

Amy's Top 10 Books of 2016
(amypurcell [@] gmail.com)

A few years ago, I was alone in Vernal, Utah, a quiet town near the base of the Uintah Mountains where barren hills outnumber humans. Using my winnings from a short story contest, I sequestered myself in a hotel to write and conduct research for my master's thesis – a draft of a novel – and I promised myself I'd do nothing but write for five days straight. As someone who's easily distracted, I needed what I call my "deprivation tank" to stay focused – no friends, no family, no dogs, no parties, no familiar surroundings. I wanted to be a stranger in a strange land, and I was. For about 24 hours.

It wasn't long after I'd arrived that I called Dave several times to find out what was happening at home. He told me to stop calling (and emailing) and start writing. Alone in my hotel room, I turned on the TV for background noise, notebooks and red-lined pages scattered across the foot of the bed. I vowed not to get on Facebook or Google anything. Within a few hours, I was down at the front desk talking to the hotel manager. She, of course, was curious as to why in the hell, of all places, I'd chosen Vernal for a writing retreat. We talked about that and then I went back upstairs. A couple of hours later, I was back at the front desk, presumably needing a bag of potato chips from the vending machine. That's how it went for days. I would write for a few hours, find someone to talk to whether it was the server at a restaurant or a forest ranger on one of my hikes into the mountains. I continued to call Dave and ask him what was happening back home. His response was the same: go write.

What I learned is that I am not good, not good at all, at being alone. Over the years, I have decided that this is both a curse and a blessing. Writers must work in isolation to actually get the writing done. My curse is that I don't enjoy isolation. I tend to choose connection and community over my deprivation tank. That said, my blessing is that some of my best ideas have come from my connections with others and the stories they tell me. Being in community with others fuels my creative energy. Yet, I must be alone to get the work done. It's a constant balancing act; one that, this year, required making a very tough decision but more on that in a bit.

I bring up this balance between being alone and staying connected because so many of the books I read this year revolved around characters who were seeking this same sort of balance. As I look upon the stack of books I read, each one contains at least one character that struggled through a period of isolation or someone desperately trying to make connections with others. Some failed and others succeeded and, of course, this is the stuff of great storytelling. We follow our heroines and heroes into the abyss of loneliness or into the struggle to connect because we want them to come out on the bright side of it.

There was Count Rostov secluded in the Hotel Metropol who survived his decades-long exile by creating friendships with both guests and employees. There was Ove, the cranky old man who, grieving over the loss of his wife, struggled to befriend others. There was Ray who finally found companionship in a one-eyed dog yet could never quite connect to society at large. There were casts of siblings that, while connected by family ties, still found themselves as men and women alone among other men and women. That many of these characters resided in Russia is also thought-provoking but I'll dwell on that later. Finally, there were a few characters that truly needed the isolation, needed the exile, to come to terms with their identity and what they ultimately desired. A bleak theme for my reading year? Not at all, because the stories of triumph and tragedy were so rich with conflict, psychological journeys and laugh-out-loud humor.

I recently read an essay about being alone and this quote stuck with me: "The most important relationship we will ever have in our own life is with our own self." What the author was getting at is that even though we are the only ones who are present at every moment of our lives, the relationship with our Self can be the most difficult one to cultivate because society places so much emphasis on being connected and being in relationship to others at all times. The author noted that we may need to be alone to nourishes our creative

sides and that we may need to re-learn how to create spaces where we can be alone within relationships. Getting more comfortable with being alone allows us to fully explore our most important relationship – the one with our true Selves. Even in today’s uber-connected world, people can still feel disconnected or alone, and people often ignore the need for downtime and disconnection. It’s the yin and yang of our existence, and when it gets out of balance, that’s when the struggle gets real.

Thinking back to my time in Vernal and thinking about this quote really got me to thinking: it was high time for me to cultivate my relationship with myself. In general, I ignored my Self in 2016. I made very little progress on my fiction writing and it was frustrating. I gave my time and energy to other pursuits. I also sensed time slipping away, especially when my birthday hit in May and I became just one quick year away from turning 50. When I was in grad school, one of my professors told me there would come a day when I would realize I couldn’t burn the writing candle at both ends. I couldn’t continue balancing a demanding corporate job with my desire to write fiction. I’d have to make a decision. I’d have to be brave enough to break my own heart.

Now, is that time to be brave. At the end of December, I announced that I was leaving Luxottica after nearly 14 years with the company (if you add up my two tours of duty). I’m heading to a new role as a Corporate Storyteller at Fifth Third Bank’s headquarters in downtown Cincinnati. While it doesn’t completely release me from the corporate world, it does reduce my round-trip commute from 2 hours every day to mere minutes. It will also allow me to regain time and headspace. It’s a tough tradeoff. On the one hand, I’m leaving a known entity and so many incredible friends and colleagues, along with a solid reputation at the company. On the other hand, I’ll be learning something new and the job is more narrowly focused than what I’m doing today. Scary? Most big changes are. But it’s a must-do if I want to cultivate my relationship with my Self and focus on my true love – writing fiction.

Enough about me. Dave also had a stellar year. He received a promotion to Lead Analyst at 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 more than 110 children’s hospitals in North America. He’s now leading a team and loving the results and work they produce.

His band, [Pike 27](#), spent plenty of time in the studio and we can all look forward to a new album with new songs very soon. In a year when we lost incredible music icons like David Bowie and Prince, Dave spent a lot of time digging deep into his relationship with music and with his musical Self. After a lot of introspection, he decided it was time to return to his first instrumental love – the drums. Inspired by listening to a few of his favorite jazz and rock drummers, Dave felt the call to sit behind the kit once again. When I first met Dave in (ahem) 1989, he was a drummer in a band that he told me sounded like REM (for the record, they did not). He was a natural at it then and he’s building his chops back up now. He’s practicing in the basement with a few other players and we’ll see how things shape up in the coming year.

We gave ourselves the gift of downtime by relaxing poolside and ocean-side in Cancun during the winter. Our summer vacation took us to Santa Fe and Taos where we stayed in an Earthship, a completely environmentally-friendly and sustainable house. All electricity is generated by the sun and the wind and all water is recycled and recirculated to keep the house running efficiently. Whenever we travel and see vast stretches of unpopulated land, I always exclaim that the earth is pretty awesome; this trip, I declared that the Earthship is pretty awesome. Dave and I sat outside and saw the Milky Way. With zillions upon zillions of stars above us, we restored our energy and talked about what our creative futures would hold.

As for Macy and Seamus, they continue to be good buddies. Seamus is absolutely our most affectionate Aussie and he brings joy to our lives every day. We promoted him the Senior Snugglist because he’s just that good at snuggling. Macy, who is, amazingly, 14 years old, is a constant blessing, standing as our longest-living Aussie yet. She still has moxie and she’s still a beautiful girl.

In between all of that, we had a blast connecting with others. We are super fortunate and grateful to have so many fantastic friends and great people in our lives. Here's wishing all of you strong connections, the downtime you need to do what you love, much happiness and good reading in 2017!

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, Mexico and Canada, 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!). And of course, if you get this into the hands of the rich and famous (like Dave Grohl, Martin Sheen, Tina Fey etc.) please have them ping 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 so 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 of 2016

1. *The Tsar of Love and Techno*, by Anthony Marra

If you know me, you know one of my all-time favorite books in *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy. I'm a sucker for the sprawling Russian novel with clear protagonists, antagonists, high drama, a fair share of oddities and quirks, and a strong sense of place. Marra, in his own Tolstoyan way (even though he's not a Russian himself) gives us the gift of all of this and more in this set of linked stories that reads like a novel. Set mostly in the fantastically weird town of Kirovsk where there's a White Forest made of metal and plastic birch trees and a polluted lake that shines as silver as mercury, Marra connects characters across 75 years and a few wars. It's Russia so of course there has to be more than one revolution.

I found myself reading a chapter and then Googling for lessons on Russian history because Marra is just that awesome about making you want to learn more. For example, in the first story, you meet Roman Markin who is a retoucher in the Department of Party Propaganda and Agitation. He makes people disappear in photographs, as if they've never lived. Did this happen in Russia? Yes, it did. And it's a fascinating and frightening fact to read about. In this case, Markin "disappears" a ballerina named Galina (rhyme unintentional) and becomes somewhat obsessed with her. Of course, this is where the intricate connections begin. As you move through the chapters, you discover that Galina is connected to others who are connected to Markin and so on and so on. Even the smallest details or objects, including a painting, a mixtape and more become critical linking pieces of the overall narrative so it's important to read carefully.

After reading this and declaring it the Number One for the year, I started researching trips to Russia. Don't be surprised if Dave and I travel there within the next few years. Some book critics felt that Marra wrapped up the mysteries and details with a tidy red bow so if you like your endings to feel complete and if you enjoy multiple points of view, you need to put this one at the very top of your list.

2. *A History of Loneliness*, by John Boyle

This thought-provoking novel will find you questioning the Catholic Church as an institution (especially if you are Catholic) and those who were willing to turn a blind eye on the priest sex abuse scandal. This is not the story of a victim of the abuse; rather, Boyle gives us Odran Yates, a fictional priest who was not an abuser but also remained silent (and thus, complicit) at the height of the scandal that occurred in Ireland in the early 2000s.

Boyle did plenty of research on the scandal and cover-up, interviewing numerous priests and victims, and it shows in the delicate way he handles such a tough topic. Odran, who enters the priesthood at age 17, hides from himself and hides what he doesn't want to believe – that his friend Tom, also a priest, is abusing children. This gives nothing away as it's clear to the reader from the first encounter with Tom's character. Boyle allows the reader's imagination to do the work and doesn't get graphic or detailed with scenes of sex abuse. Everything is buried within in the narrative, similar to how deeply the Church attempted to bury the scandal.

One empathizes with Odran but you'll also find yourself yelling at him as you read. I often found myself talking to the book: "Say something, Odran! Tell them, Odran!" The frustration that builds as you read mirrors the frustration, guilt and fear so many who knew and remained silent must have felt. In an interview with NPR, Boyle stated that he wanted to look at the story from another angle, that of a priest who was not an abuser but was implicated regardless and also shunned by society once the scandal was exposed. He said this: "I wanted to write a book which was not just a diatribe against the church. What I wanted was to write a book where those people who constantly defend the church might read the book and actually realize what they have done and what they have been responsible for. And those who just condemn the Church constantly might read the book and see that there are good people - good men, good women who have devoted their lives to religion, to God. And what they have done in their lives needs to be recognized as well. I wanted to express both sides of the story and recognize the loneliness of the good priest as well as the tragedy of the bad priest."

This would be a good pick for a book club if your club likes to talk about issues and conflicts.

3. *Imagine Me Gone*, by Adam Haslett

I was introduced to Haslett's work in grad school when I read his short story collection, *You Are Not a Stranger Here*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize that year. I instantly loved his work and was so thrilled when I heard his second novel was coming out that I pre-ordered it. When it arrived, I read it in five days. This is writing you can sink into. It's smooth, easy and spare yet so powerful. That said, the story covers somewhat depressing territory so it's not the comical romp between the pages that you'll find in my fourth pick this year.

In the opening chapter, we learn of a mysterious tragedy that isn't fully realized until the end. As we flash back in subsequent chapters, we meet John and Margaret early in their courtship. John suffers from depression and Margaret sticks with him when he's hospitalized. They eventually marry and have three children, one of whom, Michael, struggles with the same depression as his father. John takes his own life and, from there, we watch Michael – the core of the novel – and the family move forward. Siblings Alec and Celia attempt to help Michael through his addiction to prescription drugs by taking him back to their childhood vacation spot in Maine, thinking time away in a far-off yet familiar place is what he needs to help his mind and, now body, recover. Narrated by each of the five characters, you get a sense not only of each character's inner struggle but also how they view each other. Michael's hyper-obsessive narration sometimes comes in the form of a patient relaying information to his psychiatrist, allowing the reader to truly feel the unrelenting buzz of his mind as well as his mental illness. While it may sound depressing, Haslett infuses the story with so much love, compassion and heart that you'll find this family lingering with you long after you reach the last page.

4. *The Nest*, by Cynthia D'Apris Sweeney

Again, shades of Russian literature infiltrated my reading life with this pick. As Tolstoy wrote in *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." No truer statement could be made for the hilarious and heartbreaking Plumb children who are squabbling over an inheritance that's about to be theirs. Or is it? Each Plumb child believes this inheritance – you learn whether it is available to them or not – will save their lives. Of course, like most arguments over family money, it actually ends up tearing them apart.

There's Leo, fresh out of rehab and gunning for his fair share. There's Melody, who is turning 40, the event that will release the inheritance to the children. There's Bea and Jack who are both on the brink of varying life crises. This is the family that makes you want to say your family is nothing like them. Yet. Yet. You may find hints of your own siblings or another family you know in these fiendish devils. The crew meets at The Oyster Bar in New York City to discuss their upcoming inheritance. From there the story winds back on itself through a series of subplots and points of view so you can get to know each character's situation and why the inheritance is so critical to them. It's a wild ride, sometimes bordering on the ridiculous but that's what makes it so delightful to read. This is Sweeney's debut novel after spending decades as a copywriter so, of course, I also have a soft spot for an author in her forties who's publishing for the first time.

5. *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, by Sara Baume

Spill features some of the most lush and glorious writing I encountered all year. Show-stopping, jaw-dropping descriptions and sentences greet you on every page. That said, this book will not be for everyone unless you are willing to feel emotionally bruised. I cried at least three times, not only out of sadness for Ray, the main character, but also because of the compassion and empathy the author brings to the page for him. You will want to save Ray from himself and, after reading it, you will look at anyone who might have hints of Ray in him or her and want to hug them, give them human contact and connection. You also won't be able to get the ending out of your mind. I actually messaged a writing and reading friend after she finished it because I wanted to know her interpretation. Turns out, we agreed, but I won't reveal what we agreed upon.

Here's the skinny: Ray lives alone in a small Irish village where he's pretty much invisible to society. He adopts a scraggly one-eyed dog that he names One Eye. The dog becomes his one and only companion, and Ray, who has otherwise been in social exile since childhood, attempts to venture out of the village with his ill-behaved mutt. The pair ends up living in Ray's car where Ray confides in the dog and in us as readers. We learn of his isolation, his lifetime of loneliness, all while observing One Eye as he seeks the freedom that is elusive to the emotionally imprisoned Ray. He's not a bad dog; he just lets his instincts overtake him. Which is interesting because, as humans, our instinct is to connect with others. It's just that Ray doesn't have that instinct. Some may wonder, as I did, if Ray exhibits signs of Asperger's Syndrome or something similar. We follow Ray and One Eye through each season (spill = spring etc.), ending, of course, in winter, the season of death. Or is it a preparation for rebirth? You, as a reader, will be left to decide. Intrigued? Read it. But be forewarned that you will need a happier story to accompany this sad tale. Baume captures unrelenting loneliness like no other. This is her debut novel so I'm hopeful we'll see more of her brilliant, intelligent and rich writing eventually.

6. *This Must Be The Place*, by Maggie O'Farrell

We're still on the Emerald Isle with my sixth pick, but this time it's filled with social and familial connections, and misunderstandings. O'Farrell made my list in 2015 with *Instructions for a Heatwave* which also dealt with family dysfunction.

In *This Must Be The Place*, she extends the definition of family as well as dysfunction. Here we meet a reclusive Hollywood film star who's had her fill of fame and fortune and is hiding in the remote hills of Ireland. Daniel Sullivan, a New Yorker, has also run away from his life and children in the States and lands in Ireland where he meets the recluse, Claudette. They marry and have children as well but then Daniel finds himself called back to

his former life and the question becomes whether his love for Claudette will be enough for him to return to her. O'Farrell treats us to multiple points of view that, for the most part, don't overlap or sound similar from a tone of voice standpoint. The chapters move back and forth in time and the structure reminds me of what Alice Munro says about her stories: a narrative doesn't have to be a straight line; instead it can be like entering a house and going from room to room to explore and discover.

7. *A Gentleman in Moscow*, by Amor Towles

Set in Russia's Hotel Metropol in the 1920s, this story is rich with characters, coincidences and a lot of love. It's one of those times when I sensed that the author loved his main character as much as I did. Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov is sentenced to living at the hotel and never setting foot outside after he wrote a poem that was deemed anti-government and anti-Russian. He had already been a guest in one of the luxury suites. However, the soldiers move him to the top floor in a tiny room where he makes himself at home. Ever the optimist about his situation, the Count makes the most of it and also makes friends of the staff and guests along the way. We meet young Nina who becomes the Count's friend and takes him to all the secret places within the hotel that he never knew about. We meet Mishka, another friend of the Count's from his pre-revolution days. We also meet the cook, a waiter and several others, all of whom fill the Count's days inside the hotel with adventure. Nina grows up, then leaves, then returns with her daughter whom she puts in the Count's care. The narrative sprawls on and on through the rooms, restaurants and service quarters of the hotel. It's a long read, and sometimes, feels overlong, but the Count is so endearing that I found myself wanting to move right into the hotel with him and his friends. This is the perfect tale to curl up with on a long winter's night.

8. *The Lazarus Project*, by Aleksander Hemon

In 2011, I read an essay by Aleksander Hemon called "The Aquarium" in *The New Yorker*. His nine-month-old daughter is diagnosed with a brain tumor and undergoes several surgeries as his eldest daughter, still so very young, begins to talk about an imaginary brother. The essay is gorgeously tender. I've enjoyed Hemon's writing ever since this chance encounter and took *The Lazarus Project* with me on our trip to Mexico. Here I was sitting poolside with a cocktail reading about Sarajevo, the Bosnian War and pogroms in the early 1900s. Talk about cognitive dissonance. Dave read this as well and found the story grim but also agreed the grim is alleviated by Hemon's ability to add humor to even the darkest of moments.

The main character, Brik, immigrated from Sarajevo and lives in Chicago with his neurosurgeon wife but still feels like an outsider. He begins researching another immigrant, Lazarus Auerbach, who, in 1903 escaped the pogrom, moved to Chicago and was shot point-blank by the chief of police during a time when anti-Semitism was running high in America. Hemon moves between Lazarus's story and Brik's attempt to tell it, which takes Brik back to his homeland. Like the biblical Lazarus, Brik attempts to bring his Lazarus back to life and at the same time also find a place for himself in the world. Once in Sarajevo, Brik hooks up with his old friend Rora and they embark, like most heroes, on a journey replete with obstacles, missteps and laughter. Underlying the main narrative is the theme of whether any of the stories Brik encounters are true or "just Sarajevo stories." Life is the stuff of stories, whether true or tall tales, and Hemon shows us that we are all made of stories. What matters is whether we write them ourselves or allow others to do it for us.

9. *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, by Elizabeth Strout

Similar to some of my other selections, loneliness and the desire to connect sit at the heart of Strout's novel. Told in the retrospective, Lucy recounts the time she was hospitalized with a mysterious infection while her mother was visiting her in Manhattan. Her mother sits in a chair by Lucy's bedside and Lucy asks her to gossip about the people in small-town Amgash, Illinois where she grew up. Lucy's childhood is not a happy place. She survived on very little, including motherly affection. Even though her mother talks and talks, so much is left buried and unsaid about Lucy's childhood, about some frightening incidents like being locked in a truck by her father, about Lucy's present-day life and success. Simply being with her mother and sharing the time appear to be enough for her but we, as readers, know that Lucy's feelings are as buried as the stories they should be

sharing with each other. Her mother is a fortress, closed off in every way, yet Lucy, a writer herself, finds solace and love in the stories her mother shares, as if the stories about others convey that emotions and feelings her mother cannot.

We eventually learn the pages we're reading are the pages of Lucy's first novel and, as one reviewer stated, we begin to understand how to read this book when Lucy's writing teacher tells her: "This is a story about a mother who loves her daughter. Imperfectly. Because we *all* love imperfectly. But if you find yourself protecting anyone as you write this piece, remember this: You are not doing it right." One is left wondering whether Lucy is protecting her mother in the pages and if there's a completely different side of the story that's left unrevealed.

10. *The Guineveres*, by Sarah Domet

If you grew up Catholic, especially in the 60s, you'll enjoy this book. If you had nuns for teachers, you'll understand. If you had a tight-knit group of best girlfriends when you were coming of age, you'll want to read this. Domet's debut novel is equal parts comedy and tragedy, with a solid dose of martyred saints thrown in to keep it interesting. Four girls, all named Guinevere are abandoned by their parents at a convent. In the opening pages, the girls attempt to run away by hiding under a parade float carried by Sister Fran and the other nuns. After they're discovered, the girls must do penance in the Sick Ward which includes gravely injured men from the War. As the girls care for "Our Boys" they long for life outside the convent walls. They serve as alter girls for drunkard Father James and each girl finds herself in trouble in one way or another throughout the narrative.

Like all groups, The Guineveres pull together when times are tough and then eventually fall apart. And as much as the girls are together, they stand apart and alone in their struggle for individual identities. A few times I tired of Vera, the primary narrator, telling us what would eventually happen with each of The Guineveres in the future. Although I wanted to know what happened to each girl, I wanted to know what was happening next more than two decades from the moment being shared. By the way, Domet is a graduate of the University of Cincinnati so there's some hometown pride here as well.

Others in 2016 . . .

Grief Is The Thing With Feathers by Max Porter (beautiful)
The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky (did not finish)
Commonwealth by Ann Patchett
H is for Hawk by Helen MacDonald
Lost & Found by Brook Davis
A Thousand Miles from Nowhere by John Gregory Brown
The Mare, by Mary Gaitskill
Thomas Murphy by Roger Rosenblatt
Your Heart Is a Muscle The Size of a Fist by Sunil Yapa
The Nightingale by Kristin Hannah
All Stories are Love Stories by Elizabeth Percer
Man Vs. Nature by Diane Cook
A Man Called Ove by Fredrick Bachman
Two If By Sea by Jacquelyn Mitchard

Starting Out 2017 With . . .

A Little Life by Hanya Yanagihara
The Most Dangerous Thing by Laura Lippman
March, Book 3 by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell