

## AMY'S TOP 10 BOOKS – 2014

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Endings and beginnings. They're the stuff of great literature and the bookends of real life. All sorts of things happen in the middle, but what we tend to remember most vividly are the moments where we ended a chapter of our lives or began anew.

Lao Tzu, founder of Taoism, said: "Amidst the worldly comings and goings, observe how endings become beginnings."

That sums up 2014 for us. Dave and I experienced plenty of endings that pointed toward beginnings. In the career sector, Dave decided to transition out of academia and move in to marketing research. After months of soul-searching and thinking, he's ready to apply his sociological perspective and knowledge in another arena, and we're both feeling good about the decision. Initially, I was saddened to think that Dave would no longer teach because he's terrific at it and had touched many students' lives in his time at Kent State (many of whom still email him and tell him they continue to think about what he taught them), but teaching can take many forms and I'm sure he'll teach in his own way at Nielsen Catalina Solutions when he begins there in January. He'll also teach on the side once he gets settled in.

Dave and his mates in Pike 27 will begin the new year with the official release of *Calling Out*, a 5-song EP (available [here](#)). I'm sure 2015 will bring more gigs, more new songs, and more musical adventures for Dave, Mike, Dave K and Sean. Fact: doing what you love has its rewards. I'm lucky enough to witness that every Thursday night when the boys practice at our house.

We ended a fantastic run of 12 years with Alice, the smartest and funniest Australian Shepherd we've ever known. She will forever be the Greatest of All Time (GOAT). The loss of our grand four-pawed pal left a huge hole in our hearts, as well as Macy's, and an empty space in our house. A couple of months after saying goodbye to her, we said hello to a black and white, wiggly-bottomed bundle of energy. Sometimes the world gives you exactly what you need and this guy certainly brought us mucho affection and playfulness at a time when we needed it most. His original name was Mojo (which he has tenfold) but we decided to name him Seamus (pronounced Shay-muss; rhymes with famous), after the late poet laureate Seamus Heaney. Turns out, Seamus also means "substitute." While there's no substitute for Alice, his goofy brand of enthusiasm certainly brought new Aussie love to me, Macy, and Dave.

Mid-year took us to Ireland where we visited with our friend and fellow book lover Ann Scanlan, and explored the northern portions of the country. We stepped back into Northern Ireland's history in Derry and Belfast which made the trip all the richer for teaching us about The Troubles. The highlight was seeing The Waterboys in Belfast where we felt like the set list had been created just for us because they played so many of our favorites. Dave and I both agreed this might have been the best vacation we've ever had for its combination of everything we love – music, art, writing, nature, exploring, learning and laughing . . . and those brilliant pints of Guinness and Smithwick's too.

Me? I spent most of the year hanging out in the middle ground. I made a wee bit of progress on the novel I've been working on for a couple of years, and jotted down a few new ideas for short stories. I also received a promotion at work – a new beginning – and will open 2015 by hiring a couple of new people to the team. I was honored to go to Caruaru, Brazil with [OneSight](#) where we helped more than 1,600 people see their world more clearly. You can find some of those stories [here](#). After some time off from distance running due to this persnickety injury called plantar fasciitis, I signed up for the Queen

Bee Half Marathon. I ran this “bee-yatch” of a race for fun and to remind myself how much I love the long runs, not only for their physical merits, but also for their mental benefits. Running is my meditation time, my therapy, my happy place, and I’m vowing to be in that space more often this coming year. I’m also vowing to focus on my own writing more than I was able to this year. The act of creating and storytelling fuels other aspects of my life. Nothing gets me more jazzed than a new idea (Dave knows this all too well) and I’m looking forward to a good dose of beginnings as we enter a new year. All told, I’m ending the holding pattern I put myself in during 2014 and starting anew on the things that are important to me.

We had some good friends and family members who faced endings and beginnings as well – marriage, divorce, birth, death, moving to new places, learning new things. When I think of what these folks experienced, I do think Lao Tzu is right that our endings become beginnings. And when I think about the best endings in literature, they tend to leave an opening – a portal to a new beginning – for the main character. From a writing perspective, the landing point is, in my opinion, much more difficult to write than the beginning. How much do you clean up and how much do you leave unresolved? Some people love tidy endings that wrap everything up. I’m a fan of endings that are open to interpretation and actually require you to wonder about the characters a little while longer. Life isn’t tidy or perfect; perhaps endings shouldn’t be either.

This year’s Top 10 is filled with all types of endings – messy, clean, abstract, puzzling, pure. I toyed with the idea of jotting down the last lines of each book but I didn’t want to give anything away so I chose to type out the first lines of each of my picks. If nothing else, it’ll hopefully make you feel curious enough to crack open the cover (or click your e-reader) to find out where characters land at the end.

I hope 2015 brings you plenty of beginnings or endings that lead to new experiences and adventures!

For the newbies to the list, I have a few rules:

- **I send you the list. You forward it to other book-loving friends.** The fun part for me is learning where the list travels. Past lists have made it to Ireland (Hi Ann!), Thailand, Australia, Chicago and Colorado, to name a few fine places. There are also spectacular book groups in Ohio and California awaiting this list (thanks Sandy, Cindy and Colleen!). Anyone who puts this list in the hands of Dave Grohl, Eddie Vedder, Martin Sheen, Rob Lowe, Alice Munro, Anthony Doerr or any other famous-y sort will have my eternal gratitude.
- **My picks can be published in any year.** Why limit yourself to one year when there are so many great stories that deserve your attention? Why ignore the classics?
- **The Top 10 is not in rank order** . . . with the exception of my Number One pick which is most definitely numero uno.
- **Let me know what you’re reading.** A lot of your recommendations make it on the list (Wendy, see #4 and Mojga, see #2). You’ll get full credit for the reco. If you end up hating one of my recos, let me know, too. I enjoy a good literary debate.

### **1. All the Light We Cannot See, Anthony Doerr**

*At dusk they pour from the sky. They blow across the ramparts, turn cartwheels over rooftops, flutter into the ravines between houses.*

Weighing in at 523 pages, you might think you're in for a long read but the short chapters, war-time tension, fast pace of the action keep this novel moving right along. The writing is exquisite in its simplicity and specificity. You'll feel like you're in the walled city of Saint-Malo during World War II and you'll feel like you know every inch of the town just as Marie-Laure, one of the main characters does. Marie-Laure and her father flee to this town to live with Marie's great uncle when the city is bombed by the Nazis. Werner, a young soldier, is trapped in the town as well. There's also a much sought-after jewel that Marie's father may or may not have in his possession that could either lead them into danger or to escape. And then there's also this invention called the radio that comes into play. With multiple points of view and multiple plot threads, you're sure to find something here that grabs you and keeps you reading. Along the way, you'll learn a bunch about a forgotten piece of World War II history, too. Equal parts historical fiction, Shakespearean drama, mystery, and thriller, this was the story I couldn't put down and kept talking about all year. I'm not the only one. It's been camped on the best-seller list for many months. What made the read all the more enjoyable for me is that I had the good fortune of taking a workshop with Anthony Doerr a couple of years ago when I was getting my MFA. We even went to lunch together and talked about writing. At the time, he mentioned he was working on a novel. I had no idea it was *this* novel, nor did I realize I was sitting with an author who would soon publish a best-seller like this. I feel even more honored that he gave me positive feedback on my own writing and encouraged me to cut out those things that got in the way of writing. Solid advice from a solid and accomplished author.

### **2. A Land More Kind Than Home, Wiley Cash**

*I sat there in the car with the gravel dust blowing across the parking lot and saw the place for what it was, not what it was right at that moment in the hot sunlight, but for what it had been maybe twelve or fifteen years before: a real general store with folks gathered around the lunch counter, a line of people at the soda fountain, little children ordering ice cream of just about every flavor you could think of, hard candy by the quarter pound, moon pies and crackerjack and other things I hadn't thought of tasting in years.*

I had to go to Brazil for this recommendation where I met Dr. Mojgan Besharat during our OneSight clinic. Once I learned Mojga, who lives in North Carolina, was a fellow book lover, we began trading recommendations. I admired her passion for optometry just as much as I admired her knowledge of books. *A Land More Kind Than Home* is Southern Gothic at its finest. Set in Marshall, a backhills, small town in North Carolina, Jess Hall tries to protect Sump, his mute brother, but mischief, curiosity and a deep protectiveness for his brother leads Jess to witness things a young boy never should. Soon the town of Marshall is shaken by the actions of preacher Carson Chambliss. Some adore him. Others, like Adelaide Lyle can see right through his snake oil and snake charming ways. Unfortunately, Jess's mother is one of Chambliss's followers and the Hall family ends up paying the price. Told through the eyes of Adelaide, Jess and Clem Barefield, the sheriff, you'll get perspective from each character that helps round out the story and shed a different light on all of the characters of Marshall. I won't give away any more than that other than to say you'll find yourself sweating through several scenes. Cash has a way of building tension in a way that will have you gripping the edges of the book or reading with one eye closed because you feel like you're right. I think I cried within the first 50 pages. This one begins as strongly as it ends.

### **3. We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves, Karen Joy Fowler**

*Those who know me will be surprised to learn that I was a great talker as a child.*

If you've read any reviews of this book, you know its big secret already. And even if you haven't, the book jacket reveals that Rosemary Cooke has a sister that's a chimpanzee. Yep. Fern is a chimp raised right along with Rosemary as if they were both human. Their academic parents are using their own house and children as an experiment. Truth is, scientists did conduct experiments like this in the 70s right about the time animal rights advocates were entering the scene as well. Fowler takes this little fact and weaves it into great fiction with a story that is hilarious, heartfelt, comical, tragic and, most importantly, thought-provoking. You'll learn early on that Fern disappeared. You'll learn later what's happened to Fern. In the middle, you'll spend time learning about the quirky Cooke family and how Rosemary lived under the microscope of observation during her formative years. After Fern disappears, the family dynamic gets even more dysfunctional while Rosemary searches not only for the sister she misses dearly but also for her older brother who sets off to do some searching of his own. The animal lover in me struggled through a couple of key chapters. I'm a vegetarian for many reasons and one of them is that I can't stomach animal cruelty of any sort. While my logical side may recognize that animal testing could, in theory, eventually lead to the cure for currently incurable diseases, the emotional side of me can't fathom treating animals as expendable, scientific experiments. As I said, this story makes you think about all of that and more, including the definition of family.

### **4. The Sandcastle Girls, Chris Bohjalian**

*When my twin brother and I were small children, we would take turns sitting on our grandfather's lap.*

Fellow book lover Wendy New recommended this to me in 2013 and I'm glad I got around to reading yet another great story from Chris Bohjalian who has made my Top 10 a few times in the past. Call me ignorant about history, but I knew nothing about the Armenian Genocide during World War I until I read this book. An estimated 1 to 1.5 million were systematically exterminated during the genocide. Driven from their homeland, the men were killed first, followed by the women and children. I'd read a chapter and then do some googling to learn more, read a chapter and repeat the googling because I was so shocked that, at least in my history classes, we never covered this territory. Moving between past and present, Bohjalian brings the horrors of the genocide to the forefront while also balancing out the tragedy with a love story that highlights the power of love and the perseverance of the human spirit. We meet Elizabeth Endicott who travels with her father on a philanthropic mission to Syria during wartime where they attempt to help the refugees. Here, Elizabeth meets Armen, a soldier who has lost his wife and child to war. That's the past storyline. In the present, Elizabeth and Armen's granddaughter Laura, is attempting to make sense of her grandparent's past and uncovers more than her fair share of family secrets. I began this book knowing nothing about Armenia or the Armenian War, and ended it with a good history lesson and the belief (that I've always held) that love can conquer all.

### **5. Unbroken, Laura Hillenbrand**

*All he could see in every direction was water.*

While I spent quite a bit of time reading historical fiction this year, I also read the very real-life story of the survival, resilience and redemption of Army Air Force bombardier, Louis Zamperini, during World War II. Hillenbrand's retelling of Zamperini's 47 days stranded in a torn-up lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean truly tested my ability to keep my irrational fear of sharks in check. But that's just the beginning of Zamperini's harrowing experience. He and one of the other pilots survive the sharks and near starvation only to be thrown into a Japanese prisoner of war camp, also known as the "theater of cruelty." Zamperini somehow survives the physical torture but the experience leaves him mentally scarred. Hillenbrand paints a picture of Louie before, during and after the war that will stay with you a long time

after you reach the end. Most have either read the book or will end up seeing the movie so I won't say much else other than I found this story just as readable and rewarding as Hillenbrand's *Seabiscuit*.

## **6. The Museum of Extraordinary Things, Alice Hoffman**

*You would think it would be impossible to find anything new in the world, creatures no man has ever seen before, one-of-a-kind oddities in which nature has taken a backseat to the coursing pulse of the fantastical and the marvelous.*

Hoffman brings us yet another piece of history as she sets her story in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Coney Island begins to take shape. Here, Coralie Sardie's father sets up his freak show, which includes Coralie as the Human Mermaid and a menagerie of misfits that her father mistreats. His museum is, as suspected early on, not so much a magical and mysterious place as it is a tourist trap filled with fakery and lies that are on the precipice of being discovered by Eddie, a photographer that Coralie meets by accident after one of her swimming expeditions along the Atlantic shoreline. Coralie and Eddie are fascinated with each other but it takes several chapters for their love story to take shape. As Coney Island begins to take shape, Professor Sardie's museum falls into disrepair and he becomes desperate for tourists and the money in their pockets. Meanwhile, Eddie's photographs of the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire lead him to look for a woman who disappeared the day of the fire. Coralie's world collides with Eddie and where there are sparks, there are more fires in both of their futures. While I wouldn't call this one of Hoffman's best works, it's highly entertaining. If you're curious about the curiosities and oddities that used to populate the freak shows of the early 1900s, Hoffman won't let you down.

## **7. Someone, Alice McDermott**

*Pegeen Chehab walked up from the subway in the evening light.*

As first lines go, McDermott doesn't give us a thrilling opening. Instead, she goes for the everyday moment, the mundane task of coming home from a job, perhaps, or maybe heading out for the evening. We're in the city, of course, and in this case, that city is New York. McDermott is a master at making the ordinary life an extraordinary read. For what it's worth, I still recommend McDermott's *Charming Billy* to just about any book lover I encounter and I still stand by my belief that the first chapter of this book is one of the best first chapters out there. McDermott does New York, the working class, and love and longing well. While *Charming Billy* focused on the ordinary (albeit troubled) life of Billy Lynch in an Irish enclave of Queens, *Someone* turns toward Marie Commeford's daily doings in pre-Depression Brooklyn. We end up following Marie through periods of her life that, in McDermott's quiet and stunningly simple way, make us reflect on our own choices, losses, and experiences. If there's one thing Irish writers do well, it's death, loss and what happens to those after the wake is over. McDermott has mined that territory plenty in the past and returns to it here as Marie takes a job as an official mourner at a funeral parlor, deals with loss in her own life, and considers the opportunities not taken. Pegeen, Big Lucy, brother Gabe and many other minor characters enrich Marie's life as well as the narrative. If you're looking for a great epic narrative with lots of action, this book probably isn't for you. If you enjoy beautiful, meditative writing and an author's ability to make the ordinary extraordinary, McDermott is your girl.

## **8. About Grace, Anthony Doerr**

*He made his way through the concourse and stopped by a window to watch a man with two orange wands wave a jet into its gate.*

Yep, he's back. After reading *All The Light We Cannot See*, I wanted more Doerr. I'd already read his short story collections a couple of years ago so I picked up his first novel, *About Grace*. David Winkler has premonitions. In one recurring premonition, his infant daughter, Grace, drowns in a flood and he is

unable to save her. The vision disturbs him so deeply one stormy evening that he flees the country and eventually finds himself on a Caribbean island where he's taken in by another family who has a young daughter that captures his heart. The narrative moves back and forth through time. We begin with David on a plane heading toward the family he left behind 30 years ago and then flash back through time to the early days of his marriage, the time and the Caribbean, and up to the present. All the while, we're wondering (and hoping) and waiting to find out if Grace actually survived that stormy night. Winkler is a bit of a bungler but you have empathy for him from the get-go. Like the water and snowflakes Winkler studies, the narrative has a unique, eloquent beauty and, yes, grace as it unfolds. Doerr's love for and amazement of nature and science shine here, reminding me of some of Barbara Kingsolver's best moments in *Prodigal Summer* and *Poisonwood Bible*.

### **9. Enon, Paul Harding**

*Most men in my family make widows of their wives and orphans of their children.*

I read this right after I read *About Grace* so it was fitting that I entered into another father-daughter relationship. In this one, daughter Kate has recently died and her father, Charlie Crosby is attempting to manage his grief. (Side note: If you read Pulitzer Prize-winning *Tinkers*, you'll know that Charlie is the grandson of George Crosby; *Enon* picks up on Charlie's story.) Abandoned by his wife shortly after the funeral and left to fend for himself, Charlie doesn't fare so well. He sinks into a deep depression, soothed only by drug binges. Like I rooted for Winkler in *About Grace*, I rooted for Charlie to pull himself out of his grief and guilt. You'll just have to read it to see if Charlie prevails. Harding's writing has been described as lyrical which feels a little easy since he's also a musician but there is definitely a poetic, musical quality to his writing. I would also categorize it as "heady" writing – the kind that some enjoy and others may find too intellectual or slightly pretentious. If it's the latter, ask yourself whether you could ever write sentences and scenes like Harding does.

### **10. My Own Country, Abraham Verghese**

*Summer, 1985. A young man is driving down from New York to visit his parents in Johnson, Tennessee.*

Carole Dahlquist, an avid reader and long-time friend with impeccable taste in books, told me this was a must-read several years ago. I finally pulled it from my wish list and traveled back to the time when AIDS was an unfamiliar word in our national vocabulary. For a doctor like Verghese, who was stationed in the mountains of Tennessee, it wouldn't seem as if AIDS could impact the rural community of Johnson City, but he reminds you that AIDS and HIV wasn't just the "urban problem" many thought it to be at first. Verghese treats men and women, gay and straight, and relates to his patients on two levels: first as their physician and second as someone who understands what it's like to feel like an outsider. As a young Indian doctor in a very Appalachian town, Verghese and his wife don't necessarily fit in, just as those he treats feel as if the community they were raised in will shun them if others discover they are HIV-positive. Verghese explores the stigma surrounding AIDS as well as the personal lives of his patients with compassion, humor, and introspection that leads him to explore his own life and the decisions he's made.

### **BONUS: Short Story Collection: Bark, Lorrie Moore**

It's always a great year when Moore publishes something. While this collection didn't wow me as much as Moore's *Birds of America* did, the story, *Wings*, stayed with me for weeks.

### **Other books I read:**

The Secret History of Wonder Woman, Jill Lepore

A Few Seconds of Radiant Filmstrip, Kevin Brockmeier

Nora Webster, Colm Toibin

Margot, Jillian Cantor  
The Living, Lian Cullahan (friend of a friend)  
Emily Alone, Stewart O’Nan  
Astrid & Veronika, Linda Olsson  
The Ice Queen, Alice Hoffman  
Lucky Us, Amy Bloom  
Midwives, Chris Bojalian  
We Are Not Ourselves, Matthew Thomas  
Some Luck, Jane Smiley  
I Want To Show You More, Jamie Quatro