was so overhyped that I was sure it would replace the Bible as the most-read book ever. We were in Chicago and I remember lying in bed with Dave, struggling to finish each page. I hated it. I made it about 100 pages before throwing it across the bedroom. Literally. Dave can vouch for this fact. I vowed never to read it. But, like many things in 2015, *Jest* made a comeback into my life. No less than four friends mentioned the book to me within a month and I took it as a

sign that I needed to give it a try. This time, I made it to the end. It was both an arduous and gratifying task. That said, it didn't make my top 10 because there were other books, filled with comebacks, that I loved more.

When I think about my personal and book-reading theme this year, it's one of those themes that's ever-present in great literature. Who doesn't want the heroine, down on her luck, to return to glory? Who doesn't want to see a character beset with setbacks finally overcome them? Who doesn't want to see the protagonist rediscover what used to bring her joy in life?

Comebacks are hope, faith, perseverance, and renewal all mixed together. We come back to the things that matter most to us, to the things we might have set aside but still burn deep inside us. The novels we love are no different. We love reading about characters that burn like us, who desire something important to them and are willing to sacrifice other things – sometimes everything – to get there. Some characters succeed, others don't. What keeps us reading is discover how characters move from setbacks to comebacks, yes?

I hope you experienced a comeback or two of your own in 2015, or that you're well on your way to a stellar comeback in 2016. Here's wishing you much love, fun, adventure and good reading!

For the newbies to my list, I have a few rules:

- **I send you the list. You forward it to other book-loving friends.** The fun part for me is learning where the list travels. Past lists have made it to Ireland (Hi Ann!), Thailand, Australia, Chicago and Colorado, to name a few fine places. There are also spectacular book groups in Ohio and California awaiting this list (thanks Sandy, Cindy, Carole and Colleen!). I used to wish for someone famous (Dave Grohl, Martin Sheen, Tina Fey) to get ahold of my list but you all mean more to me than any of them so I've eliminated that wish. Of course, if it ever happens, you know where to find me.
- **My picks can be published in any year.** Why limit yourself to one year when there are so many great stories that deserve your attention?
- **The Top 10 is not in rank order . . .** with the exception of my Number One pick which is most definitely numero uno. Admittedly, two and three are usually also in order. After that, it's a free for all.
- **Let me know what you're reading.** A lot of your recommendations make it on the list (Ginger, see #1, Sandy, see #3). You'll get full credit for the reco. If you end up hating one of my recos, let me know, too. I enjoy a good literary debate.

## Amy's Top 10 Books for 2015

### 1. *Station Eleven*, by Emily St. John Mandel

If we talked books even for 30 seconds in 2015, I mentioned this book. I might have even bullied you into reading it. I might have been such a book bully, I might have given this post-apocalyptic-yet-hopeful novel to you as a gift and then begged you to share with others. All of the credit my number one pick goes to book-aficionado, Ginger, who recommended *Station Eleven* to me during a visit to Cincinnati. I started reading it the last week of 2014 and finished it the first week of January 2015. It never, not once, fell from its number one spot on my list. So if you haven't read it, correct your reading wish list, and read it now. I don't want to spoil any of the experience for you so all I will tell you is that a flu pandemic wipes out most of the human race, save for some random, lucky people. Flash forward 20 years and some of those lucky people are now part of the Traveling Symphony, a wandering troupe of actors and musicians who entertain other survivors across the altered landscape. During their wanderings, they encounter a crazy prophet and his followers. Like all great Shakespearean plays, we soon discover how the disconnected characters are actually connected. Told through multiple points of view, St. John deftly moves back and forth in time to give us a full picture of life and hope making a comeback after the pandemic. If the premise sounds bleak, it's not. If you're not a fan of post-apocalyptic fiction, try this anyway. The story itself is actually quite beautiful and the writing is top-notch.

### 2. *Did You Ever Have A Family?* by Bill Clegg

In the wee morning hours before her daughter's wedding, June Reid loses her daughter, her daughter's fiancée, her ex-husband and her boyfriend in a house fire caused by an old, faulty gas stove. Mega bummer. At its core, the story is about the struggle to get on the other side of grief (thus the comeback). It can be tough to follow one grieving character through the muck and mire of sadness; the good news here is that we're treated to multiple points of view and plenty of other plot threads to follow. Who forgot to turn off the old gas stove? How will June and others recover from the loss? What do the inhabitants of this small Connecticut town think about the tragic event, and who do they, rightly or wrongly, blame? As you move through each chapter, you'll meet a cast of characters who remind us that people are multi-layered and that while we may not feel connected to each other on a surface level, deep connections lie beneath the surface where our emotional experiences reside. While this is a debut novel, Clegg is no stranger to writing. He was a literary agent for years and wrote two memoirs before turning his talents to fiction. In less experienced hands, I'm not so sure we would be treated to such an incredible portrait of loss, love and redemption.

### 3. *Everything I Never Told You*, by Celeste Ng

Lydia is dead. That's the first line of this debut novel so I'm giving nothing away. What follows is the unfolding mystery surrounding Lydia Lee's death as well as the unraveling of the Lee family. James and Marilyn Lee slowly uncover clues and secrets about Lydia's life, and in doing so, their marriage begins to crack under the weight of their guilt, grief, and long-buried regrets. Nathan and Hannah, left to deal with the loss of their sister and their parents' disintegrating marriage, seek answers to Lydia's death as well. Misguided conclusions are drawn by each family member, and more confusion and blame ensues as each of the Lees embarks on their own path for answers. Woven through the central plot line are hints of bigotry, the cost and consequences of perfectionism, and the frustration that accompanies unfulfilled dreams. We're treated to all of this through an omniscient narrator who moves freely between the thoughts and actions of each character. All told, the story is an enigma wrapped in a mystery that makes it tough to put down, so set aside a weekend soon to get between these hard or softcovers.

### 4. *Migratory Animals*, by Mary Helen Sprecht

Yet another debut novel that didn't disappoint. Here again we have multiple points of view, this time from a group of 30-somethings who have gathered together when Flannery, a young scientist, returns from Nigeria to Austin to visit her family, especially her youngest sister, Molly, who is showing signs of Huntington's Disease. The central conflict and question revolves around whether Flannery's loyalty lies with her family or the man she plans to marry back in Nigeria. Flannery isn't the only conflicted character – her old boyfriend still loves her, her best friend is on the brink of committing suicide, and Molly's husband is uncertain how to handle his wife's diagnosis. The threads that once held this tight-knit group together are fraying quickly and each character has to decide how to conquer these setbacks. Sprecht peppers each chapter with flashbacks, sometimes annoyingly so, and there were also moments when this group of 30-somethings felt overly precious and whiny, but these are minor quibbles about an otherwise lovely read.

### **5. *Get in Trouble*, by Kelly Link**

This is my short story collection pick for the year and while I read many others, this one remained at the top of the pile. I adore Link and not because we share the same agent. I adore her because she's a genius and her stories make me want to pick up a pen and write. It's similar to musicians who hear music that makes them want to play or an artist who sees a painting that makes her want to paint. Link does that for me in every way and I'm amazed by the fantastical stretch, depth and breadth of her imagination. In one collection, we get animated, life-sized, nearly perfect Boyfriend dolls, mysterious and magical summer people who help a young girl living in the remote woods of North Carolina, and ghost hunting in the swamplands of Florida. Despite all of the fabulist twists, Link always grounds the emotional arc of the story in something readers can relate to. This is where her brilliance shines. Link is right up there with Aimee Bender, Alice Munro, Mary Gaitskill, and many of my other most-admired short story writers.

### **6. *Awakenings*, by Oliver Sacks**

Oliver Sacks, renowned neurologist and "the poet laureate of medicine," according to the *New York Times*, died on August 30. I mourned the loss of such a great mind. For me, reading Sacks is like opening up a treasure chest filled with fictional ideas. And I'm not the only one. Lisa Genova, author of *Still Alice*, admitted that Sacks' work inspired *Still Alice* and some of her other novels. And there are plenty of other writers out there who turned to Sacks for a glimpse inside the strange workings of the brain. When Sacks' death was announced, I immediately bought his memoir, *On the Move*, and *Awakenings*, which recounts Sacks' research on patients diagnosed with "sleeping sickness." In the late 60s, Sacks treated these patients with the groundbreaking drug L-DOPA. Essentially asleep and frozen in trance-like states for years, these patients "awakened" after taking the drug. Unfortunately, most were unable to handle L-DOPA and developed other side effects. The case studies about sleeping sickness are fascinating to read for many reasons but what always sticks with me is Sacks' compassion for his patients and his ability to, as he says, "preserve what is important and essential – the real and full presence of the patients themselves, the feeling of their lives, their characters, their illnesses, their responses to their strange situations." This is one time when truth really is stranger than fiction.

### **7. *The Secret Wisdom of the Earth*, by Christopher Scotton**

It's yet another debut novel on my list! After the death of his younger brother, Kevin and his mother set off for Medgar, a tiny coal town in Kentucky, to live with Kevin's grandfather. The town is grappling with the issue of mountaintop removal and all the corporate corruption that comes with it, while Kevin is left to grapple with his increasingly withdrawn mother as well as his own teenage angst. He meets Buzzy Fink, who becomes both friend and foe. As the pair explores the mountains surrounding the town, Buzzy witnesses a deadly and disturbing hate crime, and finally confesses to Kevin what he knows. From here, Kevin (and Buzzy) face not only the town's hatred but also the pressures that come with transitioning from being "just a boy" to a man. Kevin's grandfather, Pops, stands out as a classic and classy character – and one we'd all want as our own grandfather. Speaking of classics, there's a lot in this novel that runs along those classic novelistic lines – good versus evil, coming of age, man versus himself, man versus nature, moral lessons, and hopeful endings. You'll find all the makings of solid storytelling here and you won't forget Pops for a long time.

### **8. *The Green Road*, by Ann Enright**

Here's another small town tale, this time set in Ireland. The Madigan children come together for one final Christmas at the house their mother, Rosaleen, has decided to sell. Flung far and wide, the children haven't had the greatest relationship with their mercurial mother, and like all good dysfunctional families, when they gather together again, all of that buried dysfunction comes roaring to the center. Yet, for all of that roaring, Enright tells the story of the Madigans in a quiet way, without too much melodrama or hyperbole. Spanning 30 years, Dan joins and leaves the priesthood. Constance, the only Madigan child who still lives in Ireland, discovers a lump in her breast. Emmet has gone off to Mali and other impoverished countries to help the poor. And Hannah is struggling with her acting skills as well as the bottle. None of the kids seem overjoyed about visiting their mother but all seem hell bent on making sure she doesn't sell the house that they seemingly hate to love. If you like stories with sprawling time spans and unresolved endings, this will be your kind of story. If you want clear resolution at the end, you may find yourself frustrated, even though the writing is beautiful.

### **9. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, by Elizabeth Kolbert**

Most know that I'm a huge fan of *National Geographic* and if I'm not mining Oliver Sacks' work for story ideas, I'm tearing pages out of *NG* to keep for future inspiration. Like all good fiction, *NG* takes me to places I may never get to and teaches me something in the process. The *Sixth Extinction* had the same effect. If you don't believe in climate change, you should probably stop reading this paragraph. However, if you are one of those non-believers, Kolbert's bona fide, scientific treatise on the decline of our planet might be just the thing to change your mind once and for all. Our planet is heating up, species are dying, rivers and oceans are rising, and glaciers are melting. There's not much in the way of good news for the Earth here, and, as Kolbert advises: "we're putting our own survival in danger." Humans weren't around for the five mass extinctions that happened in the earth's 3.8 billion year lifespan but we, in fact, could be at risk for causing – and experiencing – the sixth extinction. In each chapter, Kolbert takes you to another part of the planet where it's clear things aren't going well. I don't know about you but the Earth is pretty awesome and I don't want to lose the only planet we have so let's take Kolbert's call to action seriously: people can change the world for good and bad, and this is one time we need to change the world for the good of all.

### **10. *The World Before Us*, by Aislinn Hunter**

When Jane Landen is a teenager, a little girl she's babysitting goes missing. Twenty years later, Jane Landen, still fraught with guilt over the disappearance of Lily, is working in a soon-to-be-closed museum and attempting to finish up a research project about another missing person, a case that happened more than a hundred years ago near a lunatic asylum. These two cases become linked in Jane's mind and we begin to hear voices that Jane cannot access. These voices, it turns out, are ghosts from the asylum but they're not rendered as stereotypical ghosts that go banging around and scaring Jane. They're sort of situated in limbo and hopeful that Jane will discover the answers to the mystery she's researching so they can finally have the answers themselves or, at the very least, be rid of what they know. This is a story of the drive to solve unsolved mysteries, of guilt, of redemption. We move from present day with Jane into the lives of a group of people in the long-ago past who inhabited the insane asylum Jane is researching. Reading this reminded me that we carry our pasts in everything we do and every decision we make. As much as we'd like to "let go" of things, it's easier said than done and Hunter renders this notion in such a creative and unique way.

### **The 2016 Hopefuls - what I'm reading right now (yes, I multi-task) ...**

***A History of Loneliness*** by John Boyne (this will make my top 10 in 2016 for sure)

***On the Move: A Memoir*** by Oliver Sacks

***H is for Hawk*** by Helen MacDonald

***Lost & Found*** by Brook Davis

### **The 2015 Clunkers - the most hyped books that I set aside this year ...**

**Purity** by Jonathan Franzen (didn't do it for me like *The Corrections* and *Freedom* did)

**Fates & Furies** by Laura Groff (let me know if I should pick it back up)

**Euphoria** by Lily King (I finished it, begrudgingly)