

Amy's Top 10 Books of 2018

As a young kid in the late 1970s, I used to watch a show called *In Search Of*. Each episode, narrated by Leonard Nimoy, examined the supernatural and paranormal as well as other mysterious phenomenon. My favorite episodes featured investigations of UFOs, the Loch Ness monster, the Bermuda Triangle and anything to do with missing persons. I was fascinated by the strange phenomena as much as I was the search for answers to an unsolved mystery. Despite some of the highly speculative storylines, the show gave me my first taste of investigative journalism, the very thing I majored in at college. (No offense to my other heroes Nancy Drew, Encyclopedia Brown or Woodward and Bernstein.)

For me, the fun of the show was in the chase and the search more than finding the definitive answers. It's no wonder then that I've always had a passion for reading and fiction writing, for a character's search is the bread and butter of any great story.

Early on in fiction writing classes, you learn about the hero's journey. Your main character embarks on a quest for something—either psychological or physical—she most desperately needs or wants. To keep the reader's interest, the search must feature obstacles and complications and detours for your character to overcome. As readers, we crave the complicated journey. No one wants to read about a character who has it easy—it's the hard stuff of conflict that keeps us turning pages into the wee hours of the morning.

As I looked back at the books I read this year, the hard-fought quests stood out as the dominant theme. Tales of immigration, the search for freedom, the quest for acceptance and love loomed large among the 30 books I read and especially the 10 that made it to the top of the list. Regardless of the searches I encountered, they were all filled with twists and turns, some more surprising than others, and the answers I thought the characters might find at the end weren't always what I expected.

The same can be said for the journey Dave and I took in 2018. Overall, it was a great year but we also had our fair share of twisty detours and obstacles to conquer. Within the first four months of the year: Dave started a new role at Cincinnati Children's Hospital; we said a heartbreaking goodbye to our beloved 15-year-old Aussie, Macy; we searched for a house, sold a house, bought another and moved to a new neighborhood; and then we added a new Aussie, Annie, to our family.

Loss and change being two of life's bigger stressors, the first half of the year had its ups and downs but we had plenty of laughs along the way. We have our stellar realtor, Mary Bryan, to thank for helping us find a terrific house in Westwood that checked all of our major musts in a home – a sunporch, a (dry) basement for Dave to play music and a writing room for me. The fact that all we needed to do was paint a few rooms before moving in alleviated some of the hassle of moving. We also have our friend, Lara Dorenkemper, to thank for helping us feel instantly at home in Westwood by introducing us to a great community of friends and neighbors. Finally, we have Annie to thank for mending our broken hearts after losing Macy. Her Aussie smile and shrewd side-eye glance along with her quirky personality fits right into the Purcell pack.

Major upsides to the year abound. Dave continued to regain and refine his drumming chops. It didn't take long for the incredibly talented drummer I met in 1989 to reappear behind the new kit he set up in his basement studio. We saw Dave's drumming hero, Mark Guiliana, perform twice, once in Miami at a jazz festival and once in Cincinnati, courtesy of Xavier University and Dave's recommendation to bring him to town. This summer, the band agreed to put Pike 27 on hiatus after a good, long run of gigs. Now, Dave is making some kickass all-instrumental music with three other fine fellows. They're looking forward to debuting in 2019. And Dave's top 10 list of albums, concerts and more can be found [here](#).

While Dave was playing away in the basement, I was upstairs in my writing room making progress on various projects. I had another short story published, had a couple of others rejected and had a few requests for more of my work—all par for the course in a writer's journey. In June, I attended the Southampton Writers Workshop where I met a terrific crew of writers. And, speaking of good writers, I continued teaching my writing workshop to a wonderful group of adults through the University of Cincinnati's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). As I told them often, they were the best part of my week.

I also decided to run a full marathon after several years of running halves. I simply couldn't pass up the 20th Anniversary of the Flying Pig Marathon as an opportunity to push myself back on a 26.2 trek. My finishing time was my slowest ever but the experience—and the black toenails—was well worth it.

You'll find that narratives that alternate between past and present loom large in my top picks this year. Perhaps I was drawn to this kind of framework because I was alternating between past and present in my work life as I wrote content for the Fifth Third Bank Museum, slated to open in March 2019. I spent many days – actually weeks – alternating between digging through the past and cranking out present-day projects. I ventured down many a rabbit hole to uncover Fifth Third's history and found some interesting stories that have been buried for decades.

Our summer vacation took us to Lake Chapala, Mexico for a much-needed rest. This lovely little town located about 40 minutes from Guadalajara offered the tranquility we needed to rejuvenate. Typically, we are on the go during vacations, searching for new things to experience and learn. In Chapala, we were more than content to shut it all down and explore what retirement might be like. Our friends, Peter, Elaine, Carolyn and Johnny have all retired there and gave us plenty of encouragement to join them in the near future.

Just days after coming home from Chapala, things took a tragic turn. On the morning of September 6, there was a mass shooting at Fifth Third. Three people plus the shooter died and another two were injured. While I was never in harm's way, the day and the weeks that followed will be burned in my memory forever. The tragedy took a significant emotional and psychological toll on me and on Dave. For weeks, I waffled between sadness and anger and fear. The "what if's" were on auto-replay as was the concern for my colleagues and anyone impacted. The aftermath had me searching for answers to the questions everyone asks after a mass shooting: Why? And why can't our country find a reasonable solution to gun violence? And why does this continue to happen on a nearly daily or weekly basis in America? I'm still in search of the answers.

On the heels of this tragedy came another. We lost our friend, Dave Davis. Dave touched the lives of so many people and left an indelible mark on Cincinnati's musicians and the music scene. We may believe our journeys end with death but I believe that Dave lives on in the grooves of so many hearts and in the thousands of songs he engineered-worked on during his life. He is greatly missed but he will never be forgotten.

Now, we're closing out another year where some of our searches will end and others will begin. As Lao Tzu once said, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Here's hoping your personal searches in 2019 are wholly fulfilling and joy-filled, and may all of your steps bring you closer to whatever it is you dream of.

If you're familiar with my list, you know I follow very few rules but the rules I do follow have been here since the get-go:

- **I send you the list. You forward it to other book-loving friends.** The fun part for me is seeing just how far the list travels.

- **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.** Number One is most definitely numero uno. Beyond that, it's a free-for-all, although my number two and three picks are typically my second and third literary loves of the year.
- **Let me know what you're reading.** Many of your recommendations make it into my reading pile and some reach my Top 10. You'll get full credit for the reco. If you end up hating one of my recos, let me know. I enjoy a good literary debate.

1. *The Great Believers*, Rebecca Makkai

It's no surprise to me that this book was shortlisted for the National Book Award and appeared on several top 10 lists. The search for love and answers takes place in Chicago in the 1980s and in Paris in 2015. The core narrative centers around a group of friends, mostly gay men, in Chicago at the edge of the AIDS crisis. The Paris story picks up some of the loose threads from the group's past in surprising ways and adds a few other narrative twists, too. First, the past: it's 1985 and Yale Tishman is at the funeral of Nico, the first friend he loses to AIDS. Many others in Yale's group of friends and lovers will be diagnosed as HIV positive and some will die but, no spoilers here. While Yale mourns the loss of his friend, he's asked to pursue a collection of paintings from the 1920s that could help build the reputation of the art gallery where he works. Again, I'll say no more because it could spoil portions of the plot. Yale finds himself confronting the terribleness of the disease and the validity of his relationship with his boyfriend at the same time he's trying to validate the authenticity of the art collection. Yale's simultaneous search for authenticity in the art world and authentic love makes for a thematic read that never feels overwrought. Meanwhile, in present-day Paris, we meet Nico's sister, Fiona. She's searching for her estranged daughter but also finds herself confronting the past when she meets one of Nico's old friends who survived the pandemic. Some of the answers Fiona is searching for, both from her past and present, intersect with questions we have about Yale's past and his group of friends. The way Makkai folds the two narratives together is quite delightful, as is her ability to keep such the grim topic of AIDS hopeful and filled with love. In fact, at its base, this is a love story and a tribute to those who lost their lives in the early years of the crisis. I can't say enough about the compassion she has for her characters and how fully realized they all felt to me. The way Makkai ties the questions of Yale and Fiona together is highly satisfying.

2. *Less*, Andrew Sean Greer

Less, the Pulitzer winner in 2017, was in my number one spot for nearly six months until I read *The Great Believers*. The journey of Arthur Less provided more laughs than any other book on my list. I'm a sucker for a lovable loser and Arthur Less is as lovable as they come. On the cusp of turning 50, nothing is going Arthur's way. As a novelist, he's a has-been who doesn't even appear at the bottom of a bookstore's bargain bin. On top of that, his old boyfriend is getting married and has invited him to the wedding. Instead of RSVPing to the wedding, he accepts invitations to literary events and interviews no other self-respecting author would accept. Arthur's search for his new self at 50 is equally hilarious and heartwarming. From Paris to Berlin to India, I was cheering for Arthur to finally see himself as the good man he is. This is the kind of story where you're in the know well before the main character. What Arthur has been searching for is right under his nose all along but that sort of madcap fun is what makes this such a touching and heartwarming read. After I finished it, I wanted to read more Greer so I picked up *The Path of Minor Planets*, a book that sounded similar to a few other favorites of mine. Unfortunately, it ended up on my "did not finish" list, a real rarity. I'll stick with most any book but I couldn't hack this one. After 100 pages, I left it on the bookshelf at our hotel in Mexico, hoping that

someone else might enjoy it. That said, don't let my opinion of one of Greer's earlier novels scare you away from *Less*. It's more than worth the read.

3. *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead

A gut-punch on every page. A story that doesn't hold back but one that's so gripping and so big and important and fantastically imagined that you're willing to endure the hits. After all the hype *Railroad* received, I was reluctant to read it. I tend to get my hopes way up and sometimes the book doesn't deliver (see past lists for my struggle with *Infinite Jest*; also, *Gone Girl*, the book I love to hate). I didn't want that to happen with this book so I waited until the book group I'm in, founded by fellow book lover and friend, Annette Christianson, selected it. We meet Cora, a slave in Georgia, who is searching for a way to escape the cotton plantation. Another slave, Caesar, encourages her to join him on the Underground Railroad. Yet this is not the railroad as we know it from our history lessons. It's a real railroad, complete with conductors, secret entrances, tracks and a makeshift train. Whitehead twists time and weaves a bit of magic realism into this telling of our country's history of slavery. Cora moves through both Carolinas, Tennessee and Indiana with slave catcher, Ridgeway, in heavy pursuit of her. Ridgeway is one of the most despicable and evil characters I've ever met in literature. I honestly don't know how Whitehead was able to write his character, although I think Ridgeway's ultimate undoing and outcome might have helped. It sickens me that some of Ridgeway's worst traits are evident in some Americans today. Thus, one of the many reasons the narrative feels appropriate for our times. The parallels in the narrative to contemporary life are plenty and I was reminded constantly that slavery isn't all that far away in our country's past and, horribly, racism is on the rise today. As the *New York Times* review stated, "In a sense, *The Underground Railroad* is Whitehead's own attempt at getting things right, not by telling us what we already know but by vindicating the powers of fiction to interpret the world. In its exploration of the foundational sins of America, it is a brave and necessary book."

4. *Unsheltered*, Barbara Kingsolver

Here's another book on my list that alternates between past and present and features intersecting narratives. I'm a Kingsolver fan girl. I've read all of her books and loved most of them. If you haven't read *Poisonwood Bible*, I will bully you into it—it's on my top 10 list of all-time. Kingsolver's background as a scientist and her love for nature tend to factor into work and *Unsheltered* is no exception. Here, we are introduced to the past and present of Vineland, NJ. In present day, Willa Knox and her family have inherited a nearly uninhabitable house. Willa has lost her job at a magazine just as her husband, Iano, loses his academic job. Shortly after Willa is told the house is unsalvageable, her son Zeke calls with news that his wife committed suicide. Zeke and his newborn son come to live with Willa, Iano, daughter Tig and Nick, the crusty, conservative father of Iano who needs constant care. Most of this is revealed in the first chapter so I'm giving nothing away. Desperate to make the house livable and to support her family, Willa begins digging into the house's past, hoping there's historical value to save it. We then flash back to the 1870s when Vineland was an experimental utopian community led by Charles Landis, a man who wanted to protect his followers from Charles Darwin and his theories on evolution. Mary Treat and Thatcher Greenwood, two devotees of Darwin, are semi-outcasts in Vineland. Greenwood's house, like his new marriage, is also falling apart. Treat and Greenwood develop a friendship grounded in their love of the natural world. Structurally, Kingsolver links the past and present narratives by using the last words of one chapter as the title of the next. In other hands it would feel like a corny narrative device but this fan girl thinks it works. The crumbling houses in both eras stand as metaphors for the lives inside them. The metaphor does feel heavy-handed sometimes but all is forgiven since Kingsolver's sense of humor and clever storytelling shine through on every page. Both storylines also hold meaning for the current climate in America. One could read Charles Landis' character as a precursor to Trump – a man so fearful of progress, science and diversity that he touts everything as "fake" and circles the wagons around a tightly-knit community of people who refuse to believe the facts. As Kingsolver writes of Landis in 1870: "When men fear

the loss of what they know, they will follow any tyrant who promises to restore the odd order. ... These are more dangerous times than we have ever known." Sound familiar?

5. *The Friend*, Sigrid Nunez

This slim little tale reads more like a meditation or perhaps an elegy to a good friend. The narrative is fragmented yet the tangents build on each other, giving the story its psychological and philosophical power. It's the kind of book you want to read with someone else so you can stop after each part to talk it. There appears to be a new or growing genre called the "literature of grief." While many authors have tackled this territory, Nunez brings a fresh perspective to it. The unnamed narrator is mourning the loss of her friend, a former professor, writer and her one-time lover, who committed suicide. The story unfolds like a one-sided conversation, the narrator addressing her friend, as she examines his life, their friendship and the writing life in general. Shortly after his death, she reluctantly takes in his Great Dane named Apollo. The dog, experiencing his own form of grief, is content to sit on her bed and take up most of the space in her tiny Manhattan apartment where dogs aren't allowed to live. Soon, Apollo becomes the narrator's lifeline as she isolates herself. Beyond therapy sessions, her teaching gig and walking Apollo, she rarely leaves the apartment. At one point, her friends hold a failed intervention. The duo's bond grows tighter as the narrator struggles to come to terms with her loss. The story never grows maudlin. In fact, there are several laughs and all kinds of things that make you think. Ultimately, it's a love story and a story of the bond between humans and dogs. Literary references, along with numerous philosophical questions on ethics, sex, morality and more, abound in these 200 pages. This makes for a great little read on a long airplane ride or a weekend trip.

6. *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, Kate DiCamillo

My favorite book bully, Ann Scanlan, sent me this middle-grade/young reader book all the way from Ireland in the early months of 2018. I read it in one sitting, and then commenced crying for the next hour thinking about this absolutely beautiful and magical story of love, faith and hope. It's fitting that this was among the first books I read in 2018 given that the theme for the year ended up being about journeys and searches. Edward Tulane, a dapper china rabbit, is owned by Abilene. Edward is much-loved and also thinks pretty highly of himself. That is, until he finds himself lost. Abilene's grandmother, Pellegrina, factors into Edward's fate but I won't give that away. Edward journeys far and wide, from the ocean floor to a garbage dump and a hobo camp to the streets of Memphis. During his search for home or at least a new home suitable for a china rabbit, he encounters the coldness and kindness of others, making his journey equal parts emotional and physical. He meets many an obstacle as he learns that you can only be truly found when you open your heart to others. The story has many of the qualities of an old fable. And DiCamillo doesn't hold back on depicting the dark and hard parts of Tulane's journey. We're not in rainbows and unicorns land here. Sometimes books meant for kids hold numerous lessons and reminders for adults; this is one of those books. If you're like me and missed this when it was published in 2006, get yourself to your local library or bookstore and check it out. If you have young readers in your house, they will also enjoy it. Just be aware that there may be some tears shed during Tulane's travels.

7. *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*, Alexander Chee

I was fortunate to hear Alexander Chee give a craft talk at the Southampton Writers Conference this summer. His talk, one of the best I've heard, prompted the purchase of this book. Let's be clear: this is not a how-to book. It's a collection of essays that's about so much more than writing. Writers may find some instructive nuggets here but there's something for everyone in this collection. At a high level, Chee explores his life as a Korean-American, as a gay man coming of age, as a son and a friend, and as a writer pursuing his craft. I admire his self-awareness and his willingness to put himself under a microscope for every reader's viewing. Many

writers would struggle to reveal the least likable parts of themselves as readily as Chee seems to do. There's a beautiful essay about Tarot reading and how his life as a professional Tarot card reader influences his writing. Other essays draw from his childhood and his sexual awakening. As a whole, the collection does conjure up the feeling of an autobiography as it chronicles Chee's early years as a writer, his coming out and much more. I was particularly fond of the essay about studying with Annie Dillard – it's instructive for any writer. The essay titled, "After Peter," about his lover and mentor who died of AIDS is especially touching. I found myself underlining plenty of sentences in this collection. Chee's writing feels unique to me. He turns a phrase in original ways. I read this book shortly after finishing *The Great Believers* so, thematically, everything tied together nicely. If you enjoy essays that make you think and reflect on your own journey, you'll find something here to love.

8. Anything is Possible, Elizabeth Strout

This follow-up to *My Name is Lucy Barton* isn't the most uplifting read on my list but if you're a fan of Strout, then it's a must-read. Additionally, if you're a fan of the novel-in-stories structure, something Strout excelled at with *Olive Kitteridge*, you'll love this. Strout returns to Amgash, Illinois where Lucy Barton grew up. In the nine stories here, we learn about some of Lucy's people and their reactions to her successful memoir (*My Name is Lucy Barton*). Some of Lucy's friends and relatives believe she's getting "above her raising" with her success. Others are angry that she's revealed her life in a memoir. Strout paints a vivid and raw portrait of small-town America, a sometimes harsh and unforgiving place. Yet, she always shows compassion for her characters and this, I think, is why I always enjoy her work. My sense is that Strout wasn't ready to let go of Lucy's character yet. There were still aspects of Lucy she wanted to explore and by looking around outside of Lucy, she was able to explore Lucy's life in new ways while also introducing us to a new cast of characters that were exploring the value of their own lives. Patty Niceley is one of many characters within these pages that will stick with you for a long time.

9. The Sympathizer, Viet Thanh Nguyen

The *Sympathizer* was the first book I read in 2018. I recall telling Dave that I hoped my year wasn't going to be filled with novels that recounted the horrors and tragedy of war as well as the major struggles of immigration. Turns out, plenty of what I read covered that very territory. And, of course, the migrant struggle dominated the news in 2018. Nguyen was awarded the Pulitzer in 2016 for this novel. I knew going in that the topic – the Vietnam War coupled with an immigrant's tough journey – would be grim. By no means is this a light-hearted read but I'm very glad I read it. The novel is written from the point of view of a conflicted communist sympathizer who remains unnamed. As Saigon falls, this captain escapes on one of the last planes out of the country and ends up in Los Angeles with a group of immigrants, all former military professionals. The group is unaware that the captain is observing them and reporting back to the Viet Cong. The plot is far too intricate and complicated to summarize here. Suffice it to say, you'll encounter a double agent's view on the war, plenty of double-crossings and betrayals, some internal and external warfare and the experience of Vietnamese immigrants in America. What I loved about it is that Nguyen gives us a different point of view on the Vietnam War. In these pages, we have Vietnamese characters telling war and immigrations stories in their own voices versus hearing the Americanized version of the story. You'll find yourself sympathizing with the captain for waffling between the two sides of right and wrong or, in some cases, right and right. This novel made me think a great deal about what is currently happening in our country and how our "land of the free and home of the brave" isn't that way for people who are deemed outsiders by our government or by those who tend toward extreme nationalism. I don't believe in walls or cages for people – humans – who are seeking a better life or escaping danger and violence in their home country. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" This is the America I want to live in.

10. *In the Midst of Winter*, Isabel Allende

Befittingly, the end of my reading year bookended the beginning with another immigrant story, this time focused on the South American countries of Guatemala and Chile. Some authors excel at making their characters feel like friends, so much so that you forgive obvious narrative devices or overly coincidental plot points. Allende is one of those authors for me. While I could feel the heavy hand of plot mechanics, the topics she covers and the bonds that develops between the three main characters kept me reading and enjoying this tale. Richard and Lucia, colleagues at a university, meet Evelyn during a blizzard in Brooklyn. Each of the three characters have secrets in their pasts. Evelyn is an undocumented immigrant from Guatemala. Lucia escaped Chile as a young girl and made her way in America. Richard is a tired academic who's ready to retire and suffers from anxiety. As the blizzard blankets Brooklyn (how's that for alliteration!) the trio begins to share their stories of the pasts, and very quickly they discover a terrible secret locked in the backseat of the car Evelyn was driving. I'll say no more to avoid spoiling the story. What I loved most about this book is its timeliness in telling the stories of two women who fled their countries to escape danger and, almost certainly, death. They would have been part of the caravan that Trump so despises. Allende shares the high stakes and high risks for anyone fleeing their country and the dangers they encounter along the way. If you read this and still think we need a wall, I'm not really certain you're human.

What I Read This Year (mostly in chronological order):

1. *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen
2. *The Yellow Birds*, Kevin Powers
3. *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, Kate DiCamillo
4. *Manhattan Beach*, Jennifer Egan
5. *The Smile*, Roddy Doyle
6. *Pachinko*, Min Jin Lee
7. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Jesmyn Ward
8. *Heritage of Smoke*, Josip Novakovich
9. *Anything is Possible*, Elizabeth Strout
10. *No One Is Coming To Save Us*, Stephanie Powell Watts
11. *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead
12. *Upstream*, Mary Oliver
13. *Who Is Rich?*, Matthew Clam
14. *Less*, Andrew Sean Greer
15. *Improvement*, Joan Silber
16. *The Rise and Fall of Dinosaurs*, Stephen L. Brusatte
17. *The Great Believers*, Rebecca Makkai
18. *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*, Alexander Chee
19. *Red Dirt*, E.M. Reapy
20. *Amy and Isabelle*, Isabelle Allende
21. *Cat's Eye*, Margaret Atwood
22. *Kayak Morning: Reflections on Love, Grief and Small Boats*, Roger Rosenblatt
23. *You Will Know Me*, Megan Abbott
24. *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*, by Neil DeGrasse Tyson
25. *Remind Me Again What Happened*, Joanna Luloff
26. *The Little Book of Hygge: Danish Secrets to Happy Living*, Meik Wiking
27. *Unsheltered*, Barbara Kingsolver
28. *She Begat This: 20 Years of the Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Joan Morgan
29. *In the Midst of Winter*, Isabelle Allende
30. *The Friend*, Sigrid Nunez