

Amy's Top 10 Books of 2019

As the saying goes, there's a first time for everything. In 2019, those firsts are that I'm not including a summary of our year and that I selected a nonfiction book as my No. 1 of the year. It's no mistake. You're reading Amy's Top 10 Book List, a tradition I've kept for two decades now. As we close this decade, I decided it was time for a change. Besides, I can't deny that the best book I read this year is based in reality.

So, let's dive right in. The 30 books I read this year transported me to Ireland, Russia, London, Scotland, Egypt, Maine, Baltimore, the canopies of Redwood trees, fantastical cities in the future and many other places. Three of those 30 took me to Northern Ireland. Of those three, two made the list. The other, *Milkman*, a Booker Prize winner that received rave reviews from plenty of readers, continues to befuddle me. You'll also find two books from London and Scotland on this year's list. I'm beginning to get the feeling Europe is calling me somehow.

From the first to the last, each selection on this list centers around a woman or women and only two of my top 10 were written by men. With the exception of *The Overstory* where men populate the narrative just as much as women and trees, the stories focused on women searching for identity, redemption, truth, freedom and love. In many ways, the women you'll find among these pages bear witness to how women persevere and endure, what we pursue, what we discover about ourselves and how we navigate relationships and aging.

And before you ask: Yes, I, like everyone in the universe, read *Where the Crawdads Sing* and, no, it didn't make my top 10.

If you're familiar with my list, you know I follow very few rules but the rules I do follow have been here since I started this tradition some 20 years ago:

- **I send you the list. You forward it to other book-loving friends.** The fun part for me is seeing 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 our 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. That's true for this 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. *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland*, Patrick Radden Keefe

I thank Dave for turning me on to this book. After he blew through it, I did the same. We also had the pleasure of seeing Keefe talk about the book at The Mercantile Library which was, in some ways, as thought-provoking as the book. Having visited Belfast and Derry, the general setting of this true tale of The Troubles felt familiar, though the familiarity ends there. We visited Northern Ireland long after the Good Friday Agreement had been signed and The Troubles had ended. We didn't worry about car bombs or violence. We didn't watch our backs. The Belfast Keefe covers is polar opposite to that. In 1972, Jean McConville, a widow and mother of ten children, is abducted and "disappeared" – the term used for people who were taken away and killed by the I.R.A., even though the I.R.A. claimed no responsibility. McConville's case is the launching pad for Keefe as he offers a history of The Troubles through the lens of I.R.A. leaders and members who fought for a united Ireland. Keefe gives us perspective on Gerry Adams, a man who has never admitted to being a part of I.R.A., and others like Bobby Sands and Dolours Price who sacrificed themselves for the cause.

Any review you read tells you that you'll feel like you're reading a crime novel or thriller. The pace is fast and the web within the I.R.A. is both tight and complicated. Then you remember that what you're reading is real, that these are real people who fought and sometimes died in a violent guerilla war. Keefe's research and journalistic balance is admirable. He lets readers judge both sides of the war for themselves by relaying facts through a very human perspective. It's one thing to know as fact that Bobby Sands, Dolours Price and her sister went on hunger strikes to show their allegiance to the I.R.A. and resistance to the British when they were in jail. It's another thing entirely to read the details of the strike, like the Price sisters being force-fed through a tube for days on end. Like me, you may struggle with cognitive dissonance. At times, you take the side of the I.R.A. or, at the very least, understand why they're fighting and choosing violence to get out from under British rule. Then you find yourself unable to comprehend the impossibility of the conflict. And The Troubles was an impossible situation. Keefe shows why the Good Friday Agreement is akin to a miracle and why we can't repeat that history, with Brexit's impact or otherwise. Part history, part politics, part psychological documentary, Keefe offers it all.

2. *Disappearing Earth*, Julia Phillips

Oh, how I love Russian literature. What I mean by that is literature written by Russians and literature set in Russia. Phillips' linked stories falls into the latter category. At the outset, two sisters disappear in the remote town of Kamchatka. The disappearance of the two young girls, Alyona and Sophia Golosovskaya, becomes the backdrop for introducing others who populate the town and may or may not have a connection to the girls. Each chapter is narrated by a woman. We meet young lovers, lonely travelers from the Even tribe of indigenous people, middle-aged women grappling with death. Midway through the book, another girl, Lilia, disappears. The mothers of the disappeared meet and, in a lovely scene at a native people's festival, they come together to search for the daughters the authorities struggled to find. You'll have to read the book to find out whether they're successful. Phillips explores violence in women's lives in various forms, some more overt than others. She touches on discrimination and what it means to be an outsider through the Even tribe. Secrets and their destructive nature also abound in every story. Subtext lives large here and, like the frozen landscape of Kamchatka, there's plenty that's buried deep beneath the surface in the characters' lives. For those who like a little mystery, you'll be satisfied, not only with how the disappearance of the girls unfolds but also with the ending. One of

Phillips' chapters appeared as a short story in *Glimmer Train*. That story stuck with me a good long while after I read it and I was glad to see Phillips stretch her storytelling into novel form. This one is well worth a read.

3. *Olive, Again*, Elizabeth Strout

Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* made No. 3 in 2009 (and also won the Pulitzer). Ten years later, her follow-up to that book, comes in at No. 3. I like how it was purely unplanned and I made my picks before checking my old lists. With a title like *Olive Again*, obviously Olive is back and I couldn't have been more thrilled to meet her again. Strout uses the same linked stories structure here as she did with *Kitteridge* and it seems to me that her readers would struggle to accept anything but this structure given how much we enjoyed it a decade ago. We're back in Crosby, Main with Olive where she's a little older and slightly more self-aware. Her husband is dead, her son has moved away and she has a new companion in Jack Kennison. They're an unlikely couple but there's a lot about Olive that's unlikely anyway. You love her because she's so frank, so practical and so, well, Olive. Cranky as Olive can appear, she does express love in her cantankerous way and desires love in return—as long as no one else notices. Strout's crisp writing and sense of humor shine in these stories. As does her astute observations of an aging woman who's still attempting to make sense of her life and identity. The final two stories in this collection brought me to tears, not because they were sad but because of Strout's deep insight and obvious love for Olive, a character whom it seems she simply can't let go of yet.

4. *The Library Book*, Susan Orlean

Is there a library or librarian you love? Then this book is for you. It made me reconsider my career choice. Like Keefe, Orlean is a great journalist and researcher. Her writing feels novelistic and I'm not sure I've ever read such a captivating account of a fire, one that destroyed 400,000 books and damaged some 700,000 more at the Los Angeles Public Library in 1986. Once extinguished, the work of restoring the library began as did the work of figuring out who or how the fire started. As much as Orlean covers this mystery, the book is about so much more. It's an historical account of libraries. It's about quirky head librarians and how women were denied the role but kicked ass at doing so anyway. It's about Harry Peak, the main suspect for the arson. Mostly, it's about the special place libraries hold in our communities and how librarians impact our lives. I played book bully with this one. I let a few fellow library lovers borrow my copy and then pretty much promoted it to anyone who told me they liked to read and borrow books from libraries.

5. *The Overstory*, Richard Powers

This was the first book I read in 2019 and it's a whopper. Like a few others on this list, Powers gives us linked stories – in this case, the stories are linked by both characters and trees. The whole time I was reading, I couldn't help but think about trees, look at trees, wonder about trees, bow down to trees for the amazing creatures they are. And I'm sort of convinced trees are more creature than plant. They work as individuals and in teams. They help fellow trees that are sick. They survive through the disastrous stress we place on our planet. Powers gives us an education on trees themselves in a way that I found far more interesting than taking a botany class. With each story, he shows how trees loom large in our lives and memories—personally, professionally, politically, psychologically. There's a domino effect in the narrative. One character's actions impacts the whole group. There's Nick, Olivia, Mimi, Douglas, Adam, Neely, Patricia, Dorothy and her husband. Their stories branch out without losing sight

of their connection to the trees in their lives. I cried at the finish of Patricia Westerfield's story. As "Plant Patty" says of trees: "their lives have long been connected, deep underground." She also says that plants are willful and crafty, just like certain people and animals. Trees help make the weather, feed creation and create the very air we breathe. Like trees, the characters are connected and intertwined, becoming a forest unto themselves. By far, Patricia, Nick and Doug held my interest and had the richest storylines. The narrative wandered off in places and there were portions that didn't appeal to me but, overall, Powers' love for the natural world appears on every page, as does his fear that humans are destroying the very ecosystem that keeps us alive. When we visited the Giant Redwoods outside of Yosemite this year, I couldn't help but think of this book. And think about how much trees deserve our respect. *The Overstory* is a cautionary tale of environmental murder. Sadly, it may be too late already to answer Powers' plea to stop the destruction.

6. *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, Gail Honeyman

I read this when we were in Scotland which was appropriate given that's where the action takes place. This is definitely the most humorous and heartwarming book on my list this year and, possibly, the funniest book I've read in two or three years. Eleanor is a socially awkward loner. As a child, her life was marked with tragedy but I can't say what or I'll give too much away. One night she sees a band and falls in love with the lead singer, Johnnie, who has no idea Eleanor exists. Convinced that she can capture his attention, she embarks on some physical and personal improvements. As Eleanor sits through her first bikini wax, gets a haircut and generally tries to make herself into a new person, she continues to bury the childhood tragedy that has impacted her ability to make friends and also find her true self. Raymond, an equally socially awkward IT guy at work befriends her and they become friends, often annoying each other with their unique ways of being unable to connect with other people. Together, they save Sammy, an old man who falls on the sidewalk, and begin developing their own type of family. Eleanor's personality is similar to Olive Kitteridge. She has no filter and sees no reason not to speak exactly what's on her mind. She's aware of her loneliness but has also built up enough internal defense mechanisms that she tries to ignore her need to connect with others. We watch her try (and usually fail) to navigate the world of her co-workers and we follow her as she edges closer to coming to terms with her tragic childhood. Honeyman treats Eleanor with such empathy and compassion that you can't help but love them both from the get-go.

7. *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, Winifred Watson

Traveling now to London, I discovered this little gem on the bookshelf in the flat we stayed in while we were in Covent Garden. I enjoyed the first few pages so much that when we visited the amazing Foyles Bookstore, I bought a copy. Good thing too since this book is only available through Persephone Books and isn't easy to find in the States. Miss Guinevere Pettigrew is a middle-aged governess who is desperate for a job. She's somewhat invisible to others and appears to have no friends. When she applies for a job at the wrong address, she meets Delysia LaFosse. Delysia is mixed up with two men and it's Miss Pettigrew to the rescue to save Delysia from herself and her poor decisions in the love department. First published in 1938, it's not the most woke or feminist tale around but it's also an artifact of its time and place. Watson gives us a glimpse of high society London in her version of a Cinderella-esque tale, complete with a fancy party and a happily-ever-after ending. Like Eleanor Oliphant and Olive Kitteridge, you find yourself cheering for Miss Pettigrew and hoping that she will also find friendship and love in her life. Watson herself led an interesting life. She wrote a few novels before

this one and didn't think *Pettigrew* would sell but it became her most popular book. During World War II, she stopped writing to care for her family. When she finally had the time to return to writing, she'd lost the spirit to do so. It's disappointing that someone as entertaining as Watson stopped letting her talented light shine on.

8. *Normal People*, Sally Rooney

Since readers of my book list run the gamut in book tastes, I'll start with the disclaimer: if you're not one for sex scenes, Rooney's novel may not be for you. That said, every sex scene – and there are more than a few – is artfully and tastefully written. In fact, many of them are beautiful for their honesty but you should go into this book knowing it's filled with young love. Underneath the bedroom scenes, there's a much mightier fire brewing – one made up of class conflict and how class can impact one's identity. Connell and Marianne grew up in the same small town in County Sligo. Connell is decidedly working class. His mother is the hired help for Marianne's mother. In high school, Marianne is a loner while Connell finds friends among the jocks and other popular kids. They have a secret fling but it isn't until a year later, when they're both at Trinity College, that things really heat up and the tables are turned. Marianne gains popularity while Connell struggles to fit in, feeling like an outsider among his wealthier classmates. While they run in their own circles, they always circle back to each other—moth to flame and all that. Within the cocoon of their semi-secret relationship, they feel safe and are able to be themselves. Outside of this cocoon, it's another story. Their on-again, off-again relationship is filled with miscommunication and secrets, yet the reader is fully aware of what Marianne needs to know about Connell and vice versa, so much so that there were times I wanted to shout at the page and tell both of them to 'fess up already and bring everything out in the open. That's the beauty of a read like this—because you're in on the secrets, you continue reading to find out whether the characters will ever discover what you've known all along. The most thematic line in the book also includes the title. Marianne says to Connell, "I don't know why I can't be like normal people ... I don't know why I can't make people love me." As a reader, you know the answer and you wait anxiously to see if Marianne figures it out. Rooney's prose is so gorgeous and lyric and wise that it feels like you're reading a long love poem.

9. *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood

It's hard to beat *The Handmaid's Tale*, a book I read in a Women's Literature class when I was at Ohio University. *The Testaments* is the solid follow-up to *Handmaid's Tale* and it doesn't disappoint. We return to Gilead 15 years later and, this time, the horrible empire on the brink of destruction. The woman who may bring the cruel city and its repressive misogynistic practices to its knees is none other than Aunt Lydia, a monster character in *Handmaid's Tale*. Aunt Lydia, once tortured into her role as an Aunt, has been keeping track of Gilead's secrets and the sins of its oppressive male commanders. Aunt Lydia is ready to unload all that she knows but she can't do it alone. She needs help and her needs are specific. This is how we meet Daisy, a feisty teenager who lives outside of Gilead in Canada. Daisy is ready to resist any form of oppression and it eventually becomes clear that her ties to Gilead are much more binding than Daisy realizes. There's also Agnes, the daughter of a Gilead commander, who rounds out the trinity of women that eventually assist in the fall of Gilead. Their lives are intertwined in ways that come to light as the narrative unfolds. I hesitated reading this follow-up because I feared it would be too grim, too real. I'm glad I set my hesitation aside. Where *Handmaid's Tale* left me feeling hopeless, *The Testaments* feels hopeful. Hopeful that a regime like Gilead can be toppled—by women who rise up.

10. *After You'd Gone*, Maggie O'Farrell

It's back to Edinburgh, Scotland again with the final selection on my list. O'Farrell's other works hail from Ireland but this story takes place in both Scotland and London. Alice Raikes takes a train home to see her family. When she stops in the bathroom, she sees something so upsetting that she leaves for London immediately. Hours later, she's hit by a car and the accident puts her in a coma. Her family, along with the reader, is left to wonder whether it was an accident or an attempted suicide. The story moves back and forth in time so we get to know Alice before the accident. We also hear from Alice who reveals portions of her story while her family is gathered at her bedside. There are plenty of secrets and lies between them, plenty that rises to the surface. You'll find yourself drawn to Alice's story as much as the lives of her grandmother Elspeth and her mother Ann. Her two sisters and her lover, John round out the narrative and offer perspective on Alice's life as well. The narrative is told in vignettes and feels fractured and unconnected at times, mirroring Alice's fractured life as well as her state of moving in and out of consciousness. The writing is lyrical and rich. I sunk into O'Farrell's language as much as I sunk into the mystery of Alice and the vision in the mirror that disturbed her so.

What I Read This Year (in chronological order)

The Overstory, Richard Powers

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine,

Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day, Winifred Watson

There, There, Tommy Orange

Where the Crawdads Sing, Delia Owens

Killers of the Flower Moon, David Grann

Salvage the Bones, Jesmyn Ward

Everything Under, Daisy Johnson

After You'd Gone, Maggie O'Farrell

The Third Hotel, Laura van den Berg

The Library Book, Susan Orlean

Sing to It: New Stories, Amy Hempel

Say Nothing, Patrick Radden Keefe

Milkman, Anna Burns

Feast Your Eyes, Myla Goldberg

Cherry, Nico Walker

Disappearing Earth, Julia Phillips

The Power & The Glory, Graham Greene

The City & The City, China Mieville

Mostly Dead Things, Kristen Arnett

Lady in the Lake, Laura Lippmann

The Need, Helen Phillips

Normal People, Sally Rooney

Ohio, Stephen Markley

Chances Are, Richard Russo

The Testaments, Margaret Atwood

Olive, Again, Elizabeth Strout

A Pure Heart, Rajia Hassib

Fates and Furies, Lauren Groff

Alexander Hamilton, Ron Chernow (still slowly working through it)