

Amy's Top 10 for 2010

This is the 11th year for my not-so-world-famous-but-who-needs-world-fame-anyway Top 10 Book List. Most of you know the drill but if this is the first year I've included you in this tradition, here's the schpeel: every year, I read a bunch of books and let friends, family, and friends of friends of the mail carrier in Rhode Island or the friend of the friend who lives in India know which books I think deserve worldwide recognition. I might not need world fame but I think people who write good books do so I do my tiny part to spread the good words others take the time to write for our literary pleasure.

Case in point: last year, my list nearly made it to Martin Sheen. Okay, this might be a slight exaggeration in honor of stretching truth into fiction. Here's the truth part: my list did go to a friend of a friend a friend whose brother-in-law works for the Sheen brothers and knows Martin so, in my mind, that was only four degrees of separation from Martin Sheen. Here's the fiction part: in my imaginative little brain, I enjoyed the fantasy that Martin was sitting near the fireplace (because in my fantasy Martin reads by the firelight – I won't go into detail about what he's wearing) reading last year's list, and thinking "who is this book-loving woman from my home state and when can I meet her in person so we can discuss this list together?" A girl can dream.

While some of my rules have changed over the years (yes, I now include Oprah selections after denying her entry to my book list just like Franzen denied her *The Corrections*), several original rules still hold:

- The books I recommend do not have to be published in that given year. There are zillions of good books in the world – why limit yourself to one year?
- 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.
- It's the age of social networking so feel free to be a good social butterfly and spread the word. That means you can 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. It's been sent to several countries so let me know if you're reading this in Bora Bora or Boring, Oregon (located in Clackamas County). And please for the love of all that is good in the world, if this happens to miraculously make it to the likes of Dave Grohl or the Edge or Johnny Depp, tell them to drop me a line. I might drop on the floor as I'm reading it but I'll pull myself together and promise not to drool all over my keyboard.
- 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!

2010 in Summary

As many of you know, the big news of 2010 was that I returned to school part-time and am now a Northeast Ohio Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing student, also known as a “NEOMuffer” which sounds like a new political party or like a good name for a rebellious roller derby team. I’m voting for roller derby. Returning to college after being out for 20 years is an awakening of sorts, not so much a rude one but an awakening that makes you realize just how much things can change in two decades. No more trekking to the library – everything is online! No more standing in the line at the bursar’s office – pay online! No more sitting outside professors’ offices waiting for office hours to begin – just send an email! No more doodling in your notebook – set up your laptop and surf the net!

But as much as things have changed, other aspects of school have remained the same. I still get mucho excited buying school supplies. I still do my homework and make notes in all of my books. I still get nervous about assignments and grades. And I still end up getting gushy about everything I read (hopefully no one will assign T.S. Eliot because that would break the Lovefest I’ve been experiencing). I have three classes under my belt and loved them all. Not only am I learning, I’m being introduced to some authors I’ve never encountered before – a few who made the list this year. In February, I’ll attend the Association of Writers and Publishers conference whereupon I will get to see some of my literary heroes and heroines speak. I almost wept when I looked at the list of authors in attendance. I feel incredibly fortunate to be at this juncture and not a day goes by that I don’t thank my lucky stars for getting to this point in my life, and for being in a job that allows me the opportunity to work part-time and be in school the other part of my time.

The other big news is that Dave and I moved to Kent, OH this summer to be closer to the university. Akron wasn’t all that far away but the convenience of Kent was enticing. As was the ability to walk to more places and be in a tighter-knit community. Discovering the house we’re now living in also required a solid spoonful of serendipity, and it was too good to pass up. You know a place is right for you when the former owners (who are now our neighbors and friends) have a Grit cookbook sitting on their shelf.

Dave is making excellent strides as a professor and he’s helped many students think about the world in new ways and/or change their major to sociology after taking one of his classes. It’s inspiring to witness someone doing what they love every day. In the past, we’ve talked a lot about what it means to have a job versus having a career. Dave has found his career and it’s a perfect one for him at that. Music took a backseat in 2010 for Dave but he’s hoping to find some compadres to play with soon.

Like always, my experiences during the year mirrored the themes in many of the books I read. This year, I was reintroduced to fairy tales, folktales, and fantasy, thanks to Dr. Barzak’s class in Genre Bending and Blending. I’m not talking the unicorns and goblins kind of fantasy though. I’m talking about twisting the modern-day world in such a way that it’s possible to believe a young woman’s feet are turning to glass and another woman can taste emotions in food. As much as I love stories based on family turmoil or mystery or history, I really dig fiction that puts me on another plane entirely and asks me to suspend all disbelief. It reminded me how important it is to be an open reader and not pooh-pooh a book just because it’s categorized as sci-fi or fantasy or something I normally wouldn’t pick up. Ultimately, this opens up my writing as well and I found myself so jazzed by what I was reading that I was writing more. It also reminded me that there’s this fantastical spectrum of fiction that touches the inner child reader in me and sparks my imagination like other fiction can’t. It takes me back to reading the fairy tales in the Childcraft book that sat on the same shelf as the World Book Encyclopedia set in the

family room of my childhood home. Point is, it pays to cast a wide net when choosing what to read as opposed to sticking with the same thing. Variety is the spice of life and all of that.

This year, the theme of transformation also leaped off the page and around my life. The characters I encountered were moving in, over, around, and sometimes through a major transformation in their lives. Sometimes the transformation was physical, other times psychological, and still other times caused by forces outside of their control. But that's what characters do and that's why we love following them – they shift and change and we get to be a part of the process. As I mentioned above, there was the woman whose feet were turning to glass (a fantastical transformation that felt as Grimm and grim as all get out). There was the character whose daughter had disappeared and he transformed her in the stories he concocted as he moved through his grief. There was the aging punk rocker making the transition into the middle of his life and all that goes with that. And there were poems by Jane Hirshfield that explored transformation from a Western Buddhist's perspective.

Grief, hope, faith, acceptance, and courage accompanied most of these transformations, each character making a decision or choice that led to shedding emotional skin or baggage – sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. In *City of Thieves* one of the main characters states at a critical moment in his journey, "It's not the way I pictured it." There is regret in those words but also recognition that the choices we make come with risks and rewards, and sometimes we might mix up the two. In Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, we move through a series of transformations that bring the characters full circle, their paths zigging and zagging in comical and tragic Shakespearean ways.

One night late in the year, I watched a PBS special on great migrations in the animal kingdom. I'm a sucker for shows about animals (and many of you know my dream job would be working as a reporter for *National Geographic*) but this one in particular held my attention. We all know that monarch butterflies migrate from Mexico through the U.S. to Canada every year – 5,600 miles, 2.5 months each way. What I didn't know was that the migrators are three to four generations removed from those that made the journey the previous year. By the time the migration begins anew, a few generations of monarchs have already lived and died and it's the migrators' great grandchildren – called super monarchs – that make the return journey from Canada to Mexico. The super monarchs make the single journey that it took three generations of butterflies to complete in reverse. The butterflies risk death, injury, and much more on their trek but they do it anyway – much like our own journeys. We're uncertain sometimes what the outcome will be – will I graduate from school? will my novel get published? – but we continue moving and carrying on. Such is life, yes?

I hope the transformations you experienced in 2010 made you feel like a super monarch and resulted in greater happiness, greater health, and greater goodness for your soul. And I hope the transformations and fantastical happenings of 2011 will do the same. Onward to the list!

1. The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake, Aimee Bender

How can something as sunshine-y and birthday-y as lemon cake be sad? Aimee Bender shows us as we meet young Rose Edelstein who can taste emotions in the food people make for her, specifically her mother whose loneliness and unhappiness about her marriage leave a sour taste first in lemon cake and then in everything she makes. If you're already saying that this premise doesn't seem plausible, Bender's novel might not be your cup of chamomile. But I've been in the Aimee Bender fan club since her first short story collection and I enjoy a hearty dose of magic realism and fabulism in my fiction. Suspension of disbelief is necessary and it helps to remember that Bender writes in the fairy tale tradition, meaning that the overall landscape is simplistic, there's a "flatness" to the characters (i.e. Bender doesn't go to great lengths to describe them) and the reader has to accept what's presented as reality or else the whole premise will feel flimsy.

Like any delicious layer cake, there is more than one layer to this tale and that's why it's so delicious. Rose's relationship with her odd-genius brother Joe and her attempts to reach out to her distant father add depth and richness to the story. There's also Rose's burgeoning crush on Joe's friend George who plays a critical role later in the tale, and Rose's strained relationship with her father who seems wooden on the surface but ends up having his own hidden layers. The icing on this cake is whether Rose's discovery of her strange talent to taste emotions is a blessing or a curse. You'll have to read the book to find the answer.

And in my fantastical mind, I would like to think that Bender was influenced by one of the short stories of mine that she read several years ago. In my story, there's a nasty splinter that the character can't extract (it's her ex-husband, not a piece of wood). In Bender's story, the mother asks her son to pull splinters from her fingers nightly after she comes home from the woodworking shop. Obviously Bender was probably not influenced by my story at all but I'll keep tracking with that fantasy just in case the Martin Sheen thing never pans out.

2. The Truth About Celia, Kevin Brockmeier

This is a fantastically fantastic frame story (a story within a story). The main character is a science fiction writer named Christopher Brooks. His seven-year-old daughter Celia disappears while he's taking visitors through his home and his wife Janet is at work. Within this framework, the reader is treated to a set of seven stories that lead us through Brooks' grief (seven stories, seven stages of grief -- it's a possible theme). Brooks makes his living by creating imaginary worlds that he controls, worlds where he dictates the narrative and the outcomes. He uses his craft as an attempt to explain the inexplicable disappearance of Celia and, in the process, introduces us to imaginary worlds where Celia is safe and cared for. We move backward and forward in time as we see Celia in a strange otherworld and then as a young single mother. We all have our defense mechanisms and ways to deny the real "truth" and Brockmeier shows us a character doing just that in a very imaginative way.

This is first novel of Brockmeier's I've read and I fell in love with the lyrical quality of his prose. He asks readers to look underneath the stories that Brooks creates to see what else is going on with the characters. And because of the framework Brockmeier establishes for the narrative, it's one of those times where you feel like you get to peel back the curtain and see what's going on behind the scenes even as you're watching the action unfold on stage. **Great selection for book groups.**

3. The Night Watch, Sarah Waters

Things move away from the fantastical and turn to real history with my Number 3 pick. This book came highly recommended by my writing pal Pat, a tremendous woman I met through a Gotham Novel Writing Class (online). Thanks Pat! Set in England during World War II and the aftermath, the story unfolds through four characters, linked by their war experiences.

Interestingly, the story is told in reverse chronology so you move from 1947 to 1941 – it's a structure that demands your attention. If you're like me, you'll finish the book and be turning back to the beginning to make sure you've understood every juicy detail Waters offers up. While there are four characters we hear from, Kay is the linchpin. You'll also meet Duncan, Helen, Viv, and Julia. I can't tell you more than that but I will tell you this: if you begin reading and wonder just where in the hell Waters is taking you to, keep reading. You won't be disappointed as she ties the main characters together in heartwrenching and hopeful ways. If you like historical novels, read this. If you like a sense of mystery and like solving puzzles, read this. If you like lyrical prose, read this. If it weren't for Bender and Brockmeier, this would've been my number one pick. **Great selection for book groups.** (p.s. If the Victorian era and the supernatural are more your thing, check out Waters' Affinity; also terrific.)

4. City of Thieves, David Benioff

Keeping with the historical fiction theme, City of Thieves was recommended to me by friend and voracious reader Erik Brueggemann. His recommendations never let me down but I let this book linger on my nightstand for over a year. Then my friends Kevin and Jessica mentioned that they had read it and I should dust off the cover and open it up. I finished it in two sittings. It's a slim novel at 250 pages but it packs a Panzer tank-sized explosion from a storytelling standpoint. Set during the Nazi siege on Leningrad, young Lev encounters Red Army deserter Kolya when the two are thrown in jail together on the same night. A colonel says he will spare their life if they bring back a dozen eggs for his daughter's wedding. They have four days to complete the impossible task – this is wartime and the German were as treacherous and torturous in Russia as they were elsewhere.

Following the duo on their journey is an entertaining, heartbreaking education on what it must have been like in Russia during this time. In and of itself, that's enough of an engine to keep the story moving but Benioff adds some surprises and twists as Lev and Kolya search for the eggs that you'll find yourself taking the book to the gym and riding a bike instead of doing your regular three miles on the treadmill just so you can get to the end of the story. At least that's what I did.

Great selection for book groups. (p.s. check out Benioff online – va va voom, he's as hot as his writing).

5. Freedom, Jonathan Franzen

No one does middle age, suburban, existential angst better than Franzen. And I doubt there's another writer who could weave issues such as population control, mountaintop removal in West Virginia, and saving a rare bird into a narrative that follows the breakdown of a marriage and a family. Oh, and do all of this with a wry sense of humor and near genius-level inspection of the psychology of the Berglunds, an upper middle class family living in St. Paul, MN. Patty is the matriarch who is slowly spiraling into a stew of regrets and missed opportunities. Her husband Walter, a do-good environmentalist, begins to compromise his principles and his marriage as he contemplates an affair. Son Joey is a golden child in his mother's eyes yet turns against his family. And their daughter is present in the narrative yet takes a backseat in all of the front-seat dysfunction between Patty, Walter, and Joey.

Characters that would play minor, stereotypical roles in other stories like this end up living large in the conflict. Richard Katz, the college roommate and best friend of Walter, is central to both

Patty's and Walter's breakdowns and breakthroughs. The title provides the overarching theme here – each Berglund is seeking the freedom he or she wants or believes is deserved, yet when that freedom is offered up, they sometimes question whether it's all it's cracked up to be. Franzen writes as deftly from a female point of view as he does a male's. The novel's best sections are those written by Patty as third-person autobiography to her therapist. Using this device, Patty is able to describe herself and her life with some distance from it, and through that distance, we learn a great deal about Patty and the Berglund dynamic.

The family moves closer to an apocalyptic and almost absurd sort of breakdown, and the reader has to endure long passages of run-on sentences, lists of objects, and plenty of political and philosophical ramblings but it's worth it just to discover how things turn out for the Berglunds. They're the kind of characters you love to hate and hate to love, and the kind of characters that sometimes hold up a mirror as you're reading and say, "see, you're not so different from me as you thought."

6. The Girl With The Glass Feet, Ali Shaw

Back to the fantastical, this time in the form of a modern day fairy tale where Ida Maclaird's feet are turning to glass. When it comes to transformations, this one served as the story's central crisis and conflict. Ida can't stop what's happening to her body even though Midas Crook, a shy and lonely photographer Ida meets one morning in the woods, tries to help her. Since we're in fairy tale mode, a love story develops between Ida and Midas as they search for a cure. Under the topcoat of this story is Midas also attempting to come to terms with his father's suicide and his mother's despondency. As Ida continues to transform into glass, Midas's hardened exterior begins to melt and he undergoes his own transformation. The setting, St. Hauda's Island, is described beautifully by Shaw, and it instantly feels like the familiar territory of other European fairy tales. There are bogs, cliffs, and crystalline forests glazed in white. There are also moth-winged cattle and albino moths that add to the story's fairy tale flavor. After reading a few chapters, you find yourself looking around the room just to make sure colors other than white and grey still exist. The pace is slow and the outlook is grim at best during certain scenes but if you want to settle down with a good fairy tale that doesn't include the regular witches and goblins, this is just the ticket.

7. Brother, I'm Dying, Edwidge Danticat

With the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti, I decided to read a few Haitian authors and learn more about Haiti's history through them. Edwidge Danticat was the first author who came to mind so I ordered her memoir. In 2004, Edwidge learned she was pregnant and also learned that her father Andre was dying. As she prepares to become a mother, she delves into her family's history. Her father immigrated when Danticat was two years old with her mother joining him in the U.S. a few years later. Danticat and her brother were left under the care of her father's brother (her uncle) Joseph for eight years until they were brought to the U.S. Woven throughout their personal family history is the history of Haiti under Duvalier's regime. After decades of suffering in Haiti, Joseph finally travels to the U.S. at age 81 to join his brother, only to die in the Krome detention facility in Miami. The memoir explores the intersection of the personal and the political as well as the messy immigration system but always comes back to the core of our lives – family. As Danticat tells us, "I wrote this because they can't." Sometimes the things that people can't write are precisely the things we must read and listen to.

8. Never Let Me Go, Kazuo Ishiguro

Recently made into a movie (that I haven't seen), Ishiguro's novel introduces us to a dystopian English countryside town in the 1990s that isn't completely the 1990s but the very near future. Kathy H narrates the story of her time spent at Hailsham, a private school where students are

told they are special; however, the reader immediately knows that there is something slightly off about this specialness and that the teachers are keeping secrets from the students. We learn early on that the students are clones, born of the DNA of some stranger but Ishiguro doesn't exactly give away what the clones' purpose is. We get clues about the fates of the students and you'll find yourself silently whispering "get out of there" and "save yourself from yourself," all the while knowing that the young people who populate this novel will know no other fate than the one they've been raised to live out. Kathy's strained friendships with fellow classmates Ruth and Tommy unfold in sparse, sensitive prose that includes questions about the meaning of love, loyalty, friendship, and forgiveness. This is one time where the transformations we expect don't come yet we realize the ending was always inevitable in this bizarre world. That Ishiguro sticks to his guns and doesn't make this a clichéd coming of age tale where girl gets boy and love conquers all is a testament to his craft. **Great selection for book groups.**

9. A Visit From The Goon Squad, Jennifer Egan

A novel that pulls off a chapter structured as a powerpoint presentation simply had to make my list. I dread and loathe powerpoint, mainly because I'm inundated with powerpoint at work where we call them "decks" and there are times I'd like to deck someone with their 180-slide gargantuan deck that crashes my email inbox. But that's another topic for another day. Back to this book. Bennie Salazar is an aging former punk rocker and the central character in this musical, entertaining romp through the interior lives of Bennie, his assistant Sasha and many others. Many of the characters are at the eve of self-destruction when we meet them and then the story winds back to show us how they got there. Fortunately, there's transformation and redemption – oftentimes found through the role that music plays in our lives – and the characters don't end up replaying the broken record of their lives. Word of caution to those readers who like a straight line of chronology in their narratives or a story with a clear beginning, middle and end: you won't find that here. Egan moves forward and backward in time and plays around with styles and voices. This is not the kind of story where you'll feel like you're following one character from start to finish in a neat and tidy way. It's more like opening up the junk drawer of your past and picking out the most interesting and dramatic pieces to explore. Me? I love that. You? That's up to you.

10. Given Sugar, Given Salt by Jane Hirshfield

It's a Top10 first! A poetry collection makes the list after 11 years of ignoring this writing form. Please hold the sighs and groans. We're no longer in high school laboring over some 17th century sestina or sonnet. I was introduced to Jane Hirshfield during my Contemporary Poetry and Buddhism class this summer. Her work is gorgeous in its starkness, complex in its simplicity, and playful in its seriousness. You don't have to practice Buddhism to enjoy her poetry nor do you really have to enjoy poetry. These are the kind of poems you can read at the beginning or the end of the day, and they'll transport you to a peaceful and calm state of mind. Reading her is like meditation. Hirshfield takes everyday objects – a shoe, a chair, a carpet, a tree – and illuminates them, transforms them. Soon, putting our shoes on each time, "left first, then right" takes on new meaning. If nothing else, reading Hirshfield forces you to slow down, to pause, to concentrate, and to look at the world – if only for a moment – with wonder, playfulness, and joy. And that's never a bad thing.