

## AMY'S TOP 10 BOOKS OF 2013

*"You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to romantic love, back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame, back home to exile . . . back home to one's youthful idea of 'the artist' . . . back home to someone who can help you, save you, ease the burden for you, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time--back home to the escapes of Time and Memory."*

— Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again*

It's been years since I've read Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again* but the story of George Webber entered my thoughts many times in 2013. When George, a fledgling author, publishes his first novel, the people in his hometown believe the novel is based on them. Outcast from little Libya Hill, George sets off for New York City and beyond in search of himself, and eventually returns to America with a renewed love for the place he once dissed. I'm no George Webber by any stretch. The novel I'm working on is set in Chicago, and everyone can rest easy because the characters do not resemble friends or family members. I thought about George when Dave and I were contemplating moving back to Cincinnati because, like George, we had to answer some important questions. Would we come back to Cincinnati only to realize that home wasn't really home anymore? Were we over-romanticizing what our return would be like? Were we sacrificing something in our future for the city that held so much of our past?

So far, the answers to those questions are no, no and no. As George ends up discovering, you can go home again as long as you don't expect home to be exactly as it was when you first left it. In our case, going home again has been like moving to a new city. Cincinnati has changed – and continues to change – for the better, and, in the course of a year, Dave and I have made plenty of positive changes, too.

2013 may go down as one of the more transformative years in our 24-year journey together. In short order, we made the decision to move back to Cincinnati after my role at Luxottica changed. That meant that Dave would teach online courses through the rest of the 2013-2014 academic year and then leave his tenured position at Kent State for a to-be-determined position elsewhere; hopefully, in academia. It was a huge risk, but one we were willing to take. Giving up a tenured academic position (translated: giving up guaranteed employment for life) is not something you do on a whim. Yet, we both agreed that Cincinnati was the place we wanted to be.

We announced our decision in March and moved in July. In between that time, we worked hard and played hard. We saw Billy Bragg in Chicago for our anniversary, and The National in Louisville and Columbus. We sold a house and bought a house. I spent five glorious days on my own at Dinosaur National Monument in Vernal, Utah doing nothing but writing and conducting research for the novel I'm still trying to finish. If you know me well, you know I'm not a fan of being alone so this was a big, big deal for me. After I finished my final two classes and my thesis for the NEOMFA program (graduating with a 4.0!), we said goodbye to good friends in Northeast Ohio and headed south on I-71 to come home again after being gone for six years.

Northeast Ohio treated us well and we accomplished a lot during our time there. Dave was awarded tenure with promotion and, more importantly, touched the lives of countless students, many of whom decided to change their major to Sociology after taking his classes. I started a writers' group that is still active today and I fulfilled my dream of getting my master's degree in creative writing. We made great friends and great memories. Still, there were many times over the course of those six years that we felt our future lied elsewhere. Every time we visited home, we witnessed the vibrancy returning to Cincinnati and could see how the city was re-energizing its rich history (Cincinnati's beer brewing is back in full force) while looking toward the future (Over-the-Rhine is revitalizing downtown and the arts are thriving again). There's a momentum here that excites and inspires us, creatively, professionally, spiritually, personally, and we wanted to be a part of it.

Within a month of being home, Dave formed a band, a new version of Pike 27 with new songs. I settled into my commute to work and returned to StoryCrafters, a book group with some of the most well-read and wonderful women I know. We also reunited with old friends while making some new ones in Northside, a new neighborhood for both of us. All told, it's not "just like the old days" for either of us, and we're exploring every nook and cranny of the city as if we're wide-eyed newbies.

What I discovered about myself this year is that having a strong sense of place is critical to my sense of Self. And so it's serendipitous that many of the books I read featured characters that were searching for their sense of place, and, ultimately, their sense of Self. Robertson Davies was right when he said that: "we who are committed readers may appear to choose our books, but in an equally true sense our books choose us." I certainly gravitated toward characters that were on the hunt for their rightful place in the world. I also believe in fiction's ability – and art's ability, in general – to inform and transform, to help us sort out our present situation, and to help us better "read" what others are thinking and feeling. In fact, *Science Magazine* published an article on this very topic if you're interested in learning more (<http://tinyurl.com/qj3glfk>).

My point is, this year's Top 10 is cray cray with characters searching for that special place among the streets of New York, the surrealistic backwoods of childhood, a mansion in a South American town, and the unexplored hinterlands of our neurological system. Some characters were lucky enough to find a place to call home; others, not so much.

As the year comes to a close, I think it's safe to say what we all know: like any place, we are, as Thomas Wolfe so wisely says, "changing all the time." We are all a work in progress. And that's what makes life so interesting. Dave and I are thrilled to feel grounded in a place that fuels our hearts and our energy, and I hope you feel that same sort of grounding in your special place in 2014. I also hope you visit some fantastic places and meet some brilliant new friends between the hardcovers (or e-reader page swipes) next year!

For the newbies to the 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 discovering where the lands. Past lists have made it to Ireland (Hi Ann!) and Australia and Seattle, to name a few. There are also spectacular book groups in Ohio and California awaiting this list (Thanks Cindy and Colleen!). Anyone who puts this list in the hands of Dave Grohl, Martin Sheen, Glen Hansard, Alice Munro, Kevin Brockmeier or any other famous-y sort will have my eternal gratitude.
- The books I recommend are not always published in the list's given year. Why limit yourself to one year when there are so many great stories that deserve your attention?
- Let me know what you're reading – a lot of your recommendations make it on the list. You'll get full credit for the reco. And, if you end up hating one of my recos, let me know, too. I like a good literary debate.
- The Top 10 is not in rank order with the exception of my Number One pick which is most definitely numero uno.

## AMY'S TOP 10 BOOKS OF 2013

### 1. **THE GOLDFINCH** by Donna Tartt

I say this with only a slight hint of hyperbole: Best. Book. Ever. Buy it, borrow it, steal it from a friend. Whatever you do, read *The Goldfinch* and then, while you're at it, read *The Secret History* (appeared as #2 on my 2004 list) and *The Little Friend*. Tartt has written three novels and they're all worthy of your reading time. My good friend and fellow book lover Michael Kearns accused me of being a Book Bully because I've been purchasing the book for friends and begging them to read it so we can talk about it. If I'm a Book Bully, so be it! At least I'm not bullying you to read Danielle Steele or watch *The Bachelor*. Anyhow, it's present-day New York City and young Theodore Decker is at the art museum with his mother when things go terribly, deathly wrong. Let's just say there are two deaths, and a famous Dutch painting by Carel Fabritius from the 1600s ends up in Theo's hands. We're off to the races from there.

Homeless and motherless, Theo is taken in by the Barbour family and his schoolmate, Andy. Lives converge and diverge as Theo tries to find his way through his grief and his adulthood. We meet Hobie (a character I adored the minute he was introduced on the page), Pippa, Boris, Theo's wayward and untrustworthy father, and many others along Theo's 800-page epic journey toward Selfdom.

At the center of it all is the painting – *The Goldfinch* - that Theo secreted away with on that fateful afternoon at the museum. In the painting, the bird's delicate leg is chained to its perch. As the narrative unfolds, so does the metaphor. One sees that, like the bird, Theo and the other characters are bound and imprisoned in some way. You'll spend the rest of the novel wondering just when Theo will find himself, escape the chains that bind him, and fly to freedom. And that, my reading pals, is what makes literary magic! The narrative is sprawling – and sometimes a little plodding – but the eccentric characters, the drugs, the gambling, and the underworld of antique restoration and art theft will keep you reading. This is the kind of narrative that beckons to you after you've put the book down. I found myself wanting to skip work, parties, phone calls, running, laundry, and meals so I could continue reading. Dave calls these "Ignore Me Books," meaning I ignore him and everything else until I reach the last page. When I finished reading, I turned back to page one and read the first 50 pages again. It's that good.

### 2. **REGENERATION** by Pat Barker

One of the great benefits of getting your MFA in Creative Writing is that you get to read ... and read ... and read. It was a dream come true for three years; I was required to read more than I ever have and I discovered authors I might not have on my own. One of those authors this year was Pat Barker. *Regeneration* is the first in Barker's trilogy that take place in World War I, and she chose to focus on the psychological impact of war, not only on those who suffer from shell shock (our present-day PTSD), but also on those who treat the victims. Barker grounds the narrative in a true story but then veers into the fictional realm. The truth is that, in 1917, Siegfried Sassoon, a decorated British officer and poet, declared he would not go back to fight in the war. Like many soldiers, Siegfried was sent to a military hospital, and expected to recover so he could be sent back to the frontlines. While at the hospital, he's treated by Dr. Rivers who begins to question his role in rehabbing soldiers just so they can return to the trenches. This is where things get fictionalized but one senses that Barker did an enormous amount of research to explore PTSD and the doctors who provided treatment to the soldiers during WWI.

Dr. Rivers stands at the center of the narrative and becomes a tragic hero who philosophizes on the insanity and horror that is war. He wonders who he is and what his profession is asking him to do – isn't medicine supposed to heal instead of prepare a soldier for more harm and potential death? Barker brings to light the much darker side of the *Downton Abbey* era and reveals just how appalling it was to be a soldier in a world war that obliterated an entire generation of European men. I enjoyed this book so much, I started reading

Barker's trilogy which includes *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road* (received the Booker Prize in 1995), but got sidetracked with some required reading for class. I'm promising to get back to the trilogy in 2014!

### **3. BELL CANTO** by Ann Patchett

After gushing over Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder* last year, my friend Kevin Boyle, who has great taste in fiction, told me I should read *Bell Canto*, so I did just that. And I think I enjoyed it even more than Patchett's *State of Wonder* (on my 2012 list), *Run*, (on my 2009 list) and *Patron Saint of Liars* (on my 2005 list). Roxanne Coss, an American soprano, is singing for a wealthy Japanese businessman at a party in a South American town when the home is overtaken by terrorists and the guests are held hostage. Mr. Hosokawa has been obsessed with Roxanne for quite some time and now he's held captive with her. The good news is, the group of terrorists aren't necessarily hardcore about their terrorism or hostage-holding. The hostages begin to mix and mingle with some of the terrorists and things get really interesting as days turn into months. In between it all, Roxanne sings for the group, Mr. Hosokawa falls more in love with Roxanne, and a young terrorist discovers that he's gifted with a beautiful, operatic voice. Red Cross negotiator Joachim Messner provides plenty of comic relief as Patchett creates a tight-knit family out of complete strangers. The plot feels like an opera in some ways – lots of drama, conflict, love, and, like most operas, a few deaths.

### **4. THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE** and **FORTUNATELY, THE MILK** by Neil Gaiman

Every year, there are a couple of books on my list that I know will appeal to a smaller audience of readers. This might be one of those books. If you like speculative fiction, fables or a good fairy tale (note: not the Disney variety but a true fairy tale in the literary sense of the term), this skinny, dark tale might be the friend your bookshelf or nightstand needs. Reading *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* before bed is like entering a dream while you're still awake. The narrator of the tale returns to his childhood home to attend a funeral and feels compelled to visit the Hempstock farm where his childhood friend Lettie once lived. From here, the man revisits the seventh year of his childhood, a time when Lettie's grandmother had magic powers and the suicide of one of the townspeople unleashed Ursula Monkton, a not-so-nice entity with powers that rival Lettie's grandmother's ability to keep the world a good place. I won't give away any of the magical and fantastical moments here. If you want to suspend your disbelief for a few hours and remember what it's like to have the wild and fantastical imagination of a child where people can snip out pieces of time with scissors or turn into a witch-like worm that invades your foot or turn a simple backyard pond into an ocean, you'll enjoy this one.

*Fortunately, The Milk* is a young reader's book that's equally entertaining for adults. Illustrated by the fabulous Skottie Young, it'll take you no more than an hour to read. When mom leaves for a conference and dad goes out to buy milk for the breakfast cereal, he comes home later in the day with an epic tale about the adventure he had in getting the milk home. It involves, among other things, a stegosaurus, green globby aliens who want to redecorate the planet with plastic pink flamingos, pirates, "wumpires," piranhas, and a Floaty-Ball-Person-Carrier (aka a hot air balloon). Entertain and delight your inner child with this fantastical, funny tale.

### **5. THIS LOVELY LIFE** by Vicki Forman

I tend to read fiction more than nonfiction or memoir but a couple of creative nonfiction workshops in my final semesters of the MFA program introduced me to some terrific writers and real-life stories, including *This Lovely Life*. Vicki Forman gave birth to a pair of super-preemies at 23 weeks. Weight just a pound each, Forman assumes the twins won't make it and tells the doctor she does not want the children to be placed on life support. However, California law dictated otherwise and the babies are resuscitated and placed on life support. Forman's approach to the experience is raw and honest; her grief and love are palpable throughout and she exposes thoughts and feelings that others may find shocking. For example, she admits that she wished the babies wouldn't survive because she knew the children would have multiple disabilities and need constant, expensive care that she feared she and her husband wouldn't be able to give. Her daughter died after a few days but her son survived with the crippling disabilities that Forman feared. The memoir explores many ethical questions: when is a life truly viable outside of the womb? Do doctors use unnecessary measures to save

preemies just so they can be seen as heroes? How far should medicine go and who does it serve in the end? Are parents of preemies equipped economically and psychologically to care for a severely disabled preemie at home? Forman loves her children just as much as any mother but she's also willing to tackle the tough questions that, fortunately, most parents never encounter. What struck me is how Forman managed the delicate balance between her fierce love for her children and her ferocious rage against a medical system that both prevailed for and failed her family. Want to have a healthy debate at your book club? This one will do the trick.

#### **6. THE BURGESS BOYS** by Elizabeth Strout

I can't say I fell in love with the characters in this story, though I can say I respect Strout's ability to keep me reading when I don't necessarily identify with or love the characters. *The Burgess Boys* is a story within a story. The novel begins as a mother and daughter talk about the Burgesses, a neighborhood family in the small town of Shirley Falls, Maine. The mother and daughter, who are somewhat disconnected, find common ground talking about the Burgess Boys. The daughter sees Jim Burgess's wife, Helen, and tells her mother she's going to write a story about the Burgess Boys, and that's where the central narrative begins. We meet Jim, Bob and Susan Burgess. Their names are about as bland and generic as their lives until Susan's son Zach commits a crime that sends shock through the small community. Jim and Bob have escaped Shirley Falls for New York City but find themselves back in their hometown to help Susan and Zach. Years of underlying tension between the siblings rises and falls as the narrative progresses. Past hurts, rivalries and secrets are revealed as each character struggles to move past the past and maintain present-day happiness. The three siblings don't necessarily enjoy each other's company but they pull together as a family when there's a crisis. Strout leaves it up to the reader to decide whether their treatment of each other is mean-spirited or just plain honest. I loved Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* (#3 on my 2009 list) a little more than I loved this one, but *The Burgess Boys* is still worth the read.

#### **7. A CONSTELLATION OF VITAL PHENOMENA** by Anthony Marra

This selection spent some time as a critic's darling in 2013. Set in war-torn Chechnya, eight-year-old Havaa loses her father and is taken in by bungling neighbor Akhmed who hides her at a nearby hospital. There, he meets Sonya, the only remaining doctor at the bombed-out facility, and the three of them struggle to survive in a country they both hate and love. From there, we meet characters who are all connected in surprising ways, yet Marra puts the pieces of the puzzle together slowly so you can savor the revelations and the a-ha moments in the plot. I'd tell you more but the plot twists and turns and this is a book where it pays off to pay close attention to the details. While the story itself may sound depressing, Marra gives his characters a gritty sense of humor and optimism that provides a thread of hope throughout. This is Marra's debut novel and it will be interesting to see what he puts out next. He's definitely an author I'll keep reading.

#### **8. LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN** by Colum McCann

One of the highlights of my literary year was seeing Colum McCann speak at The Mercantile Library, thanks to Dave buying me tickets as part of my graduation gift. McCann can weave a brilliant and entertaining tale in person as much as he can in print. At the Mercantile, he talked about writing as a journey and, in a bit of kismet, about how he traveled the world in his younger years to find a sense of place outside of his homeland Ireland, only to find that the place he feels the most at home was Ireland all along. In *Let The Great World Spin*, McCann puts us on a tightrope poised above New York City with the world-famous French tightrope walker Phillippe Petit who walked along a cable stretched between the World Trade Center towers in August 1974. The highwire act becomes the connecting element between a set of ten characters whose lives are hanging in the precarious balance for one reason or another. You'll cross paths with a street preacher, a couple of prostitutes, grieving mothers who have lost their sons to the Vietnam War, two young artists and many unforgettable others. While I thought the story got off to a slow start, I'm glad I stuck with it. Read the book, then watch the documentary "Man on A Wire" about Petit's daring and dangerous highwire act. Like Marra's *Constellation*, McCann covers some grim territory that's always infused with hope, faith and inexplicable love.

### **9. ANCIENT LIGHT** by John Banville

Let's call this our Irish interlude in the list since Banville, like McCann, is a native of the Emerald Isle, too. Some critics say that you can find recurring themes in an author's book. I read Banville's *The Sea* several years ago. In it, the main character returns to a seaside town where he spent holidays as a child. He turns to his memories to sort out the past and make sense of his present grief upon losing his wife. *Ancient Light* is somewhat similar in that it takes on the themes of memory, love and loss. Alexander Cleave is between acting jobs and grieving the loss of his daughter who died under mysterious circumstances (or committed suicide, he's uncertain which it is). He is also struggling to write a memoir about the affair he had with his best friend's mother when he was 15-years-old. As he begins to journey back through his memories, a present-day opportunity arises. He is asked to star in a movie as Axel Vander, a famous literary critic. Cleave learns that the real Axel Vander once lived in the same town where his daughter was found dead, and wah-lah, the major threads and thrusts of the novel converge. Banville gives us a role reversal of *Lolita* as he ruminates on the affair he had when he was a minor. We also get hints of a hard-boiled mystery as Cleave hires a researcher to retrace Axel Vander's path to see if it leads to his daughter and the truth about her death. Through it all, Cleave continues to mine his memories in an attempt to understand whether the seeming love and lust of Mrs. Grey was simply bollocks or the real thing. Banville reminds us – through beautiful writing – that memory is a slippery slope and sometimes we shift the shapes of our memories to protect ourselves from deep hurt. As Cleave says: "Time and memory are a fussy firm of interior decorators, always shifting the furniture about and redesigning and even reassigning rooms."

### **10. HALLUCINATIONS** by Oliver Sacks

If you're fascinated by how the brain works and the weird tricks our neurological systems can play on us, you'll enjoy Oliver Sacks' latest. I read this mainly for research and background material for the novel I'm currently writing, and ended up loving it just because it was so dang interesting. Sacks offers up case studies on some of the most common and rare forms of visual hallucinations – people who see their shadow double, people who see ghosts during periods of intense grief, people with Charles Bonnet Syndrome who have frequent hallucinations, all without the aid of drugs. Sacks describes mentally healthy people who are afflicted with some sort of neurological glitch and how they come to terms with said glitch. Sacks also reveals his own hilarious and harrowing experimental trip with drugs in an attempt to understand how hallucinogens effect our neurological systems. Sacks is far more accessible than many other medical experts who might try to the inner workings of the brain. He leaves the academic rhetoric and theory behind for simplicity and humor that is both educational and entertaining.

**THIS YEAR'S CLASSIC PICK: DRACULA** by Bram Stoker

**THIS YEAR'S SHORT STORY COLLECTION PICK: VAMPIRES IN THE LEMON GROVE** by Karen Russell

**THIS YEAR'S POETRY PICK: WHAT'S WRITTEN ON THE BODY** by Peter Pereira