

Amy's Top 10 Books of 2008

Hope and Home – the two “H” words that were a constant presence in my real and fictional worlds this year. Hope because it was what our country seemed to be longing for amidst the economic crisis and ongoing war in Iraq. Home because Dave and I were focused on just that as we planted deeper roots in Akron.

As I pen this, Dave and I celebrate our year-and-a-half anniversary in the “Ak-rowdy.” We’ve taken every bit of that time to adjust to our new environs, make new friends, and get a grasp on the community and culture here. In short, we have created a happy home for ourselves, not so much in the sense of redecorating or fixing up our physical surroundings, but more in the sense of developing a sense of place and figuring out how we fit into it.

As Wendell Berry says, “if you don’t know **where** you are, you don’t know **who** you are.” Berry isn’t talking about knowing the best shortcut from your house to the grocery store. Berry is talking about the kind of knowing that involves the senses, memories, and history-making. He is talking about knowledge of a place that comes from working in it, living through the seasons, and feeling that you have somehow contributed a thread or two to the community’s cultural fabric.

If you’ve ever moved away from your childhood home, you know what it’s like to be a stranger in a strange land. There’s a mixture of excitement and adventure in everything you do when you first arrive. Eventually, when that honeymoon period wears off, you realize there’s more to making a home than putting up new curtains and knowing which restaurant has the best grilled cheese sandwich (that would be Lockview Lounge in downtown Akron in case you ever need to know).

When we first moved to Akron, we brought our Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky roots with us. But Northeast Ohio is a different place with a different vibe, and we looked for ways to plant our old roots in new soil. For Dave, who is loving Kent State and vice versa, it was a little more natural than it was for me. He immediately developed a strong cohort of colleagues – and they are good friends to us both now. For me, because I was fortunate enough to keep my job with Luxottica Retail, I continued to straddle the highway that runs from our home in Highland Square and to our old home in Cincinnati. Caught between a new home with new friends and an old home with old friends, it made it more difficult for me to know, as Berry says, “where I was and who I was.”

No worries though. I did what most people do when they land somewhere new – seek out new opportunities and people. I signed up with a running group, signed up with a gym, and scouted out writing groups. I found the runners and the gym quickly but the writing group eluded me so I started my own. Through it, I met two new fantastic gal pals – Cristy and Suzanne – as well as a great crew of dedicated writers who are all balancing their writing lives with jobs, kids, dogs, hobbies, and other interests. To date, there are more than 40 members and we regularly draw 12 to 20 writers at our bi-monthly meetings.

Through all of our new contacts and experiences, Akron has become what we hoped it would become – home in every sense of the word. I’m a slow learner -- it took me almost 18 months to recognize that I didn’t have to *choose* between my old home and my new home. As the Girl Scout song goes, “make new friends but keep the old, one is silver and the other gold.” So, I’m quite the rich and be-jeweled girl, indeed.

From a fictional perspective, many of the books I read this year had home, hope or both “H” words as themes. What I love about reading novels is what so many other people enjoy – fiction transports you to the homes of the characters. The characters draw back the curtains for us and give us a sneak peek into their lives. We learn about other cities, countries, and cultures while we’re tucked in our beds wearing our favorite flannels. Jean Rhys, who wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea*, said, “Reading makes immigrants of us all. It takes us away from home, but more important, it finds homes for us everywhere.” I love that concept.

If you’ve been receiving my list for more than a couple of years, you know that I’m a sucker for a certain kind of story, and that story usually includes a strong sense of place. 2008 was no exception – Russo, Lahiri, and Price are experts in putting their readers in a specific area of the world. Price’s Manhattan, Russo’s blue-collar towns. And Lahiri? Most of her characters struggle with feeling displaced from their

native India as they attempt to create new homes in Massachusetts. And then there's Barbara Kingsolver who is so in tune with the place she lives that, for one year, she eats nothing but locally-grown food.

As for that other all-important and all-critical "H" word (hope), it also loomed large with most of the characters – real and make-believe – that I encountered. They were either holding out hope, losing their grip on it, or seeking to regain it. In the case of Dr. Paul Farmer, in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, he sets an example of a life based on hope, and offered me one of the most inspiring true-to-life stories I've read in decades.

Hope loomed large for Dave and I, too. We hoped our way through the primaries and the election and we are super-pleased with the outcome. We're hopeful that we will see some much-needed change in the years to come. I hoped I'd make it through another marathon training season that was filled with snowy Northeastern Ohio morning runs. Thanks to the Vertical Runner training group, I posted my best marathon time to date. I also declared that it was the last marathon I'd run but we'll see if I stick to that declaration.

Dave kept pace in his own marathon march toward tenure by sending out three research papers, which he hopes will find homes in academic journals. He also received two awards, including a three-year fellowship grant that will support his research endeavors. He was one of just three untenured professors to receive the fellowship. For those unfamiliar with academic life, Dave is at a research university, which means that he is evaluated more for his research productivity than for his teaching. While he's keeping up the research end of the bargain, he's also wowing his students. Dave's students give him incredibly positive evaluations – he's well-liked and respected by colleagues and students alike.

From a creative perspective, Dave is starting up a new band, to be named soon. And I'm continuing to work on fiction. I've set some goals for 2009. We'll see what happens.

Finally, before we get to the part you're all waiting for, I have one request: please watch *The Wire* if you didn't catch it when it aired on HBO originally. Most of you know that Dave and I don't watch much TV, except for the occasional basketball, football, or *Project Runway* episode. However, we caved in to enormous peer pressure to watch *The Wire*. We even had one friend threaten to send us Seasons 1 – 5 along with his DVD player if we didn't start watching it. So I bought Dave the first season on DVD for his birthday in May. We're now in Season 4 and we've been known to watch episodes back to back. To say we're addicted is an understatement. The writing is spectacular. The commentary on our social institutions and structures is spot-on. The acting is superb and the plot is so smart that it puts *West Wing*, *The Sopranos*, *Grey's Anatomy* and any of your other favorite dramatic series to shame. If you read or have read Richard Price's *Lush Life*, which is on my list this year, you will love *The Wire*. Price was one of the writers who contributed to the show. If you like cop shows or crime thrillers, you'll love this. You may not always agree with me on my book recommendations but there's no way you'll be able to deny *The Wire* its position as one of the best series ever created.

Most of you know the drill by now but this year I've added a few twists. I've ranked my Top 10 in order. My number one is truly my number one for the year. Oddly enough, I read numbers 1, 2 and 3 in succession and nothing I read after them dropped them down in the ranking. The books on the list weren't necessarily published in 2008. Most of the authors never received a nod from Oprah. This year, I've also included a list of the books you recommended to me – some are still on my nightstand and I promise to read them in 2009.

So, without further ado, here's Amy's Top 10 List of Books for 2008. I "Hope" you'll find yourself feeling at "Home" with at least one of these fantastic reads.

1. Unaccustomed Earth, Jhumpa Lahiri

I know, I know. You hate reading short stories blah, blah, blah. Get over it and read this collection. Maybe you read Lahiri's *The Namesake* and liked it. If you did, you'll like her short stories even more. I have a theory: some authors are better at the short form than the long form. Lahiri is a short form superstar. As Lahiri herself has said "Everything's a story, no matter how long or short." So, set aside your aversion to short stories or long stories and just read stories, whether they're 100 or 10,000 words. The good news for you novel snobs is that the eight stories in this collection are longer and more emotionally complex than anything Lahiri has written. You'll feel like you're getting the dramatic impact and story arc of a novel in each of the stories which deal with universal themes -- family, relationships, and, of course, home and hope. There is a trilogy of linked stories at the backend of the book that follow Hema and Kaushik -- not so much childhood friends but two people brought together by their parents' circumstances -- that are both beautiful and bittersweet. Lahiri wrote one of the stories in the trilogy ten years ago and never did anything with it until this collection. I love stuff like that -- there's comfort knowing a Pulitzer Prize winning author struggles with her rough drafts for years. At least it's a comfort to someone like me who spends three to four years on a short story.

My two favorites? The title story about Ruma, a young mother in Seattle who is visited by her widowed father. Ruma, thinking her father is lonely, is considering asking him to come live with her and her husband and son. Ironically, it is Ruma that is lonely. Little does she know that her father has befriended a Bengali woman and has taken up traveling with her throughout Europe. Lahiri is a pro at creating a father who is emotionally distant yet so lovable, and the scenes where Rumi's father is tending to his daughter's garden brought tears to my eyes.

My second favorite is "A Choice of Accommodations," the story of a husband's attempt to turn a friend's wedding into a romantic getaway weekend. It's a reversal of stereotypical roles here -- the wife is the hard-working doctor absorbed in her work and in herself with no time for romance. The husband is longing to create a romantic weekend, knowing his wife is slipping away from him. Yet, they're going to the wedding of a friend the husband had a crush on years ago. At the reception, he drinks to embarrassment and returns to his wife who left the reception early. The final scenes between the couple are equal parts tense, heartbreaking, and hopeful. The writing here is so exquisite and lush, I found myself reading paragraphs two or three times just because they were so impressive in their beauty.

Lahiri's lyrical qualities make you feel like you're reading a classic yet the prose is so natural that it never feels old-fashioned in the "Tale of Two Cities" or "Wuthering Heights" sense. From a sense of place perspective, Lahiri focuses on a specific generation of Bengalis who immigrated to the United States in the 60s or 70s. In an interview in *Bookforum*, Lahiri offered her opinion of the terrain she covers as a writer: "Some bits and pieces are taken from my own parents and other parents that I knew growing up. And sometimes they're totally invented. The thing I took for granted when I was growing up is that I was living in a world within a world. It was a tight world, but I knew a lot of people and was privy to the whole spectrum of types and personalities and characters. To me they don't represent immigrants or anyone specific. They just represent the human condition."

2. Mudbound, Hillary Jordan (Awarded the 2006 Bellwether Prize for Fiction)

This story stuck with me long after I finished it, sort of like mud sticks to your shoes. I couldn't get rid of the scenes and the characters from Jordan's debut novel. Yes, this is her first. I can't even imagine what she has left in the creative tank after writing this but I'm looking forward to reading whatever she puts on the shelves.

City girl Laura McAllen marries country boy Henry in 1946 and Henry moves them to a dilapidated Mississippi Delta farmhouse. With the help of Florence Jackson -- the black wife of one of the McAllen's sharecroppers -- Laura does her best to make a ramshackle shed a home for her husband, their two daughters and her hateful, racist father-in-law, Pappy.

In the midst of their family struggles, two young men return from World War II to work the land. Jamie McAllen, Laura's brother-in-law, is charming and handsome but haunted by the war. Florence's son, Ronsel Jackson, comes home a war hero but quickly finds out that prejudice runs as heavy as the rains that frequently flood the Delta and his hero status is meaningless in the Jim Crow south. An unlikely friendship develops between the two young men and it is this friendship that rankles the town's KKK men, including Pappy. It is also this friendship that brings the novel to its sorrow-filled conclusion.

While the story starts out slow, sort of like slow-moving mud, it kicks in high gear near the end. I read the last 75 pages in one sitting. I think I would've kept reading even if the house had been on fire.

This should be required reading for anyone who doesn't believe that the Jim Crow South was a brutal, awful place and a terrible mark on the history of our country. For those who think the scars of racism are gone just because we've elected a black president, I suggest you read *Mudbound*. Laws and civil rights and all sorts of social structures and cultural advances might make us all feel that racism no longer exists but Jordan makes it clear that you can't wipe away the color of your skin and all the history that goes with it, just like you can't clean away a mudslide.

p.s. The Bellwether Prize for Fiction is awarded biennially to a first literary novel that addresses issues of social injustice.

3. Then We Came to the End, Joshua Ferris

Okay, so my number two pick was mucho serious-o. After a read like that, it was time for something a little lighter. And we happened to be going on vacation to Boulder, Colorado so I needed a good read for the plane. My good friend Carole Singleton had recommended *Then We Came to the End* for its thigh-slapping, hooting-and-hollering qualities about a year ago. Trouble was, it's about working in an advertising and marketing agency. At the time she had recommended it, I was working mucho overtime-o and didn't want to go home and read about something similar to the work I was doing all day. It's the same reason I don't watch *The Office* – too close to reality for me. So, I had shelved the idea until the Boulder vacation came around. I started reading on the plane and was laughing so hard, the guy next to me rolled his eyes and put on his headphones. That'll teach the airlines to give me the middle seat. I kept nudging Dave and declaring that the book was hilarious, that I had worked with someone similar to every one of the characters at some point in my career. And I had worked with even worse specimens of the ad agency world than the characters that Ferris had drawn. (*MaryBeth B., if you're reading this and you read this book, shades of our days in Walgreens' ad department will return to you in full post-traumatic force*).

Anyhow, the first few chapters are mucho hilarious-o but the story gives way to tragedy in the time-honored tradition of Greek myths – mix a little comedy with your heartbreak and throw in a few flaws that lead to the main character's downfall etc. etc. It's the stuff of your high school English course on *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

Ferris, who did his time in ad agencies, writes what he knows and he does it in a rarely used point of view – the collective “we.” Anyone who gets sucked into agency life knows that the culture becomes more about the collective than the individual. You find yourself talking about work in the “we” vernacular as in, “we're working on this big project” or “we all think he should be fired.” His spot-on take of the advertising world – and of our lives in cubicles – is cringe-worthy mainly because it's so real.

Here's a paragraph from the opening chapter: “We were fractious and overpaid. Our mornings lacked promise. At least those of us who smoked had something to look forward to at ten-fifteen. Most of us liked most everyone, a few of us hated specific individuals, one or two people loved everyone and everything. Those who loved everyone were unanimously reviled. We loved free bagels in the morning. They happened all too infrequently.”

Sadly, what happens in the book is what's happening more frequently than free bagels in the morning these days. Ferris' fictional agency is losing clients and people are losing their jobs. Subsequently, no one trusts anyone as everyone waits for his or her last call to the boss's office. No real work gets done under these circumstances because the only real work is to gossip and speculate on who's going to be turned out on the street next. If you've been through a layoff, you know that's how we do when the worry meter is running at full speed.

Many of the characters remain unlikable from page one to the end but there are a few that gain your empathy, like Chris Yop. He's the 40-something ad guy who just wants his office chair, which, in variously comical and tragic twists and turns, gets stolen, hidden, returned, and switched with other office chairs – all while Yop has been downsized and should no longer be working at the agency but shows up every day and hides out in empty rooms. Yop can't give up his “life” even though the agency has given up on him.

There's also Tom Mota, the stereotypical crazy advertising person that exists in every agency. Tom finally "gets got" and then the remaining workers are left to wonder if Tom will come back toting a gun to get his revenge. Tom's professional life is about as tragic as his personal life, a theme that runs through most of the major characters in the story, including Lynn Mason, the supervisor who is battling cancer.

Ferris gives us a break from the "we" point of view in one chapter, told from Lynn's perspective. It's the point in the story where you begin to see that while Ferris is intent on keeping us entertained, he's also pointing out what we tend to forget or tend to ignore when we're immersed in our cubicles and riding the hamster wheel of projects – people have lives, real lives, with real problems. All cleverness and snarkiness aside, Ferris brings sympathy to the table and reminds us that there humanity exists between the cubicle walls.

4. Lush Life, Richard Price

Let me get the disclaimers out there: in general, I don't read mysteries. I don't read crime thrillers either. I'm not one for action-packed movies or car chases. I like my fiction straight-up and literary. You can play around with structure and add post-modern twists all you like but if it's still in the literary category, I'll give it a go. I avoid the Mystery and Science Fiction aisles of the book store. Not because I'm too snobbish to read them, just because I don't intend to write them so I stick with the stuff I need to study.

So then book devourer and friend Erik Brueggeman ruins that streak by telling me *Lush Life* is the "best book he's read in a long fucking time". On top of it, he sends me an advance copy of the book followed by his DVD player upon which Dave and I are supposed to insert DVDs of *The Wire*. This is followed up by friend and book lover Sandy Becker pleading with me to read *Lush Life*, which is followed up by more pressure from other friends to watch *The Wire*, a series that Price wrote some episodes for.

Soon enough, I'm reading *Lush Life*, watching *The Wire* like it's the last television I'll ever be able to see, and reading about the writers who created *The Wire*. I'm ingesting so many crime plotlines and so much cop drama that I start dreaming about solving my own mysteries on the mean streets of Akron. In one dream I think I even showed someone my police badge. (As a side note, this is precisely the reason I cannot read or watch anything in the horror genre. No one wants me dreaming about monsters.)

Price's novel is set in 2002 in the lower east side of Manhattan. It reminded me a lot of where we lived in Chicago. You've got your gentrifying area filled with well-meaning white folk who want to clean up the community, your Chinese immigrants and Latinos, and your African Americans who either occupy the projects or grew up in the neighborhood and want to keep ownership of it. And then you've got the NYPD trying to keep the peace in the melting pot. Working at a restaurant in the area is Eric Cash, a 30-something failed actor, and bartender and wanna-be writer Ike Marcus. One night, the two get schnoekered up with another East Village scenester, Steven Boulware. There's a fatal run-in with some young muggers. Ike gets shot, Steven passes out from drinking, and Eric Cash survives the ordeal. Eric gives the police a sketchy account of what happens and the police are suspicious. Matty Clark and Yolanda Bello, two veteran detectives interrogate Cash to exhaustion, ultimately accusing him of killing Ike. Meanwhile, Ike's father, Billy Marcus, is caught between grief and anger as he searches for real answers to his son's death.

It isn't until the middle of the book that you get the truth about the case, which I won't reveal here. Regardless of the turn the story takes, Price stays on the task of revealing to us what it's like to live in today's urban landscape. Which is to say, no walk in the park.

Price's knack for believable and brilliant dialogue keeps the story moving. I felt like I was reading a manuscript for a movie or television show, which makes sense given his history with *The Wire*. Fans of crime stories and mysteries will dig this but it's for any reader who digs a cinematic feel in their fiction.

5. Mountains Beyond Mountains, Tracy Kidder

This book comes highly recommended by friend and book fiend Janet Callif as well as Dave who read it while we were in the mountains surrounding Boulder, Colorado. It's one of the rare times that Dave asked for more time to read. Usually the book is in the other hand and it's me who is asking if we can leave a

few minutes later because I have to finish a chapter. By the last page, Dave had a new-found hero in Dr. Paul Farmer.

Farmer is on my hero list, too. He provides health care for the poorest of the poor in Haiti and is an expert on infectious diseases including TB and HIV. But he doesn't have that Mother Theresa or Dali Lama quality about him. In fact, he comes across several times in the story as an asshole, a charming asshole, but an asshole all the same. Thing is, he has every right to be an asshole. He was educated at Harvard, he received a MacArthur genius grant, he sees the waste in our health care system, and he chooses to live in Haiti where they have less than zero resources yet Farmer finds ways to help improve people's health on about one-tenth of one percent of what it would cost us in the States. Truly amazing work.

Tracy Kidder (who also wrote *House* if you're looking for another good read) immerses himself in Farmer's world, trying to keep up with Farmer's relentless work ethic which can include walking a grueling 15 miles to treat one patient. While Kidder is nearly fainting from the effort, Farmer is singing to himself and saying, "it's all in day's work."

Farmer's philosophy is to take the road less traveled and the unconventional path to get results. People either think he's crazy or a genius. I went with genius though I did find myself saying, "this dude is certifiable," especially when he sleeps about three hours a night, eats relatively nothing, and still finds the energy to haul ass up a mountain to help a man with HIV.

Reading about Farmer's day will exhaust you and make you feel guilty for saying you're tired after a day at the office. But that's not Farmer's intent. He doesn't want you to feel guilty – actually, he does want you to feel guilty but it's about other things. He wants you to understand why he does what he does and, as he explains it, "it's just what he wants to do." He tells us that no one else has to choose his life but maybe we should consider how we're contributing to society overall. As Farmer says, "the only real nation is humanity."

One review states: "At the heart of this book is the example of a life based on hope, and on an understanding of the truth of the Haitian proverb "Beyond mountains there are mountains": as you solve one problem, another problem presents itself, and so you go on and try to solve that one too."

The book is inspiring on many levels, especially since Farmer came from humble background but it's a cautionary tale in how we've let our sisters and brothers around the globe waste away in poverty. Farmer shows his readers that the resources to help Haiti and eradicate TB and other infectious diseases around the world exist. We simply choose to ignore some of the hard choices that would need to be made to improve overall health throughout the world. Shortly after I read this, I traveled to Guatemala on a Gift of Sight mission where our team gave free eye exams and glasses to more than 26,000 people. The poverty I encountered was nothing compared to the poverty in Haiti, which was confirmed by one of the eye doctors who had been to Haiti on a mission. "People in Haiti would cry over this kind of abundance," she said as we looked at kids in torn, dirty clothes picking through a garbage dump.

Why read this book, you ask? Many reasons – to remind yourself how fortunate you are, to maybe ask yourself what you're doing to help those who need help, and to realize that one person truly can make a difference in the lives of others. Hope, hope, and hope. This story is nothing but the big "H" word.

6. Mohawk, Richard Russo

There's no way I could say one of my themes for my year and for my reading life was "Home" without including the master of creating a sense of place, Richard Russo. I know there are some Russo naysayers out there but, to them, I say, skip my sixth pick and move to number seven. If you didn't like *Empire Falls* or *Bridge of Sighs*, you won't cotton up to Mohawk either.

Sure, there are the great place-creators like Faulkner and Updike and McCarthy but I'll put Russo up against any of them. All signs point to McCarthy as the greatest writer known to mankind for his ability to define place and the impact the place has on his characters but I find McCarthy grueling to read. He's long-winded and he gives more details about a horse or a body in the cadaver stage than I ever need to know. Yes, I've just committed literary sacrilege by criticizing McCarthy but to each his own. You say McCarthy, I say Russo, let's call the whole thing off.

This was my second visit to Mohawk, New York, a wrong side of the tracks town where the leather tannery is a ghost of its former self as are the people who live there. The story runs through three generations and two families, the Grouses and the Gaffneys. Former high school football star Dallas Younger and his ex-wife Anne are the parents of Randall, a smart kid in a town where being smart is more burden than blessing. There's Wild Bill Gaffney, a kid who got messed up early on and now, as an adult, plays the role of crazy local. There's Harry, owner of the Mohawk Grill, who cares for Wild Bill when no one else will, the reasons of which are revealed later in the story. There's Dan, confined to a wheelchair and struggling to stay connected to his wife Diana. The couple's friendship with Anne and Dallas goes way back, as does most of the family history in the town. Then there's patriarch Mather Grouse, retired from the factory and bitter about what Mohawk is becoming. And Rory Gaffney, who hates Mather and vice versa. A series of events bring Mather and young Randall together in tender ways – the two outcasts, one young, one old, mirroring each other's lives.

While the families are different, their troubles are similar. And most of their troubles stem from Mohawk itself. Some want to leave it, some can't imagine ever living elsewhere, some recognize what the declining Mohawk is doing to their lives, others refuse to see it. In Randall, there is hope that he will escape the all-too-familiar fate of kids that grow up in small towns with limited opportunities. It's clear the tannery won't be an option for him but if not the tannery, then what?

Even though Mohawk was published in 1986, the characters could walk out of a place like Akron or Youngstown or Toledo or Detroit today. As Annie Proulx, another master of place, says of Russo's work: "After the last sentence is read, the reader continues to see Russo's tender, messed-up people coming out of doorways, lurching through life. And keeps on seeing them because they are as real as we are."

For me, that's the mark of superior fiction.

7. The Monsters of Templeton, Lauren Groff

Fans of humorous, slightly quirky and outrageous tales will enjoy Groff's debut novel. I liked it but I also like Lorrie Moore, Aimee Bender, and others who some believe are an "acquired taste." Thing is, Groff demands that you suspend disbelief immediately and you must do so at a higher level than you do with most fiction. Groff dips her toe into magic realism but doesn't take a full bath in the literary genre.

Willie Upton returns home to Templeton (modeled after Cooperstown, NY) after a botched affair with her archaeology professor. She thinks she may be pregnant and when she reconnects with her mother, her mother brings a skeleton out of their family closet – Willie's father, thought to be a mystery, is alive and well and living in Templeton. Her mother, who is running short on sanity, refuses to tell Willie who the man is. At the same time, a prehistoric monster dies in Glimmerglass Lake and rises to the surface. This is where the story veers into magic realism. You have to accept that there was a monster in the lake just like kids believe monsters live under their beds. The town is both shocked and saddened at the loss of their beloved monster and it sets off a chain of events that tears at the fabric of the town. While Willie investigates her family tree, she also reconnects with a former high school flame as well as the Running Bobs, a group of older men who have been running through Upton every morning since Willie was a child. Willie takes us on the journey as she rattles more skeletons in other family closets and finally discovers who her father is. Along the way, she also discovers a lot about herself and we're treated to old photographs of Templeton's cast of characters, diary entries, letters and a handy family tree that is constantly revised as Willie begins connecting the roots and branches.

Fast paced, funny, and tender, Groff's debut received rave reviews and lots of good press. It was one of Powell's Books most frequently recommended reads of the year. Readers who want a serious story told in linear fashion probably won't enjoy this but my easily-distracted brain enjoyed all the twists and turns.

8. Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, Barbara Kingsolver

I consider this my most controversial pick. I almost went with *A Thousand Splendid Suns* but figured everyone and their sister has already read that because everyone has already read or seen *The Kite Runner*. Truth is, I even complained about a chapter in this book where Kingsolver takes vegetarians to task for being "snooty eaters." But I love Kingsolver's story-telling and it's as strong in her non-fiction works like this as it is in her novels.

Kingsolver and her family return to a farm in Virginia where they eat local, grow their own food, and barter with other farmers to fill in the gaps on their pantry shelves. The chapters are peppered with commentary about the U.S. food industry, specifically factory farming, the plight of today's farming community, and the increase of processed foods in the American diet which is ultimately responsible for our expanding waistlines.

Many may find the commentary too preachy but I found it eye-opening, so much so that I'm now more conscious of where my fruits and vegetables come from and what season it is when I'm eating them. For example, year-round blueberries? Really? Blueberries are not in season *all the time* but given that they're always in the grocery store, we tend to ignore that fact.

So not only did Kingsolver's family agree to eat only those fruits and vegetables that were grown locally, they also had to be in season. For a family coming from Arizona, this meant giving up precious items like oranges and much more. I could never take it that far. When I came home from Guatemala after two weeks, I nearly cried when I ate my first Granny Smith apple. I'm not sure I'd have the willpower to go "cold banana" like that. They also gave up processed foods like, say, potato chips. If this were me, I'd be planting potatoes and I'd be damned sure some of them ended up in their delicious chip form. I mean, no chips? That's serious, hard-core stuff.

Nor could I take on the monumental task of planning out crops to ensure that you had enough to can or freeze for the winter, and enough to put on the table come spring.

If Americans were asked to live like Kingsolver's family for a month, we'd probably experience a Civil War. Most of us would starve to death from the lack of proper farming skills. And most of us wouldn't even know how to tend to a garden or slaughter a fatted calf or chicken, which Kingsolver's family does.

Which is where the vegetarian thing comes in. Kingsolver did some time as a veg-head but, as a biologist, she realized she was ignoring a whole portion of the food chain and she was uncomfortable about it. So she decided that if she raised animals humanely, she could eat them. The family raises chickens and turkeys and barter for beef with farmers nearby. She values the ritual of the "harvest" because of what she learns from it: "We reconnect with the purpose for which our animals were bred. We dispense with all the delusions about who put the 'live' in livestock and who must take it away...my animals had a good life and death is the natural end."

Fair enough. I believe Kingsolver is doing the right thing for herself and her family. She raises it, they eat it. There's no horrible factory farming conditions, the animals are raised and killed with compassion. That's all great and good but the percentage of people able to live the Kingsolver way is ever-so minimal. Here's where I could get on my soapbox about factory farming and the fact that turkeys, for example, can't even stand up because they're so fat and jacked up on steroids, all so we can enjoy an extra juicy turkey breast.

Alrighty then, this is not the forum for preaching. Arguments about vegetarianism aside, Kingsolver drives home the fact that we need to be more aware of what we put on our dining tables and into our mouths. Maybe take a moment to thank our local farmers by purchasing their produce at farmer's markets. And maybe sacrifice that Twinkie for a Honeycrisp apple, in season, of course. If you're at all interested in nutrition, eating locally, or the farming life, pick this up.

9. All The Way Home, David Giffels

With all this talk of home, it only stands to reason that I would find a hometown hero for the list. Lo and behold, native Akronite David Giffels released his memoir *All The Way Home* which actually received a mention on Oprah's website. Giffels worked for the *Akron Beacon Journal* and lives in our neighborhood just a few blocks away. To see the house today you would never know that it was a money pit, nightmare, trainwreck of a place when they bought it.

With their infant son, Giffels and his wife begin their search for the perfect house in Akron. But, like most searches for the perfect house, nothing pans out. Until they spy a structure that might be a house, most likely in need of condemning. Giffels has lived in Akron all his life and has witnessed the crumbling factories around him. While many want to tear down anything that looks "used", Giffels can see the beauty behind the rust and the chipped paint and the cracking plaster. He's a restoration madman. So

they purchase a house that is still, unbelievably, occupied by an old, reclusive woman who puts up with the holes in the roof and the critters that have taken up residence in the attic.

With some help from family, friends, and a crew of workers who look more like roadies for Led Zeppelin, the Giffels transform the decaying mansion into a comfortable home for their family. You'll find yourself intrigued by the older woman they purchased the home from and then laughing out loud as Giffels' attempts to use an electric guitar to scare away the squirrels.

Equally hilarious and poignant, Giffels takes readers beyond the story of restoring a house and gives us a glimpse into his own coming of age where he worries about being a good father and providing for his family. He also admits to his own weaknesses – while he can fix up just about anything, he can't control a stubborn streak that has him working on the house shortly after his wife's miscarriage. We find out how this family makes a house a "home" and the personal struggles that come with it.

10. Matrimony, Joshua Henkin

If this novel were a food, it'd be in the comfort category. Smooth, warm, fulfilling, maybe a little fattening but who cares because it tasted good going down. It's 1986 and fiction writer wanna-be Julian Wainwright meets friend Carter Heinz at Graymont College in Massachusetts. They also meet Mia Mendelsohn with whom Julian falls immediately in love. Their relationship and their friendship with Carter carries them through college and the next fifteen years together as they approach middle age and begin to grow up and grow apart from each other.

Julian and Carter drift apart as their class differences become more apparent. Carter and his wife Pilar disappear from Julian and Mia's life just when the couple needs friends the most. Julian continues to struggle with failed manuscripts and literary dreams, which are also disappearing. The central conflict is between Julian and Mia, and what will happen to their relationship. Secondary to this is Julian's attempt to reconcile with Carter.

Several reviews of the book mention that, as a character, Julian is never fully realized on the page but I chalk this up to literary snobbery. It's a relationship, people. Relationships and marriages are messy and sometimes inexplicable. And sometimes, characters that are so well-drawn become stereotypes. I liked Julian just the way he was.

Also read in 2008:

A Thousand Splendid Suns, Khaled Housseini
Starting Out In Evening, Brian Morton
Light on Snow, Anita Shreve (audio)
Devil in the White City, Erik Larson (audio)
The Godmother, Carrie Adams
The Translation of Dr. Appelles, David Treuer
The Gravedigger's Daughter, Joyce Carol Oates
Away, Amy Bloom
No One Belongs Here More Than You, Miranda July

And then there were the dog books whereupon they either featured a dog or the dog was the narrator or a dog had some minor role in the plot:

Darkest Evening of the Year, Dean Koontz
Art of Racing in the Rain, Garth Stein
Dogs of Babel, Carolyn Parkhurst
A Three Dog Life, Abigail Thomas

Starting out 2009 with ...

Songs Without Words, Ann Packer
Knockemstiff, Donald Ray Pollack (thanks, Erik!!)
All My Sons, Arthur Miller
Sing Them Home, Stephanie Kallos
Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Juno Diaz

[NOTE: Last year, I asked list receivers to send me their recommendations. Here's what I collected over the course of the year. Try some for yourself!]

Recommended by friends and acquaintances who read this list...

From Jeanne Golliver

Birds Without Wings and Corelli's Mandolin, Louis de Berniers

From Janet Callif

Glass Castle, Jeannette Walls
Mountains Beyond Mountains, Tracy Kidder

From Ann Scanlan

On Chesil Beach, Ian McEwan
The Road, Cormac McCarthy
Boy Meets Boy, David Levithan
The Crow Road, Ian Banks
The Distant Echo, Val McDermid

From Ann Trulley (who still can't believe I hated Water For Elephants as much as I did)
Pillars of the Earth, Ken Follet

From Sandy Becker

Years of Wonders and March, Geraldine Brooks
Lush Life, Richard Price
World Without End and Pillars of the Earth, Ken Follet
A Thousand Splendid Suns, Khaled Housseini

From Anne in Seattle

Devil in the White City, Erik Larson
Winter's Bone, Daniel Woodrell

From Melissa Culyer

Truck: A Love Story, Michael Perry
Professor and the Madman, Simon Winchester

From Anna Ventrella

East of Eden, John Steinbeck
A Thousand Splendid Suns, Khaled Housseini

From Megan Molony

A Thousand Splendid Suns, Khaled Housseini
Glass Castle, Jeannette Walls

From Shelley (who commented on my blog)

Map of Glass and The Stone Carvers, Jane Urquhart
Fall on Your Knees, Anne Marie MacDonald

From Wendy New

Peony in Love, Lisa See
Harry Potter #7
The Woods, Harlan Coben
The Story of Edgar Sawtelle, David Wroblewski

From Erik Brueggerman

Last Night at the Lobster, Stewart O'Nan
Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Juno Diaz
Knockemstiff, Donald Ray Pollack
Lush Life, Richard Price

From Jennifer Allen

John Updike's Rabbit series

Saving Fish from Drowning, Amy Tan