

Amy's Top 10 Books of 2011

Wowzers. My Top 10 List turns 12 this year. Does this mean my list is going to get all adolescent and moody and “god you’re- such a dork, mom” on me? Will I have to take away its texting and Facebook privileges for not following the rules?

You remember being 12, don’t you? The dreaded in-between year when you were not yet an unruly, rebellious teenager, but also no longer a sweet little child who could be placated with a lollipop and stuffed bear. Twelve put you squarely in the Awkward State, the same state populated by many of my favorite characters this year. But more on that theme in a bit.

Last year, someone new to my book list tradition asked me why I created a list when there were so many Top 10 Book Lists and Best Of’s available from reputable places like *The New York Times*, *Salon*, The American Library Association, *The Guardian*, etc and so on. Certainly I’ve never considered myself to be among the erudite and astute tastemakers of the literary world. I started this venture as a matter of convenience. Throughout the year, friends and family ask me for a good read and I rattle off a few titles I think they’ll like. Mainly, I like turning people on to authors they’ve never read or getting people to read outside of their comfort zone. Sometimes I hit the mark, other times I get an email or a phone call notifying me that my taste in books is...um...weird. Anyhow, the more I read and recommended, the more people asked, and so on and so on, and thus the annual list.

Here’s the skinny for the newbies: I send the list; then you forward it on to other book lovers you know. The fun part for me is discovering where the list travels. Two years ago, I was a friend of a friend of a friend’s relative law away from making it into the hands of the fabulous Martin Sheen. It was a highlight in my listmaking career. I don’t care what the cliché is about almost not counting except in horseshoes and hand grenades. That kind of almost is good enough for me. Other years, the list has traveled to bibliophiles in Thailand and India and Ireland (Hi Ann!) and Oregon, which, according to my mother whose youngest child lives in Portland, “is on another continent.” In this case, I’ll accept that false geographical assessment.

And here are the rules, loosely applied:

- The books I recommend do not have to be published in the list’s given year. Why limit yourself to one year when there are so many great books that deserve your attention?
- The first few pages of this document summarize my year as well as the overarching theme(s) in the books I’ve selected. You can bypass the personal stuff and get right to the selections if you choose.
- Forward Ho! (Or is that land ho? I’m writing this on a Royal Caribbean cruise ship, so please excuse my pirate-like banter.) Forward this list to anyone you know that I don’t know who likes to read and might enjoy it. Apparently there’s a spectacular book group in Columbus, OH awaiting this list as I type (thanks Cindy!!)
- I track where my list travels. Let me know if you’re reading this in Malaysia or Galway or Buford Wyoming, population of 1. Since I’m writing this as we cross into the Bahamas, I’m going to say my list made it to Nassau. Oh, and if you’re going to Galway, please consider taking me with you. I promise to pack light.
- Let me know what you’re reading – I get a lot of recommendations throughout the year and many of them make it on the list. You’ll get full credit for the reco.

Happy reading!

2011 In Summary

This was a moving-the-chains-down-the-field kind of year. Football fans – especially those who listen to Dave Lapham announcing the Cincinnati Bengals games – will understand the reference. For those who don't, it pretty much means the year was filled with hard work and strategic plays that slowly moved Dave and I closer to some of our professional and personal goals.

Dave continued his arduous (that's my word for it) march toward tenure. Most mornings and evenings before and after teaching, you could find him stationed at the computer working on research. Research and the publish-or-perish game is still very much the other side of the tenure-track coin that many people don't know about. When Dave wasn't focused on research, he was focused on what he loves most: teaching his students. His student evaluations are jaw-droppingly good and many students tell him he's the best teacher they've ever had at Kent State. He's made sociology majors out of many students and he's exposed them to new ways of viewing society. They appreciate his openness, his sense of humor, and his passion for his subject. I always knew he'd be great, and he is. Dave also has a new band together called Prospect + Pioneer (we live on the corner of these two streets). They've played a few gigs and are working on a new record which should be out in Spring 2012. Pike 27 fans will like the new sound as well as the new songs!

Meanwhile, I completed my first full year as a part-time graduate student in the Northeast Ohio Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program (NEOMFA). That's a super fancy way of saying I learned a lot, wrote a lot, and met some amazing writers in the process. While it's tough to balance my corporate job and school, I am so glad I made the decision to pursue my MFA. Writing remains my first love and being able to pursue the literary side of it makes the corporate writing a little more palatable.

I published one short story this year, written for one of my classes. The magazine asked for a photo along with my bio so my fabulous photographer friend Erin Powell assisted. Somehow, the shot of me lying on railroad tracks became the centerfold of the magazine so I can now say that I posed as a centerfold model ha ha ha. Over the summer, I attended the Imagination Conference in Cleveland, OH where I workshopped a couple of novel chapters with Anthony Doerr. You'll see one of his short story collections on my list, along with a novel by James Hynes who was also at the conference. I had the opportunity to lunch with Doerr one afternoon and he uncovered my biggest weakness within minutes of our conversation.

"You have to learn to protect your time," he said. "Or you won't finish that novel."

True. And true.

One of my resolutions for 2012 is to follow Doerr's advice and protect my time. Hopefully it will go slightly better than my protecting my ankle in 2011. As is our tradition, Dave and I spent most of March watching college basketball. We got the bright idea to shoot baskets one afternoon at the gym. So me and my running shoes hit the court. I did my best Lucille Ball imitations and even made a couple of baskets before I went up for what I believed to be a dramatic layup which instead laid me out on the hardwood with a grade two ankle sprain. And it just so happened to be six weeks before I was supposed to run back-to-back half-marathons in Cincinnati and Cleveland. I ran both, allowing myself a slow and ungraceful pace. An ankle brace that looked like a wrestling boot gave me the support I needed. Thus, I gave myself wrestler names like Boom Boom Purcell and the Kent Crusher. If nothing else, it made the miles more humorous.

Our summer vacation was cut short due to the aforementioned chain moving but we enjoyed every minute of our Canadian camping trip in Pinery Provincial Park whereupon Dave read Michael Griffith's *Trophy* that appears on this list. (Full disclosure: Michael is a professor at the University of Cincinnati and a

friend of Dave's but that's not the reason I picked the book. I picked it because it deserved picking and it definitely deserves to be on your nightstand.) While Dave was laughing out loud, I was reading a truly awful book called *Catching Heaven* that does not appear on this list.

We finished the trip in lovely Toronto, and pretty much decided that we could live in Canada. Just like we decided we could live in Pittsburgh when we were there for the Elvis Costello and Black Dub shows, and then again for the U2 concert with friends Sean, Jessica, Scott, and Terry. And just like we decided we could live in New Orleans when we spent time there with friends Neal and Colleen. (Colleen, by the way, is an avid reader whose recommendations have appeared on past lists.)

In a year when Dave and I talked a great deal about sense of place and community, and where that place and community may be for us in the future, it should come as no surprise that many of the books I read featured characters who were wandering in some way. In the case of *The Unnamed* by Joshua Ferris, there is a character who is unable to stop himself from walking. In Joyce Carol Oates, *A Widow's Story*, we witness the author's psychological wanderings as she grieves over her husband's death. In *The Brief History of the Dead* Kevin Brockmeier's characters wander between this world and the world after.

The good news is, all of these wandering journeys were well worth the hours I parked my butt on the sofa and did nothing but read. Sometimes the best way to travel is by book. You explore different places and landscapes without the hassle of getting a full-body scan at security or paying a baggage fee.

The other theme that emerged among my favorite reads is probably more about my tastes in literature and in life than anything else. If you've been following my list for more than a couple of years, you know that I have a literary (and real life) soft spot for underdogs and lovable losers. I remain steadfast in my belief that the good guys and gals will finish first; after, of course, some pain, suffering, and heartache. I have always rooted for the underdog and there have been plenty of times when the underdog goes home with its tail between its legs, but that doesn't stop me from hoping for the best. You'll find remarkably lovable losers in most of my selections this year.

You'll also find characters grappling with their identity – something I've been thinking about a great deal these days as I strike the balance between my corporate identity and my writerly side. Like me, many of the characters I encountered are asking who they are, what it means to be who they are, and how they can maintain their unique identity in a world that increasingly prefers conformity and neat categorization.

All told, you're sure to find characters who feel like real people, perhaps even your neighbors or your friends. And I'm sure you'll find at least one or two lovable characters among the pages recommended here.

Here's hoping that the chains move in the right direction for you in 2012, and that you discover something inspiring and interesting in all of your literary wanderings.

Amy

1. *The Brief History of the Dead*, Kevin Brockmeier

Another full disclosure: I have a crush on Kevin Brockmeier. Not the doe-eyed, 12-year-old-girl kind. This is more of a “please let me write like him when I grow up” sort of thing. Last year, his novel, *The Truth About Celia*, made my list. Then I read his short story collection, *Things That Fall From The Sky*, and re-read one story in particular, “The Ceiling,” several times. Then I picked up *Brief History*, finished it in two days, and promptly handed it to Dave and told him to read it when he needed a break from academia.

Brief History is based on the African folk legend that maintains there’s a world in between life and death. It’s the home of the afterlife *before* the afterlife truly begins. A person is suspended in this in-between world until there is no one left on Earth to remember them. In short, a person truly dies when all memories of that person die. It’s an interesting concept and an interesting premise for a story.

In Brockmeier’s take on this legend, the world has been decimated by a virus and only Laura Byrd, who is on assignment in Antarctica remains alive. We gradually discover that those in the afterworld city have some connection to Laura. Only we as readers know that Laura remembers them; it isn’t until midway through the book that the people in the afterworld begin to suspect that they “would remain there only so long as they endured in living memory.”

The narrative moves between the frozen tundra where Laura is stranded, and the afterworld where people enjoy a fairly comfortable life that resembles what they’d left behind. While Laura struggles to survive alone in the brutal conditions of the arctic and sets out on an adventure worthy of Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton and George Mallory, we learn more about life in the afterworld and the cause of the virus (great political commentary about corporate greed in this thread) that has decimated the planet.

Brockmeier’s ability to infuse hope and the will to survive under insurmountable circumstances is one of the many reasons you keep reading. His writing is beautiful yet simplistic, and unlike some other literary fiction, Brockmeier doesn’t attempt to dazzle us with precious literary brilliance. He lets the story unfold gracefully and quietly with touches of the fantastical that give the story its magical, entrancing quality. Please oh please read this book. It’s short so if you don’t like it, it won’t eat up much of your time.

2. *The Unnamed*, Joshua Ferris

Tim Farnsworth can’t stop walking and nobody knows why. He’s been to doctors, he’s shackled himself to his bed when the urge to walk becomes too great, and still no one knows what’s wrong with him. As the story opens, Tim’s strange affliction has returned suddenly after a brief reprieve and his walking is now threatening to ruin his marriage and his life. Tim ends up walking out on his marriage and his daughter but not in the usual way people walk out of relationships. He literally can’t help himself from walking away. As he wanders about with his “unnamed” condition, we move in and out of his wife’s point of view and her side of the story as well.

At first, you think that maybe the walking is a physical manifestation of a psychological condition. But as the story unfolds, Ferris lays out the deep connection between body and mind. For Tim, it’s not clear whether his body or the mind will win, and that’s the same mystery that keeps you reading. Tim goes careening down the rabbit hole of both mental and physical instability and it may be that only those readers who are interested in the link between the body and mind will truly appreciate Ferris’s unique sort of take on this topic.

But, but, but.

Despite the grim nature of the narrative, there's plenty of hope and love in this book, clearly evident in the relationship between Tim and his wife, Jane. At its core, this is a love story that is capable of both warming and breaking your heart.

3. *Erasure*, Percival Everett

The premise: Thelonius "Monk" Ellison, college professor and author of complex experimental fiction, returns to his childhood home in D.C. to care for his ailing mother. This sounds like a story that's been done six ways to Saturday but Everett makes it original by focusing on the racial and class divides that remain ever-present today and also by offering up a frame story (a story within a story).

Monk, a frustrated African American writer tired of being labeled as such, decides to write "My Pafology," (spelled incorrectly on purpose), an exploitive novel under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh. The novel is terrible and carries every stereotype imaginable about black America. Of course, this is precisely the type of marketable novel his editor is seeking. The novel takes Monk, under his Stagg R. Leigh pseudonym, from obscurity to ridiculous levels of popularity including film rights and a spot on the short list for the most prestigious book award in the country.

The story covers race, family, class, and the slimy side of the publishing industry, but you don't have to be a writer to dig that aspect of the book. There are enough family secrets revealed and enough tension elsewhere to keep the plot interesting. Thematically, the story also covers identity and false identities, and the struggle to maintain both in a society that tends to favor easy labels and categories over originality.

This is satire at its finest. Irony of ironies: because the literary world couldn't place a nice and tidy label on Everett's work – is it African American literature? Is it literature about African Americans? Is it both or neither? – the title went out of print.

Fortunately for me, Eric Brueggemann, a friend with incredible taste in books, had sent me a copy a couple of years back and recommended I read it. I'm glad I had the chance to. You can still find used copies. And I'll be more than happy to send you my copy if you're interested.

4. *Await Your Reply*, Dan Chaon

I heard Dan Chaon read from his forthcoming short story collection at the Imagination Conference. He lives in Cleveland, OH, and he has quite the following here in Northeast Ohio. However, he is getting more popular and that popularity is well-deserved. Like Everett's *Erasure*, Chaon chooses identity as one of his core themes. Here, the characters also show us how easy it can be for someone to slip in and out of identities that are not their own. We follow three story lines that eventually braid together in surprising ways at the end of the book. The fun and the mystery is in trying to solve those links before you reach the last page.

In the first chapter we meet Ryan, his severed hand sitting next to him in a Styrofoam cooler. You don't learn until much later how or why this happened but the opening is stunning enough that you're sure to continue reading. Ryan hooks up with Jay, an identity thief, who convinces Ryan that he's his real father. Ryan's true parents believe he's dead and Ryan reads about his own funeral online. It's here where identities become slippery, and Ryan sees both the advantages and disadvantages of disappearing from society as himself and reappearing as someone else entirely.

Then you have Miles, a lonely man in his 30s looking for his long-lost identical twin, Hayden. Miles wants to believe his brother was some sort of tortured genius but Chaon elegantly shows the reader that Hayden is a paranoid schizophrenic. Miles is never fully convinced that his brother is mentally unstable and Chaon handles this cognitive dissonance well.

Finally there's Lucy, an Ohio girl who runs away with her history teacher, George, in pursuit of a more exciting life. George makes promises that remain unfulfilled for Lucy and you sense that his character is up to no good from the get-go.

Like Ryan, Lucy is seeking a new identity as is George as is Hayden. I can't say much more than that without giving away how these threads tie together. You'll have to read for yourself and find out.

If you like a suspenseful read, you'll dig the mystery in this one. Chaon leaves his readers hanging until the last page but, like any good detective novel, wraps up all the loose ends. If you like to think about what identity means in a time when people can make their own avatars and craft their own personalities in an online world, you'll also enjoy this.

5. *Memory Wall*, Anthony Doerr

As evidenced in the title, memories are the thematic stuff of this short story collection. Each story moves between different places and different times in the characters' lives. Here, you'll travel to South Africa, Germany, China and several places in the U.S. but you'll always have the sense of where the characters feel most at home.

"Why," one character wonders, "do any of us believe our lives lead outward through time? How do we know we aren't continually traveling inward toward our centers?"

The longer stories in this collection will satisfy those who prefer novels over short stories. By far, my favorite is the title story, "Memory Wall." Set in the near future, an older woman struggles to maintain her fading memories through electric stimulation. She has a wall full of memory tapes that she views through a special contraption hot-wired to her brain. Doerr populates this South African town with memory thieves, people who steal others' memories to survive.

Sadly, it's a young black man named Luvo who begins stealing all of the important memories in her life. Luvo finds himself drawn to her memories of her husband and the work he did as a paleontologist. Luvo makes a huge discovery that sends the story on its way to an end that feels inevitable, if not tragic. In each story, the importance of memory and what it means to save or delete our memories rings loud. I love a good, extended metaphor and there's plenty of them in this collection. However, Doerr doesn't hit you over the head with the metaphoric anvil. They're clear yet delicately managed.

My second fave is "Afterworld," a story about an elderly epileptic woman whose seizures trigger memories and visions of her German childhood in a Jewish orphanage during the Nazi regime. While her epilepsy strikes fear in her family, she sees them as a gift that melds the past and present together. Very cool story.

When I workshopped with Doerr at Imagination, he talked a lot about clarity and ensuring that your readers know what you're talking about. He explained that obscurity and elusiveness is valuable when executed properly, but readers come to a book wanting to know things and it's up to the writer to make good on that contract with the reader. This collection is evidence that he practices what he preaches.

6. *A Widow's Story*, Joyce Carol Oates

You may want to stock up on some "I Love Lucy" or "Seinfeld" episodes before venturing into Oates' memoir about grief. Oates lost her husband, Raymond J. Smith, after 47 years of marriage. Smith didn't succumb to cancer or another long-suffering disease that allowed Oates to prepare, in some way, for his death. Rather, he caught pneumonia and died unexpectedly of a secondary infection while in the hospital.

Her sense of surprise and devastation appears on every page. This is raw, down to the bone writing. There were times I had to set the book aside because Oates' grief was too heavy. It also made me wonder about the women I know – including my mom and mother-in-law – who are widows. Was their grief this immense and painful? Did they share Oates' desperate thoughts?

I assume the book's short, choppy chapters mirror Oates' disjointed thoughts as she tried to pull her life back in order. The narrative rambles, like many of her works of fiction do, but I didn't mind it because I'm such a big fan of her work.

I had the opportunity to see Oates read from *A Widow's Story* at the Association of Writers and Publishers (AWP) Conference in Washington D.C. It was the first time she'd mustered up the courage to read from the pages, and her public reading was as sad and harrowing as my private reading of the book. She choked up on stage several times and even the men in the audience wiped their eyes as she read.

The book includes brief snippets of instruction to fellow widows at the end of some chapters. It seems these are Oates' attempt to create a community out of the women who have experienced something similar and to prepare those who will someday experience widowhood. Oates also lets her anger show as she ponders the ridiculous sympathy gifts she receives – huge fruit baskets that will turn rotten, plants that will never survive – and as friends convey tired and unhelpful platitudes.

It's an interesting look into the often overlooked anguish of widowhood, but it's certainly not a light or fun read. If you're a JCO fan like I am, you'll read it with the hope that it will reveal something about her interior life ... and it does here and there. If you've never read JCO, I wouldn't recommend this as the introduction to her canon.

7. *Permanent Visitors*, Kevin Moffett

I read a Kevin Moffett story, "Further Interpretations of Real-Life Events," for one of my classes and promptly sought out more of his work. He's a master at making characters feel real and he also seems to be a fan of the underdog.

One reviewer captured the tone of the collection better than I can: "In "Tattooizm," a young woman spends her summer stupefied by sex, chasing a shiny future that seems destined to tarnish the moment she apprehends it. Charlie, the oddly lovable narrator of "The Medicine Man," searches for cures in all the wrong places. Elsewhere in the collection, a strange and vulnerable courtship is sparked in a manatee pool among retirees; the owner of a plant nursery mourns the food-poisoning death of an employee; the relationship between a dying man and the volunteer sent to befriend him goes from benevolent to peculiar to treacherous. If all this makes the book sound like a despair-sodden downer, well, to a certain extent, it is. But Moffett's excellently appointed sentences and the element of soft-core satire that runs through the work lift these tales gently out of doomland and into a much more absurd, emotionally diverse, and authentic realm than any swift synopses might suggest."

Moffett fits the bill when it comes to combining comedy with tragedy, my favorite kind of writing. And he also draws weird people well, without making them seem outlandish or unreal.

In one of the stories, Moffett's character states: "Why does everything have to be so hostile and funny?" That's a good way to sum up the feeling of the collection.

8. *Next*, James Hynes

I wasn't sure where this book was going for the first several chapters but I'm glad I stayed with it. Kevin Quinn is on an airplane heading to Austin, TX and he envisions his plane being gunned down. Some of his paranoia comes from news reports of terrorist attacks but a lot of it also comes from the anxiety he

feels about the trajectory of his own life at the age of 50. He's going to Austin for a job interview and we end up following him through a single day that takes one surprising turn after the other. There's an eerie quality to the story but you're not sure where it's coming from until the final few chapters.

As Kevin deboards the plane, he follows a young woman through the city. He's attracted to her but he can't really say why, especially since he's in a stable relationship with a younger woman back in his hometown of Michigan. As the day unfolds, Kevin muses over his relationship and his life course. There are some good rants throughout this portion of the book and some hilarious scenes whereupon Kevin is trying to hide from the woman he's following.

Eventually, after several mishaps and misadventures, we get to the interview and then to the surprising end which I won't reveal here. Suffice it to say, Kevin is one of those lovable losers and his story, by the end, will capture your heart and mind for a good long time.

9. *Trophy*, Michael Griffith

Speaking of lovable losers, here's another: Vada Prickett. Poor Vada. He's on the precipice of 30, and his life is about to end when we meet him. Vada helped his friend Wyatt – the man married to Darla, the love of Vada's life – move a giant stuffed grizzly bear and now Vada is pinned underneath the bear, crushing the life right out of him. What follows are his dying thoughts. It's a life flashing before the eyes sort of narrative but there's more fun and word play and philosophy in Vada's thoughts which make it a far more interesting flash than some other novels that follow end-of-life threads.

Vada hasn't had the best of luck on his patch of this mortal coil. He battles with lawnmowers (hilarious chapter), battles with his job as a Hose Associate at the carwash (come on, how can you not love that job title?), battles through an emergency tracheotomy on his mother using a ballpoint pen (my favorite scene for its heartfelt hilarity) and constantly battles with his identity (still funny but one of the more serious veins in the book).

Vada is a bungler, missing or musing up opportunities that could've taken his life in a different direction. In contrast, his friend Wyatt appears to have it all, including Darla whom Vada loves. If you've ever had a friend who appears successful and pulled together in every way while your life appears to be falling to bits, you'll enjoy the Vada versus Wyatt theme. And, of course, you'll be rooting for Vada all the while. This is a fun and funny romp for those who love word play, satire, and dark humor.

10. *Room*, Emma Donoghue

Creepy, gripping, bizarre, and heartfelt all at once, Emma Donoghue draws you into this story of captivity and doesn't let go until the end. Five-year-old Jack is the narrator. He and his mother are imprisoned in Room where Jack sleeps in Wardrobe and fears Old Nick, their captor, who comes each night after 9 p.m. Jack's mother has been in Room for seven years, captured when she was 19 and in college. Jack was born the second year of her imprisonment. Ma accommodates her rapist (Old Nick) in exchange for supplies that keep her and Jack alive. In between visits from Old Nick, Ma also keeps Jack entertained with stories and songs, fueling his imagination and trying to teach him things about the outside world along the way.

When Jack turns five, his mother begins to plan their escape. Staying in a believable five-year-old point of view (POV) is as constricting for the author as the Room is for her characters. The author frees the pair midway through the book – I'm giving nothing away here – but the question remains whether Room was a safer place than Outside for Jack. It's not easy to pull off this young POV so convincingly and I respect Donoghue for being able to do so. I'd put this in the read-on-a-long-flight category. It may also make for good book group conversation.

Classic Pick for the Year: *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood

In this dystopic Republic of Gilead, women are wives, breeders, and servants, and no woman wants any of these roles in this world policed and ruled by men. Women are divided into classes and each class wears a separate color. Offred, the narrator and a handmaid (breeder) wears red. Wives wear blue. Servants wear stripes (like prisoners). Aunts wear brown. Each handmaid takes the first name of the man running the household.

We follow “Offred” as she plays the role of a handmaid and longs for her husband and daughter from “the time before” the gender and societal rules changed her life. Offred remembers her life before Gilead, and these provide a stark contrast to the bizarre and isolating conditions of her new life in which she essentially gives up ownership of her body and her identity. Fred, her commander, cheats a bit by asking her to come to his room to look at fashion magazines (women are forbidden to read in this world), play Scrabble (games and books are forbidden, too), and attend a secret Las Vegas style nightclub that was prevalent in “the time before.”

As in most oppressive societies, there’s an underground faction attempting to bring freedom back to the women. This faction brings a shining ray of hope into an otherwise bleak setting. The story may challenge or prove your political leanings. Either way, it’s a cautionary tale about letting extremism (of any form) rule. After reading, I went back to see what the book reviews were like in 1986 when this was first published. Here’s what I found:

“We are warned, by seeing our present selves in a distorting mirror, of what we may be turning into if current trends are allowed to continue.”

“Our own country will be ruled by right-wingers and religious fundamentalists, with males restored to the traditional role of warriors and us females to our ‘place’ - which, however, will have undergone subdivision into separate sectors, of wives, breeders, servants and so forth, each clothed in the appropriate uniform.”

“Despite the novel's projections from current events, Margaret Atwood resists calling her book a warning. ‘I do not have a political agenda of that kind. The book won't tell you who to vote for,’ she said. But she advises, ‘Anyone who wants power will try to manipulate you by appealing to your desires and fears, and sometimes your best instincts. Women have to be a little cautious about that kind of appeal to them. What are we being asked to give up?’

And that’s still an important question to ask in 2012.