

## Amy's Top 10 Books of 2020

If ever there was a year not to recap, it's 2020. Last year, I decided to do something different and simply send my list of favorite books without a summary of my year. Many messaged or emailed me and said they missed my musings, especially how themes in my reading life mirrored themes in my real life. I was grateful for the feedback—I'm grateful any time anyone enjoys what I write or what I have to say. Instead of recapping my year (because I can't fathom recapping it), I'm sharing a few general thoughts and how those thoughts link to a year that was, to use the word of 2020, "unprecedented" in its lack of reading and writing. So much has already been written about 2020 that is far more profound than anything I could add to the conversation that I'll keep my thoughts short.

Like you, I struggled. Like you, I laughed. Like you, I Zoomed with friends and family, missing their hugs all the while. Like you, I binged-watched a few shows on Netflix—"Schitt's Creek" and "The Great British Baking Show" being the standouts. Like you, I felt all the feels—the heartbreak, anxiety and isolation stemming from the virus; the anguish and anger at murder of George Floyd and the racism in our country; the exhaustion around the election season and never-ending news cycle. I grew accustomed to laughing one moment and being enraged the next. From March 16 onward, I worked from home. I logged hundreds of miles walking and running—a regular source of solace when I felt stressed. As the lockdown wore on, I found time for introspection. I sloughed off old habits for new ones and learned a few things about myself, some of which surprised me and others that had simply been forgotten or buried in the busy business of living life.

Surprisingly, two of my loves—writing and reading—ghosted me in 2020 like never before. One would think a lockdown would be the perfect time to finish my novel but any time I approached my project, my mind froze up. Many other writers, I discovered, had acquired the same affliction; except for journalists who were forced to manage through a historic (and hysteric) news cycle. I couldn't bring myself to craft a fictional story or world when reality was already so nightmarish. Reading fiction also became nearly non-existent. I'd start a book and find myself unable to finish it. There was too much news to absorb, too many earth-shattering events rocking our worlds.

Around July, I pulled out one of my journals and found some old notes for an idea I had for a children's book. For some inexplicable reason, writing for kids seemed do-able. Maybe it was the whimsy, maybe it was the feeling of freedom from anything connected to the present day. I wrote the first draft by hand, typed it into my laptop, edited it, and gave it to Dave to read. My mom read an early draft, too. I revised it in a matter of weeks and began querying agents. I'll continue to do so in 2021, although I'm floored at how competitive the market is for young reader chapter books. If the story never gets published, I'll be just fine. The story will always symbolize my gateway out of my personal writer lockdown.

For many of us, 2020 was a mix of suffering, loss and hope and redemption. Those themes cropped up frequently in my slim reading life. One of my picks, *How to Stay Human in a Fu\*ked Up World*, had this to say: "It's possible to pay attention and care about the suffering in the world without letting it poison us. There is a quality of mind we can develop that allows us to stay present with suffering without losing touch with the joy of being alive. We can accept that pain is an inevitable part of life without letting that make us callous or uncaring. Instead, we can respond with radical acceptance and a willingness to do whatever we can to alleviate suffering. ... When Thich Nhat Hanh uses the word mindfulness, he's describing a way of relating to the world (and specifically to suffering) that contains compassion, joy, equanimity and wisdom. It is precisely that quality that allows us to stay human in fu\*ked-up situations—to stay open, caring, and able to relate. ... Regardless of what you want to call it, the ability

to stay human in the face of intense suffering is something that's in short supply in our world. It's also something that we desperately need."

Does that sound like 2020 to you? I'm sure you can call up many examples of how you and others stayed human in the face of intense suffering, whether it was watching people sing from their windows in Italy, having a healthcare worker facing the virus every hour of their workday or getting a loaf of sourdough bread from a friend.

Just like many of us experienced during our lockdowns, quarantines and upended routines, the struggle was real for the characters in my top 10 books. They struggled with their identity, grief, infidelity, change, loneliness, family dysfunction. The very stuff of life. Many not only persevered but came out stronger—found hope and redemption in relationships or within themselves. Lessons were learned, secrets were revealed and many of those who populated these books lived happily ever after or, at the very least, lived with greater understanding and acceptance.

Admittedly, this year's top 10 is thinner than previous years. I'm still hopeful that you'll find something to add to your nightstand. And because it was slim pickings on my nightstand this year, I've added some other recommendations that I crowd-sourced from friends on Facebook. On that note, please let me know what you're reading because I have a lot of catching up to do. If your recommendation makes it onto my Top 10 next year, you'll get full credit.

The good news is, I'm reading and writing again. In fact, as I type this, I'm reading *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart. It was the surprise winner of the Booker Prize in 2020 and I'm hooked. The stack of books on my nightstand and my holds at the library can already attest to 2021 being a better and brighter year of reading.

With that, I'll simply say I love you all, and I'm grateful you're reading this. I wish you health, happiness and a joy-filled 2021.

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.

## Amy's Top 10 Books of 2020

### 1. *Monogamy* by Sue Miller

If you haven't read anything by Sue Miller, you should. This is the fourth or fifth time she's appeared on my list, and she's top-notch when it comes to delving into the psyche and relationships of her characters. Here you'll meet Graham, Annie and Frieda. It's a bizarre love triangle to be sure. Graham and Annie are married. Annie is friends with Frieda, Graham's first wife who still loves him and occasionally feels regret over leaving him. It's no spoiler that Graham dies—it's right there on the book jacket. Annie is forced to rediscover herself and, in the process, she discovers plenty about Graham that makes her question their relationship and, subsequently, herself. The novel centers around relationships and the secrets the characters keep, whether it's to protect their loved ones or themselves. It reminded me of a Rumi quote: the cure for pain is in the pain. Miller doesn't let her characters off the hook. She immerses them in complicated situations, forces them to confront the choices they've made and, as another saying goes, walk through the fire. Through it all, there's a great sense of love and friendship that feels utterly believable and real. As with any of Miller's novels, you'll find yourself thinking about the characters long after you read the final chapter. I marked many a passage for its wisdom and insight into human nature and the sometimes rocky and inexplicable landscape of love. For those who like a tidy ending that wraps everything up nicely, you'll find that here as well. Word of warning, there is a wee bit sex and some rough language in between these covers.

### 2. *Lily and the Octopus* by Steven Rowley

Good heavens, this book was a heartbreak on every page but I adored the quirky, magical realism. Lily is the beloved 12-year-old dachshund of Ted, a single man whose had loving relationships with humans in the past but we learn immediately that Lily is his lifeline. Lily talks to Ted in all-caps. Normally, I would find a device like this annoying but I loved it; probably because I'm convinced a couple of the Purcell Aussies—Alice and Annie, to be specific—are also all-cap conversationalists. Unfortunately, Lily has an "octopus" on her head. It won't take you long to realize what this dreadful octopus is and that Ted is terrified of losing her. Ted and Lily's adventures take a magical turn as they battle the dreaded octopus. It took me almost two months to read this, not because it's a doorstep kind of epic but because I couldn't get through a page without tearing up over how much I love the dogs in my life. Rowley's novel is based on one of his favorite dogs in real life. Those of us who have pets know that, no matter how much you love them all, there's still one that stands out as the Greatest of All Time (GOAT). As a fellow writer and animal lover, it's clear to me that Rowley wrote his way through his grief of losing his GOAT to bring us this charming, heartfelt saga. Don't be afraid to read this. Don't be afraid to have a good cry over the animals you've loved in your life. There's humor and a lot of humane-ness in these pages. YOU! MUST! READ! THIS! BOOK! (said as Lily would say it.)

### 3. *The Glass Hotel*, Emily St. John Mandel

Mandel's *Station Eleven* was my No. 1 pick in 2015 and I've been waiting for her follow-up ever since. While I didn't go as ga-ga over *The Glass Hotel* as I did *Station Eleven*, I still book-bullied several friends into reading it. I'm a fan of novels with multiple points of view and a somewhat Shakespearean structure where the characters' lives intersect in unexpected ways. There's a lot in here about chance, choice, regrets, betrayal and the consequences of one's decisions in this narrative. If you'd made another choice in your life, where would that path have led you? (See my No. 10 pick for more on this theme.) What would your life be like if you hadn't been at a specific place at a specific time? How would your life be different? The characters who converge at the remote Hotel Calette find themselves searching for answers to those questions. The pivotal moment occurs when someone scrawls some threatening graffiti on a window in the hotel. Vincent is a bartender at the hotel where she meets Jonathan Alkaitis,

the leader of the Ponzi scheme. Alkaitis doesn't see it but Leon Prevant (who was a character in *Station Eleven*) does. Thus begins the Vincent's new life posing as Alkaitis's wife. The story weaves through time and locations far from the hotel, and gives us glimpse into the secret lives of the characters and the ways they're hiding their true identities. The chapters from Alkaitis's point of view where he's imagining his "counterlife" are brilliant. You'll find yourself wondering about your own counterlife had you made other choices or taken different paths. The characters aren't necessarily people you'll root for or love. They're kind of unlikeable or, at the very least, the decisions they make are questionable. Mandel doesn't hit you over the head with "people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones" proverb but it's certainly within the layered narrative. It was great to see that Barak Obama included it in his top 10 for the year, too. He has such good taste in books. 🤔

#### **4. *We Love Anderson Cooper* by R.L. Maizes**

Full disclosure: R.L. is a writing friend of mine whom I met at the Sewanee Writers Workshop a few years ago but that's not why I'm including it. I'm including it in my top 10 because it deserves to be on the list and you deserve to give yourself the gift of reading it. Same goes for her new novel, *Other People's Pets*. The book group I'm a member of was treated to a special Zoom call with Maizes where we laughed, learned and received insight into several of the stories in the collection. Maizes writes with a dry wit and a big heart. Her characters feel like good friends or people you want to be friends with. From a boy who decides to come out at his bar mitzvah to the man who become jealous of his girlfriend's cat to the grieving mother and daughter with the pet parakeet, Maizes mines some of our darker emotions with a great sense of humor and compassion for her characters. Themes of jealousy and guilt filter through this collection, so we asked her about them. She acknowledged that readers will explore these emotions and more but explained that she saw the characters in the collection as outsiders and what it feels like to be on the outside of social norms or relationships. You'll fly through the stories and will hope for more—which you can find in her new novel. Your favorite book bully (me) is strongly suggesting you check both of them out.

#### **5. *Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka**

This was the first book I read at the onset of the pandemic; you know, that foolish period when we thought the threat of the virus would pass quickly. Told from the collective "we," this slim novel follows the lives of a group of Japanese women who are brought to San Francisco as "picture wives." Otsuka's style is minimalist but that word belies the richness in the narrative. She delves into the character's lives as they travel by ship to the U.S., meet their husbands and assimilate into their American lives. As you can imagine, many of the women realize that their husbands aren't the kind of men they'd dreamed of marrying. The story begins in the early 1900s and moves through World War II. It's rare to find a novel written from the first-person plural point of view that works but, after reading this, it feels like the only choice that makes sense for this kind of tale. If you're looking for a quick read with a little bit of history plus an insightful perspective on the Japanese American experience of women of this era, you'll find this captivating.

#### **6. *Separation Anxiety* by Laura Zigman**

Hilarious. Absurd. Zany. Warm. This is the novel on my list that gave me the most laughs. Recommended by R.L. Maizes during our book group Zoom call, I went right out and reserved it at the library. Judy, a middle-aged woman who is semi-separated from her husband and whose teenage son is suddenly ignoring her, begins to wear her dog in a baby sling. Her career as a once-successful children's book author is on the decline along with the rest of her life. She misses how her son once loved her. She sort of misses how her husband once loved her too, despite how they work each other's nerves. Her best friend is terminally ill. It seems the only thing that brings her comfort is her dog. Facing money woes as

well, Jane and her husband agree to host two People Puppets (humans in animal costumes) to help pay for their son's school tuition. Hilarity ensues, along with some tough times for Jane and family. You'll definitely need to suspend reality as you read about this quirky crew. You'll also find yourself rooting for these underdogs, although there may also be times where you'll wish Jane would just get out of her own way and work out her problems. Zigman's sense of humor drives the narrative and I found myself turning the pages just to find out whether or not these lovable-loser types were going to prevail.

### **7. *How to Stay Human in a Fu\*ked Up World: Mindfulness Practices for Real Life* by Tim Desmond**

Some may see the title and immediately think this is a self-help book but it's more about spirituality. Desmond is a Buddhist philosopher who studied with Zen master Thich Nhat Hahn. His advice on mindfulness is real, practical and grounded in the fact that we can't ignore the suffering in our world, nor do we need to in order to be happy. He also admits that he's imperfect, has screwed up in his life, and is still a work in progress. It's a refreshing perspective. Desmond encourages radical acceptance of suffering instead of fighting it because fighting or ignoring it makes it worse. Easier said than done, obviously, but Desmond offers practical advice on how to pay more attention to what your body is telling you instead of getting carried away by your emotions. In these troubled times we're living in, Desmond's perspective strikes a timely and important chord for not only persevering but also thriving.

### **8. *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You* by Robert Leahy**

How's that for a title that encapsulates 2020? I've always been a worrier. I used to blame it on my overactive imagination but it comes from plenty of other aspects of my personality. A friend who wants to remain nameless recommended this book. It only took me a few pages to recognize some of my worrying habits. The book gives practical ways to identify productive and unproductive worry, stop the behaviors that spiral into worry and embrace uncertainty instead of searching for the perfect solution. A month after reading this, I started writing again. Proof positive that Leahy's methods work. If you worry that you're a worrier, worry no more and read this book.

### **9. *The Dutch House* by Ann Patchett**

Remember in the "before times" when we went to book readings and saw authors speak in person? Me too. The last author I saw speak before the pandemic was Ann Patchett at The Mercantile Library. It was a lovely, inspiring evening. I've read everything Patchett has written and, while this wasn't one of my favorites of hers, it's still list-worthy. With Mandel, we have a hotel that's central to the story. With Patchett, it's the childhood home of Maeve and Danny Conroy. Prior to the Conroys, the house was owned by the VanHoebeeks. The Conroys keep the old portraits of the VanHoebeeks up and the former family doesn't necessarily haunt the house but definitely casts their shadow on the Conroys. The children's mother disappears and their father eventually marries Andrea. It's a classic evil stepmother situation. We follow Danny and Maeve through their lives, and it appears neither of them can shake the cobwebs of the Dutch House from their memories. After their father's death, Andrea throws them out of the house. They grow up and continue to return to the Dutch House in an attempt to sort out their present-day lives. The story goes deeper into the characters than I'm revealing here yet I was still left wanting something more from the story. Not more conflict or melodrama necessarily but maybe a little less of the claustrophobic feeling I got from the house and the family itself. Perhaps that was one of the feelings Patchett wanted to evoke. She has said often that she's been writing the same book all her life: "that you're in one family, and all of a sudden, you're in another family and it's not your choice and you can't get out."

## **10. *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig**

This title kept turning up while scanning book reviews so I decided to check it out at the end of the year. It's the last book I finished in 2020 and, somehow, it seems an appropriate end to such a strange year where, at some point, we all wished for a do-over. Nora, the main character who's down on her luck and her life, gets several shots at do-overs. When she attempts to take her own life, she enters a strange, in-between world complete with a library and a librarian from her childhood. Here, Nora gets to review her regrets and essentially "try on" the other lives she could have lived had she made different decisions. As the librarian Mrs. Elm tells her, "every life contains millions of decisions." Nora takes several portals to the people and places she once loved, left or disappointed. It's a game of "what if" and, as Mrs. Elm explains, since Nora is in limbo, it's possible she can make a decision that will take her back to her life and possibly set her on a different path than she had been; that is, if she decides she wants to live. Nora ends up meeting other "sliders" – people who can also access other lives because they're in the same situation she is. While it's an interesting premise and the story holds some humor and charm, the portal-hopping ended up falling flat about midway through the novel. I wanted Nora to make a choice sooner than she did and, when that choice was made, I'm not sure it held quite the power Haig wanted it to. Still, if you enjoy a little fantasy and magic realism in your reading or are looking for a funky, somewhat soft read, this may be for you.

### **Recommendations by book-loving friends (alphabetized by author name, of course)**

*The Vanishing Half*, Britt Bennet

*The Water Dancer*, Ta-Nehisi Coates

*Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Caroline Criado-Perez

*American Dirt*, Jeanine Cummins

*The Night Watchman*, Louise Erdrich

*Girl, Woman, Other*, Bernardine Evaristo

*Stay and Fight*, Madeline Ffitch

*The Goodbye-Love Generation: A Novel in Stories*, Kori Frazier Morgan

*Book of Delights*, Ross Gay

*Tigerland*, Wil Haygood

*Beach Read*, Emily Henry

*Magic Lessons*, Alice Hoffman

*The World That We Knew*, Alice Hoffman

*The City We Became*, N.K. Jemisin

*Writers and Lovers*, Lily King

*Arguing with Zombies*, Paul Krugman

*The Splendid and the Vile*, Erik Larson

*Luster*, Raven Leilani

*The Mirror and the Light*, Hilary Mantel

*The Pieces We Keep*, Kristina McMorris

*Sweet Taste of Liberty*, Caleb McDaniel

*Circe*, Madeline Miller

*The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller

*The Children's Bible*, Lydia Millet

*The Giver of Stars*, Jojo Moyes

*Tokyo Ueno Station*, Yu Miri

*Hamnet*, Maggie O'Farrell

*A Promised Land*, Barack Obama

*Weather*, Jenny Offill

*Small Great Things*, Jodi Picoult  
*The Dog Man* series, Dav Pilkey  
*A Woman of No Importance*, Sonia Purnell  
*The Gown*, Jennifer Robson  
*My Dark Vanessa*, Kate Elizabeth Russell  
*The Prettiest Star*, Carter Sickels  
*Perestroika in Paris*, Jane Smiley  
*Lager Queen of Minnesota*, J. Ryan Stradal  
*The Cold Millions*, Jess Walter  
*The Nickel Boys*, Colson Whitehead  
*Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson  
*Nothing to See Here*, Kevin Wilson  
*Natural Born Daddy*, Sherryl Wood  
*Rage*, Bob Woodward