

Amy's Top 10 Books of 2017

Somewhere south of your wildest dreams / you put your faith right to the test.

This line from Dave's song, "The Long Fight," just about sums up 2017 as does the title of the song, for, in many ways, this year felt like a long fight.

Before you perceive the long fight as a tough struggle, let me quote Dave (a first in the 16-plus years I've been sending out my book list!): "This is a love song about having the right person by your side when, to paraphrase MLK, the moral arc of the universe is not quite bending towards justice. The song is ultimately about the people, ideas, and moments that keep us going, that help us maintain faith when the coming days look dark and uncertain." (If you want to hear the full song and album, check out [Pike 27.](#))

Whether it was politically, personally or collectively, it feels like many of us were either fighting for what we value and believe or fighting against injustices, hatred and lies. The thing is, we fight for things we love and we fight against those things that threaten to harm what we love.

My own long fight of 2017 is grounded in the "fighting for" category. I started off the year fighting for better work-life balance. In January 2017, I left Luxottica after 14 good years to join Fifth Third Bank as their Corporate Storyteller. The change wasn't easy. I said goodbye to great friends and left behind a solid reputation for an industry and a role that was relatively unknown to me, but I knew it was the move I had to make if I wanted to dedicate more time to fiction writing. Taking the risk paid off. I immediately used the two hours I used to spend commuting as my writing time. Within the first six weeks, I completed a short story that eventually landed in two literary journals, [The Masters Review Volume VI](#) (judged by the amazing Roxanne Gay) and [Bosque Literary Journal](#). Two other journals were also interested in the story but I had already said yes to *Masters* and *Bosque*. The two I turned down asked me to send more work their way so fingers crossed another story will find a home with one of them soon.

Novel writing, I'm learning, is most definitely a long fight. It takes time, focus and a whole lot of patience – three things that don't come easily to me. All told, I made good progress this year and it all began at the Writers in Paradise Workshop where I met some amazing writers who are in similar long fights with their creative pursuits. At the workshop, our wildly fantastic leader and author, Laura Lippmann, asked us to write down our intentions and make them known. While I didn't completely fulfill my intention to "finish the damn novel and send it to my agent before the end of the year," I came pretty close. I'll carry this same intention into 2018, and now that you know about it, you can all help me stick to my promise!

I turned 50 this year which put me in reflection mode. There's so much I'm grateful for – Dave and the dogs, my good health, a good job, my friends and family, the fact that we live a comfortable life. I recognize I have it pretty darn good. Yet, I also thought about where I want to go from here and how I want to live the "second half" of my life. What will my long fight look like in the next five, ten and, if I'm lucky, 20 to 30 years? These have always been big questions that Dave and I think about but they seem even more important now that we're officially in our 50s. I'm still thinking about it and don't have all the answers, but I do have some and I hope you'll see the products of them soon.

Among one of my most memorable experiences this year was teaching a writing class through the University of Cincinnati's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). The program is designed to inspire and educate lifelong learners above the age of 50. The 90 minutes I spent with my students each Wednesday became the most awesome part of my week. Their enthusiasm, talent and hunger to learn was boundless and we had a blast during our time together; so much so that I volunteered to teach again!

The fight to heal a torn hamstring took the better half of the year but I did slog through the Flying Pig and Queen Bee Half Marathons. Thanks to a stellar chiropractor and a return to Pilates at the end of the year, I'm finally running pain-free again and looking forward to training for the 20th anniversary of the Flying Pig Marathon in 2018.

As for Dave's long fight, it truly begins with Pike 27's recording of the full-length album, "The Long Fight." For a variety of reasons, this particular album was a long time in the making. There were several times Dave contemplated scrapping the project but they fought the good fight and officially released the CD in November. I know I'm biased because I'm married to and love the main songwriter and drummer (formerly lead singer and rhythm guitarist) but I'm thrilled they pushed this one across the finish line. In Pike's 16+ year history, I firmly believe the songs are some of the best Dave has ever written and the band has ever recorded.

Dave also experienced some changes in his job. In November, he left Cincinnati Children's Hospital and Medical Center for a new role at another company. Unfortunately, on Day Two, the company announced organizational changes and it immediately became clear that that Dave's role was not going to evolve as he expected. Fortunately, Dave had built strong relationships at Children's and had a good reputation as a leader. In January 2018, he will return to Children's in a new and promoted role as a Research Associate. We are no strangers to taking risks and we both recognize that, when you do, there's no guarantee they'll pan out as expected. This one will go down as a live-and-learn moment for the year.

Speaking of living and learning, we had more than our fair of both throughout the year. We saw one of our all-time favorite bands, U2, three times on The Joshua Tree Tour 2017, commemorating the 30th anniversary of the album. We shared the moment with good friends and fellow U2 fans in Louisville and Cleveland where we sang every word to every song and danced like a pack of raving teenagers. Then Dave and I planned our summer vacation around seeing U2 in Dublin, Ireland. We fell in love with London (the curry! the Tate Modern! the Tube! the pubs and neighborhoods!) and immersed ourselves into some of the history and culture of the city before heading to Dublin for what will always stand as an epic experience for us. You want pure joy? Stand among 80,000 U2 fans in the band's homeland and city. We made instant friends with the people surrounding us and there were hugs for everyone when the show ended. And talk about a band that has been in it for the long fight – U2 formed in 1976 and they're still making music together.

We also saw a bunch of great shows (see Dave's list of his fave music and moments [here](#)), traveled to New York City and New Mexico and had plenty of laughs with our friends. I also joined a fantastic book group filled with crazy smart and interesting women; I learn something new at every gathering. My wrap-up of this year cannot pass without mention of my year-long obsession with the world's most famous hippo, Fiona. I followed her long fight from the little hippo that almost didn't make it to the gal that keeps growing, not only in size but in popularity. For me and millions of others, Fiona was a beacon of happy, can-do moxie on the days we needed it most. Witnessing her beat the odds – with the help of the amazing Cincinnati Zoo team that fought to help her survive and thrive – gave us all something to smile about.

For those who have followed my annual book list over time, you know that the themes and patterns I experience in a given year also show up in what I'm reading. This year is no different as so many of the characters I encountered were in long fights of their own. We read for many reasons; among them is the desire to find out how someone, real or imagined, overcomes obstacles, how they fight the long fight, and how things turn out in the end for them. I'm happy to say the long fights you'll find among my top 10 are as diverse as they are provocative, as hilarious as they are heartwarming. I also love that four debut novels appear on my list . . . proof positive that there's still hope for writers like me and so many others.

If you're familiar with my list, you know I have very few rules but the rules I've had from the get-go remain:

- **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, London, and Canada to name a few fine countries.
- **My picks can be published in any year.** Why limit yourself to one year when there are so many great stories that deserve your attention?
- **The Top 10 is not in rank order . . .** with the exception of my Number One pick which is most definitely numero uno. Admittedly, two and three are usually in rank order as well but it's a free-for-all after that.
- **Let me know what you're reading.** A lot of your recommendations make it on my Top 10 or my reading pile. 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.

Wherever you are in your long fight(s), here's wishing you a fantastic new year of rich reading, great adventure and much health and happiness. As Dave's song says, "keep the faith now."

Amy's Top 10 of 2017

1. *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders

I'm definitely not the first person to place this novel at the top of the list. I started reading this in January 2017 and it remained number one throughout the year, with just one contender threatening to push it out of the top spot (see my #2 pick below). In my opinion, Saunders' imagination is unrivaled; he's a genius. And playful. And thoughtful. And intelligent. And crazy-weird in a good way. As one literary critic said: "In Saunders' world everything seems absurd until it breaks your heart." I don't know how he makes me care so much through all of the bizarre absurdity, but I do, and that's why this should be a "must" on your reading list.

The setting, for the most part, is the Oak Hill Cemetery where Willie Lincoln – yes, third son of Abraham and Mary Lincoln – is interred in a crypt shortly after he dies of typhoid. Alongside Willie are several others who are in what the Tibetan Buddhists call the Bardo – the transition from death to rebirth. Thing is, these guys and gals don't want to believe they're dead and they certainly don't want to succumb to what Saunders describes as the "matterlightblooming phenomenon" because it's unclear to them whether this lightblooming thing is heaven or hell. Willie's "sick form" (dead) meets Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins III, two men also in "sick form" in their "sick boxes" (crypts) who know that Willie's time in Oak Hill will be short because the young move on to lightblooming much faster than others.

When a grief-stricken Abraham Lincoln visits Willie inside his crypt and cradles the boy in his arms (some historians believe this to be fact) it sets off great confusion and alarm among the cemetery's spectral residents. From here, one enters the bizarre genre-blending world of Saunders where historical fiction mingles with the fantastical, and the grotesque and gothic romp around with satire and Shakespearean comedy and tragedy. The thing is, this isn't just a weird-for-weird's-sake type of story: there's solid rationale behind the weirdness and the experience of grief comes through loud and clear. I could tell you more but it's worth the read or, in fact, the listen. My friend Lara highly recommends the audio version of this strangely beautiful tale.

2. *The Nix* by Nathan Hill

Hurray for the hilarious yet heartfelt debut that, for a few months, was neck and neck with *Bardo* for the number one spot. Samuel Andreson-Anderson (that's not a typo), a washed-up writer and English professor, attempts to reconnect with his estranged mother when she turns up on cable television accused of some

politically-motivated hijinks. Desperate to write and publish something else in his lifetime, Samuel decides he'll write about his mother, a woman who disappeared on him when he was just a young boy. That's just one layer of this multi-layered story told from multiple points of view. There's also the character obsessed with a video game called Elfscape that Samuel befriends. There's the journey back into Samuel's childhood and teen years, told in a highly creative narrative form. And there's the whole theme of being haunted, whether it's by Samuel's unanswered questions about his mother or by the Nix itself, a not-always-nice Norwegian house spirit that Samuel is convinced is attached to him for life. Hill is a writing gymnast. He flips between multiple points of view and narrative threads effortlessly while keeping the story connected. At 620 pages, *The Nix* is a commitment but a thoroughly enjoyable one.

3. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving

"I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice—not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany." I've always known the opening line of this classic novel but I've never read it. I'm so glad I finally got around to it. When I reached the last page, I didn't want my time with Owen Meany and Johnny Wheelwright to end. This is a kitchen sink kind of book containing something for everyone. It's a coming of age story told in the retrospective, at times highly comedic and, conversely, heartbreaking. But it's also a war story, a family story, a love story, a mystery, and a story of friendship. We learn that Meany accidentally killed Johnny's mother when he hit a foul ball that landed on her noggin. Johnny, who never knew his father and now lives with his grandmother in her big mansion, is convinced that his father was at the ill-fated baseball game and begins the quest to find him. Meanwhile, his best friend Owen believes he's the instrument of God. Owen is a veritable punching bag for the kids in town, yet despite their incessant teasing, they also sort of admire him; at least when Owen isn't annoying the hell out of them. We follow Owen and Johnny up and out of their teens into adulthood where Owen's God complex grows out of proportion, culminating in a self-fulfilled prophecy. Or was it simply prophetic? Irving leaves that decision up to the reader. We sometimes reach for a classic novel to see if the story and characters stand the test of time. *Meany* spoke to me about the power of friendship and loyalty, about standing up for and standing by others. In that regard, the story remains relevant today. If nothing else, read it for the Christmas pageant scene—I dare you not to laugh out loud.

4. *The Ninth Hour* by Alice McDermott

For those who know my reading preferences, you know that I'll always read an Alice McDermott book and it's likely that it will end up in my top 10—*Charming Billy*, *Someone*, *Child of My Heart*, *That Night*, you'll find them all in past lists. I admire the heck out of her work, even more so since I had the opportunity to be in her workshop at the Sewanee Writers Conference a couple of years ago. Sentence for sentence, she's a titan. I marvel at the specificity and particularity she brings to the page, and if you ever take a workshop with her, these are two things she'll point to when she talks about next-level writing. This is a woman who can make a nun doing the laundry as intriguing as Russians interfering with an election. In *The Ninth Hour*, you'll spend a lot of time sorting through each character's dirty laundry.

McDermott drops us into the Irish Catholic section of Brooklyn in the early twentieth century where a young Irish immigrant commits suicide, leaving his pregnant wife, Annie, to fend for herself. Sister Saint Saviour of The Little Nursing Sisters of the Sick Poor takes pity on Annie and her newborn daughter, Sally, and gives Annie a job in the convent's laundry. Sally grows up among the nuns and her journey into adulthood becomes the main focus. Narrated by Sally's children, the story gives off an aura of family folklore where truth gets stretched into exaggerated legend. Through Annie, Sally and the nuns, McDermott tackles the tougher sides of life – sin and secrets, guilt, depression. As much Annie and Sally captured my attention, the three main nuns, Sisters Illuminata, Jeanne and Lucy, captured my heart. The nuns play key roles in the major plot twists but don't ask me to give those away. If you're Irish or Catholic or both, you'll devour this slim novel. If you like historical fiction or New York fiction, you might also enjoy this. Bonus: you'll learn more about how to remove

stains (and yes, there's a big, big metaphor in here regarding removing the stain of sin) than you'd ever imagine possible.

5. *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan* by Ruth Gilligan

Having just mentioned Ireland above, I'll stick with that theme and introduce you to Gilligan's lovely debut novel that floats as effortlessly as a swan between characters, plot lines and time periods. My friend Kevin gave me a huge sack of books when he moved to Miami, FL and this was my first pick out of the pile. For better or worse, critics compare Gilligan's novel to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, mainly because it's about the Irish-Jewish experience (Leopold Bloom was Jewish and converted to marry Molly Tweedy) and because there are plenty of references to *Ulysses* in the text – Clanbrassil Street, June sixteenth (Bloomsday) and more. For me, the comparison's stop there; Gilligan's story is far more accessible than Joyce's epic tome that every writer claims to have read but most haven't.

Nine Folds offers three main story lines that loosely connect the characters but the strongest connections appear in the overall theme. This is all about identity, belonging and the religious ties that bind or break us. We first meet the Greenburg family on a boat heading to New York. For reasons unexplained, the boat goes no farther than Cork, Ireland. Patriarch Moshe Greenburg, a peddler who dreams of being a playwright, settles his family here. His daughter Ruth becomes central to the first story line and one of the others. In the second thread, we meet Shem who turned mute on his bar mitzvah. Sent to an institution by his parents, Shem meets cranky Alf, another Irish Jew who pleads with Shem to write down the story of his one true love. Between these two threads is Irish Catholic Aisling who is struggling in her relationship with Jewish Noah. Here, Gilligan explores the deep roots of religious tradition and the difficult choices men and women face when those traditions are challenged. Aisling feels as if she's straddling two cultures, two worlds and must decide what she's willing to give up or take on. At its core, *Nine Folds* is an immigrant story that explores the challenges of assimilation and being a stranger in a strange land. As Aisling puts it: "And then what about translating people—reconfiguring them in terms you can better understand. Like changing some aspect of yourself to suit the person you love. Only by the end of it you might not be the same person anymore. No, you might have become someone else altogether."

6. *Idaho* by Emily Ruskovich

Now it's time for the third debut novel on my list. As the title alludes to, the state of Idaho acts as a main character in this story. We're introduced to rural, mountainous Idaho where Ann Mitchell, the second wife of Wade, sits in an abandoned pickup truck and tries to imagine what happened a decade earlier when Wade's first wife, Jenny, killed her daughter May as another daughter disappeared into the woods never to be seen again. Wade, now struggling with early-stage dementia, has never told Ann what actually happened and even though Jenny was sentenced to life in prison, it has never been clear whether May's death was an accident or premeditated murder. Knowing that Wade's memory is fading fast, Ann sets out to find the answers but this isn't a predictable murder mystery and it doesn't move like one; instead, the plot shifts from the present to the past and between multiple points of view. It's a complex read that demands your attention and grabs it with incredible detail and ruminations about the power of memory as well as blocking out that which we'd prefer never to remember again. This is a dark story with a strong love line running from the first to last page so don't be discouraged by the grim topic.

7. *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid

It wouldn't be my annual book list without at least one pick that leans toward magic realism, one of my favorite genres. Recommended by fellow book lover and friend Janet, I read this early in the year and then passed the recommendation on to several others. Saeed and Nadia live in an unnamed country that refugees are flocking to while militants are taking up arms. Rumors have circulated that there are secret doors in the city that transport people to other places. As war takes over the city, love begins to take over Saeed and Nadia. With the internet and cellphones no longer working, Saeed and Nadia find it difficult and dangerous to see

each other yet they persist, taking risks, they normally wouldn't take. Finally, with the city ready to crumble, they seek out the magical doors, knowing that it may separate them forever. Fortunately, they land in a refugee camp in Greece, then London, then San Francisco. Their relationship and their identities are tested to the breaking point and you'll have to read for yourself how things turn out for them. Between their storyline are other vignettes about fellow travelers that round out the novel's themes of migration and the refugee experience. Hamid's magical vision of the refugee crisis is hope-fueled. He gives us an alternate world where people can open a door and find a safe place. If only these welcoming doors existed for refugees today.

8. *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* by Carol Rifka Brunt

This debut sat in my book pile for nearly two years, then got lost in a shuffle of bookcases in our house. I'd forgotten about it until it resurfaced after yet another bookcase rearrangement; clearly I have a book problem! Set in 1980s New York City, two teenage sisters, June and Greta, lose their beloved Uncle Finn to AIDS. June is especially devastated by the loss and we follow her as she moves through her grief and develops a secret friendship with Finn's lover, Toby. Through Toby, June discovers the secrets of her uncle's life as an artist while she also comes of age and discovers that there are many kinds of love. While June is off exploring, her sister Greta is falling apart. Grief, as we know, impacts people in different ways and Brunt does a nice job contrasting the experiences of these two sisters. Central to the narrative is a portrait of June and Greta that Uncle Finn completed just before his death. Sought after by art collectors, the painting becomes a symbol of sibling rivalry and more. At its core, this is a story of love and friendship, one that's told with a great deal of empathy and heart.

9. *Last Night at the Lobster* by Stewart O'Nan

Sometimes it's good to re-read novels you love to see if you can find something new in them to love. I hadn't read *Lobster* in several years but after meeting O'Nan at the Writers in Paradise Workshop in January 2017, I decided to go back to the first book of his I had read. Anyone who's ever worked in a restaurant, from the fanciest to the dive-iest, will appreciate this slim yet powerful story. Yet the true appreciation comes from just how well O'Nan creates the deep characters that populate the Red Lobster on the restaurant's final night of business. Set in wintertime Connecticut as a snowstorm approaches, you can feel the cold and slush seeping through the doors of the near-empty restaurant as Manny DeLeon, Lobster manager, wants to do right by his employees. Manny is getting transferred to a nearby Olive Garden and taking some of the employees with him but others have either quit already or are working their last night for the Lobster. Like any restaurant culture, there's drama and dysfunction between the servers and cooks which makes for fun reading. But O'Nan goes deeper than that, giving us a slice of working-class America without getting sappy or preachy. As you're reading, you'll feel like you've made a few new friends or you'll feel like you've reconnected with some old ones because O'Nan makes his characters feel that real. I've always believed that there are loud and quiet novels – those with big sweeping narrative arcs and drama and those that whisper to you. This is a quiet one but, in that quiet, O'Nan says so much about relationships, friendships, regrets and letting go.

10. *Perfect Little World* by Kevin Wilson

Kevin Wilson wrote one of my favorite contemporary short stories, "Tunneling to the Center of the Earth." If you haven't read it, give yourself the gift of 30 minutes to check it out. Or try *Family Fang*, his hilarious yet heartfelt novel about the quirky Fang family. In *Perfect Little World*, Wilson returns to the family theme, this time focused on whether there can ever be such a thing as a perfect family. We meet Izzy Poole, a recent high school graduate who is pregnant with her art teacher's baby. With no support from the art teacher (a bit of tragedy ensues there) and an alcoholic father who can't help her, Izzy decides to keep the baby when she hears about the Infinite Family Project, an experiment created by psychologist Dr. Preston Grind. In the project, ten children and their parents live communally and care for each other's babies. The children don't know who their biological parents are but, of course, the parents do, and that's what generates the majority of the conflict in the commune. Grind himself lost a child when he was married so there's a sense of longing and grieving not only with Grind but with the parents who thought they'd be able to keep to the project's strict

promise that the children would be raised communally. While I couldn't suspend my disbelief for the duration of the novel, Wilson's sense of humor and whimsy were enough to keep me reading. Parents will contemplate whether they could ever live in such an arrangement while all of us who read it may consider what "family" really means and do we sometimes define it too narrowly.

Nonfiction Bonus: *Cork Dork* by Bianca Bosker

I'm neither a wine connoisseur nor a huge nonfiction reader but I still found myself loving this book about a woman who leaves her job as a journalist to pursue becoming a sommelier or a "cork dork" as they call themselves. Being a beer drinker who loves fiction, I was ready to be bored by what I perceived would be a story about a snooty, upper-class group of wine lovers. I was completely wrong. Bosker renders the sommeliers and restauranteurs as the obsessed people they are but does so with hilarity and love. Would I want to be in a room with them talking about wine? Hell no. But reading about them is another thing entirely. The chapters on the science of taste and smell alone are worth the read.

DNF (did not finish)

***The People We Hate at the Wedding* by Grant Ginder** – Sorry folks, but this felt like it was written by a bro for bro culture and I hated the whiny, privileged tone from page one. Too bad the title held such promise. If you read it and loved it, tell me why and I'll try again. Otherwise, this one goes in the donation pile.

Everything Else I Read in 2017

***Little Fires Everywhere*, Celeste Ng**

***A Separation*, Katie Kitamura**

***Transit*, Rachel Cusk**

***The Most Dangerous Thing*, Laura Lippmann**

***Joy*, Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu**

***The Daylight Marriage*, Heidi Pitlor**

***The Princess Diarist*, Carrie Fisher**

***Comfort*, Ann Hood**

***The Stars Are Fire*, Anita Shreve**

***Saints for All Occasions*, J. Courtney Sullivan**

***Upstream*, Mary Oliver (poetry)**

***Gypsy Moth Summer*, Julia Fierro**

***The Great Perhaps*, Joe Meno**

***Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*, Neil deGrasse Tyson**

***The Leavers*, Lisa Ko**

***All the Birds in the Sky*, Charlie Jane Anders**

***Manhattan Beach* (finishing as I type), Jennifer Egan**