

Amy's Top 10 Books of 2021

Oh, resilience! It's one of the most overused words the past two years for the quality we've all needed in abundance. In 2020, my resilience waned. Veterans of this list will recall that I couldn't get into a reading or writing groove while it felt like the world was collapsing. Good news—I refueled my resilience tank in 2021, got back into the stacks and broke through one of the worst writer's blocks I've ever experienced.

I worked my way through 34 books this year while also working through some major life changes that required a modicum of resilience. Dave and I decided to make a big move that involved selling and buying houses and traveling almost 1,400 miles west to Albuquerque, New Mexico with our two Aussies, Seamus and Annie. Prior to packing up the moving van and the car, we downsized significantly, selling some stuff and making no less than 17 trips to Goodwill. We Marie Kondo'd our way through old photos and childhood memorabilia, sloughing off bins filled with things we'd hung onto for decades. Some of it we kept. Some got digitized. Some hopefully became someone else's treasure like, for example, Dave's old leather motorcycle jacket that one of the Goodwill volunteers tried on before I drove out of the parking lot. It felt good to simplify our lives, and it gave us a sense of freedom while we carried on in a semi-lockdown state due to the pandemic. There are hard tradeoffs any time you make a big change and the hardest was saying goodbye to good friends and family, a solid network that we are forever grateful to have.

In short order, Dave started a new job as Director of Community Research at United Way of Central New Mexico, and I kept plugging away at Fifth Third in a remote working situation. I got back into the writing habit by making a commitment to work on my novel for at least 30 minutes a day. Those sessions often go beyond that time. While I've been fine-tuning the novel, Dave joined a band, Dust City Opera, and continued to fine-tune his drumming and composing skills. All of the above occurred while we were caring for our best boy, Seamus, who was diagnosed in January 2021 with Stage 4 lymphoma in his bone marrow. We were blessed with nine extra months with him as we navigated chemo treatments and numerous trips to the vet. We still miss his joyful "woo" and his big, happy presence. Several weeks after we said goodbye to Seamus, along came Louie, our sixth Aussie. Louie is working on his own form of resilience as we try to help him overcome separation anxiety. His anxiety is no joke; it's unlike anything we've experienced in our 30 years of Aussie buddies. To all the dog parents who have dealt with this, you have our utmost respect and empathy.

Although 2021 came with some big changes and challenges, it will stand out as pivotal for both of us. Once, when we were considering the move, I asked Dave, "What if it turns out to be the best thing we've ever done?" Thus far, the answer is affirmative. Albuquerque's mountains, sunshine and friendliness embraced us immediately. I joined a running group and have learned that running in altitude is incredible but also an uphill climb until you acclimate. We've made a few new friends, and we're especially enjoying the robust craft brewery scene here. By especially enjoying, I mean that we've taste-tested brews at 29 different breweries, all within a 15-minute drive from our house.

If you're a veteran reader of this list, you know that my reading life often mirrors my real life. It seems I gravitate toward a certain type of story with particular themes I can relate to because of what I'm experiencing around me. This year, two themes major emerged. Resilience, of course, along with the desire to feel seen and heard. The characters I encountered experienced big upheavals in their lives and had to find ways to bounce back or else face dire consequences. As Winston Churchill said, "If you're going through hell, keep going." That's what most of the characters I encountered were doing. We tend

to love stories with characters who fall down and get back up again, and we read in the hopes that they will rise more than fall unless, of course, we don't like the character very much and wish for them to fail.

I also encountered several characters that just wanted someone to see them for who they were—to accept them without judgment. Human nature, right? We've all had periods in our lives that required us to buck up and be resilient. We also know what it feels like when someone "gets us," truly sees and hears who we are, and what it feels like when our core Self is ignored or rejected. In most cases, the characters were also grappling with how the past was impacting their present and potential future. Again, a situation we can all relate to.

I read so many fabulous books this year that I struggled to select my numero uno. At one point, I had four books in the running for Number One. At least I narrowed it down to two and I've left those two books tied for first. That might seem like a cop-out, but it's my list and I make the rules.

Speaking of rules, for those book lovers getting this list for the first time, there are a few rules I have followed every year for over 20 years:

- **You're now part of a pact.** I send you the list. You forward it to other book-loving friends. The fun part for me is seeing just how far the list travels. Someday, Dave Grohl will read this list and tell me he thinks it's fucking cool. If you can get me to Dave Grohl, I'll think you're fucking cool.
- **There's also a second stipulation in the pact.** You email me or text me to let me know what you're reading. If your recommendation makes it onto my Top 10 next year, you'll get full credit.
- **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.** Number One is most definitely numero uno. Beyond that, it's a free-for-all.

Here's wishing all of you a happy, healthy 2022 where we can set aside the need to be oh-so resilient in favor of some other R's like rest, relaxation, rejuvenation, rediscovering what brings us joy and, of course, reaping the rewards of reading great books.

1A. *Hamnet*, by Maggie O'Farrell

This pick came highly recommended by fellow book lovers like Pat Hoffmann, Amy Brandabur Hunter and others. It sat on my wish list in 2020, and I'm glad I waited for a time when I could devour it in three sittings. There were jaw-dropping moments throughout this tale, places where I sighed with pleasure or grimaced in pain right along with the characters. Right after I finished it, I gave it to my mom to read. She also finished it in a few sittings. Upon closing the book, she said, "Maggie O'Farrell must know what it's like to lose a child." While O'Farrell hasn't experienced that exact loss, she's experienced brushes with death in many forms (read her memoir, *I Am, I Am, I Am*). Also, she has a daughter with life-threatening allergies and, as a mother, she's hypervigilant about the perils her daughter can encounter including, for example, someone opening a bag of peanuts on an airplane. It's this kind of "writing what you know" transformed into fiction that makes for such an incredible, engrossing story.

In real life, Hamnet was the son of Anne Hathaway and William Shakespeare. In O'Farrell's retelling, Anne is renamed Agnes and William's name is rarely mentioned. We encounter the family in Stratford, England when Shakespeare is just a burgeoning playwright and Hamnet is 11 years old. The bubonic plague reaches the town and, in the opening chapter, Hamnet is trying to find help for his twin sister, Judith, who has fallen ill. Agnes is away from the house—something she will always regret—and by the time she returns, Hamnet is also down with the plague. No spoiler alert here because it's clear from the

book jacket copy that Hamnet won't survive. The rest of the narrative toggles between Agnes' grief, the early days of the couple's relationship, how Agnes handles being shunned by her family as well as Shakespeare's, and how the family attempts to carry on despite their loss—all while Shakespeare is working on one of his classics, *Hamlet*, of course.

There's a stunning chapter where O'Farrell imagines how the plague spreads from "patient zero" to her children. I read it twice because it's that good. As is the depiction of Agnes' intuition and "witchery" and other scenes that feature childbirth and what life was like back in the 1600s.

After Hamnet's death, Shakespeare goes off to London to finish writing and putting *Hamlet* on stage. Other things occur that impact Agnes but I won't spoil it for you. Through O'Farrell's reimagination of Shakespeare's life, we see that, in *Hamlet*, he inverts the real-life story. You might remember that the ghost of the King of Denmark tells his son, Hamlet, to avenge his murder by killing the new king (Hamlet's uncle). In Shakespeare's real life, his son died, so are we to assume his writing of *Hamlet* was a way to avenge his son's death and assuage his guilt? It made me want to revisit the play, something I plan to do this year.

As much as there's a thread of fathers and sons in this story – Shakespeare's father was a wretched man—this is more of a story about mothers and sons, marriage, grief, the power of women, human resilience and how life experience can shape one's art. O'Farrell is at the top of her game in tone, style and emotional punches here. You might cry right along with Agnes, but you'll gush more over the sheer beauty and force of this tale, some of which is based in fact and the rest all a concoction of O'Farrell's brilliant imagination. In Act 1, Scene 5, the ghost says to Hamlet: "It is Adieu, adieu. Remember me." It is a call for revenge in the play. Yet, when it appears in O'Farrell's story, it feels like an appeal to remember this story for a long time. You will, I promise. If you haven't read this, please do. Then, go re-read *Hamlet*.

1B. *The Absolutist*, by John Boyne

Boyne made my top 10 list in 2016 with *A History of Loneliness*. I enjoyed that novel for its thought-provoking take on how the Catholic Church buried cases of sexual abuse and the impact it had on not only the victims but also those who were implicit in the cover-up.

Boyne has explored themes of abuse, sexuality, longing and loss, and secrets in his other works, including *The Absolutist*. Here, it's 1919 and Tristan Sadler is a closeted gay man enlisted in the army during World War I. As the story opens, he's journeyed to the town where his wartime friend, Will Bancroft, lived before he died. Tristan has come to the town to visit Will's family. We, as readers, sense that Tristan has a big confession to share with Will's sister, but that story doesn't crystalize until much later in the book.

The narrative weaves between present day and Tristan's time on the frontlines in France—a structure I tend to enjoy. Tristan meets Will and other soldiers at training in Aldershot. They're under the leadership of Sergeant Clayton who is brutal at the start and becomes even more so during battle. Wolf, another soldier in training, declares he's a pacifist and endures Clayton's abuse. Will takes up for Wolf and Tristan sees Will as heroic. As Tristan begins to develop feelings for Will, Will advances on and retreats from Tristan, causing emotional turmoil for both of them. As the rules and lines of their friendship become murkier, Will takes a stand in the trenches and declares he can no longer engage in war. Boyne masterfully balances the war in the trenches with the war both Tristan and Will are battling within themselves. When Boyne puts us back in Tristan's present-day, we see how his internal struggle

continues. He waffles on how much to reveal to Will's family about his relationship with Will and about Will's death.

This is a tension-filled page-turner in the best way. The writing is sparse at times, but our imaginations can easily fill in the blanks, and I believe Boyne may have written this way on purpose—wanting readers to consider how they would have handled the ethical and moral dilemmas Tristan and Will confront. Would we have fought or become a pacifist—an absolutist is the term used for Will. The fine line between bravery and cowardice is explored here, and the stakes are high from the first page to the last. As is whether Tristan will surmount or succumb the obstacles before him. We are left wondering if Tristan's choices and outcome would have been any different (I won't tell you what they are) had someone truly seen and heard him for who he was. Bravery, shame, jealousy, passion, guilt, loss, anger, confusion, betrayal – all the major human emotions are here. Don't pass it up because it sounds like yet another war-time novel. The outer war is less of the story than the inner war. There's plenty to learn and contemplate here, and this would be a terrific selection for book groups.

2. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer

"Hold out your hands and let me lay upon them a sheaf of freshly picked sweetgrass, loose and flowing, like freshly washed hair." That's the first line of this beautiful collection of essays, a line along with many others that made me wish I would have picked this up as an audio book because each essay reads like a meditation, a prayer and a soothing bedtime tale all wrapped into one. During the pandemic, climate change times we're experiencing, there couldn't be a better time to read this book. Fellow book and nature lover, Teri Gilligan recommended this to me before it became a surprise bestseller.

Kimmerer is a Native American (Potawatami), a distinguished professor of environmental biology, a mother of two and a grandmother. The essays feature some of the lessons she taught her students as well as her big love and big worries for our planet. Kimmerer gently pleads with us to recognize the damage we've done and continue to do our environment. Her tone is never preachy or academic, nor is it all doom-and-gloom. Her scientific expertise is easy to read, and she weaves Native American myths and wisdom into musings on everything from cedar trees to moss to sweetgrass—all while showing us what nature can teach us if only we'd take the time to listen and learn. I learned about Sky Woman and how some tribes tell the creation story through her. I also learned the importance of sweetgrass and the rituals that surround it. Having just moved to New Mexico about the time I finished the book, I found myself searching for sweetgrass here and thanking the sun for shining each day.

She also reminds us of the privileges we receive from nature and how we should, in return, thank the Earth by not destroying it. She believes that natural resources are resilient, and that gratitude might just be the medicine we need to heal the environment. It can be hard to feel hopeful with climate change accelerating like it is, but Kimmerer gives us ideas for changing the way we live and interact with nature that could buy us some time. With each essay, you'll learn something new, not only about our environment but also about yourself, what you value and what deserves to be valued more by all of us.

3. *Shuggie Bain*, by Douglas Stuart

This was the first book I read in 2021 and it stayed in the Number One spot for quite a while. In fact, there was a brief period where I had a four-way tie for the top spot, but I finally narrowed it down. This is also Stewart's debut novel, and I have a soft spot for any debut novel that's considered an underdog for the Booker Prize and then actually runs away with it. *Shuggie* is a young boy growing up in poverty in the 1980s in Glasgow, Scotland. His mother is an alcoholic, his father has abandoned the family, his

siblings are no help, and he's an outcast among his peers. He talks like an adult even though he's only five years old when the story opens. He likes to dress up in fancy clothes. Shuggie is teased relentlessly, called a "poofter" by other kids. You know instantly that this is not a kid who will fare well on the mean streets of this gritty city.

His mother, Agnes, struggles mightily to stop drinking. Each time she makes headway, usually with Shuggie's support, she backslides. As his mother slides deeper and deeper into the cups, the bullying increases. Yet, no matter what's thrown at Shuggie—and there is plenty literally and figuratively thrown at him—he picks himself up to battle through another day. Talk about resilience. The story is enough to break your heart, but you'll also find yourself laughing at the wee bits of humor thrown in the narrative. From page one until the end, I cheered Shuggie on, wishing for an escape route to open up so he and his mother could find a way up and out of poverty. I wished for Shuggie to be seen and heard by at least one person—good news on that front, he does find a bit of love and friendship. That said, Stuart spares no punches when it comes to how tough poverty and addiction can be. This novel certainly fit my booklist themes, but I'll be honest, the plot can sometimes be as grim as the cloudy days in Scotland, even with a glimmer of sunshine and hope here and there. Life is hard. The human spirit is resilient. That paradox exists here in abundance.

4. *Oh William!*, by Elizabeth Strout

I'm a huge fan of Elizabeth Strout, and nearly all of her books have made my Top 10 list. I book-bullied many friends to read *Olive Kitteridge* which is certainly on my Top 100 books of all time. Here, Strout returns with Lucy Barton, the main character in *My Name is Lucy Barton* and *Anything is Possible*. If this pick is your first encounter with Lucy, you don't need all the backstory from the previous books; it's helpful but not necessary.

Lucy is as memorable as Olive and just as straightforward. In *Oh William!*, Lucy revisits her relationship with her first husband, William, after her second husband, David, has died. Her two daughters are grown. She's grieving and lonely, and she finds a confusing solace in the friendship she and William have always had. As for William, he's on his third wife, Estelle, but things aren't going very well. We know from previous Lucy Barton novels that William is a philanderer and that Lucy had a traumatic childhood. She grew up poor and in an abusive home. Lucy revisits her past here, but the mentions are fleeting and, again, Strout gives the reader enough information that you're not missing anything if you don't have the full backstory.

When William discovers a family secret, he asks Lucy to travel to Maine where they may or may not confront the skeletons lurking in his family's closet. During their trip, they recount their marriage as well as their childhoods, unearthing thoughts and feelings they have never expressed to one another. Here again, there's a sense that both Lucy and William want to feel seen and heard, not only with each other but in the larger world. Lucy admits that she has felt invisible most of her life—such a sad feeling—and William admits that he felt rejected as a child which, Lucy wonders, might be why he had numerous affairs. Even though Lucy and William haven't been married for years, there's still love between them, along with the frustration and tension that can creep into any long-term relationship. I'm always amazed at Strout's ability to write so simply and direct but with such depth and emotion. Oh Lucy! How I adore you!

5. *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain*, by George Saunders

Two of my favorite things wrapped into one—Russian literature and George Saunderson's brilliance. This took me right back to getting my M.F.A. in Creative Writing and felt like one of the best master classes in

writing one could take. It also made me wish I'd had Saunders as a professor. His humor shines through each of the lessons here, and I got to revisit some of my favorite short stories from Russian authors I admire. I have one of his brief lessons written on a Post-it note that I keep near my computer: "That's all a story is, really: a continual system of escalation." As a writer who gets lost in characterization and setting, I need this kind of reminder. What's apparent is that Saunders considers himself a lifelong learner. Every time he re-reads the stories included here, he encounters something that speaks to him in new ways. He dissects the stories page by page, scene by scene. He's taught these stories for nearly 20 years but still discovers something new in them with each read. The stories also leave him with unanswered questions and his own theories on their plots, themes and what the author might have been attempting to convey or missed conveying entirely. His lessons are just as much about reading stories closely as they are about writing. All I can say is, "Eureka! Amazing! Huzzah!" I will revisit this one often.

6. *Astonish Me*, by Maggie Shipstead

Speaking of Russians, I read Shipstead's tale of a woman who falls in love with a Russian dancer at the same time I was reading Saunders. (Yes, I typically have at least two books going at the same time—one is my read-before-bed book, and the other is my read-after-dinner book.)

Joan, a ballerina, meets Soviet dancer, Arslan Rusakov, when she's on the rise, but she's not quite good enough to make the leap into the elite world of ballet. Rusakov uses Joan's love for him to help him defect from Russia. Once safely in New York City, he throws Joan over and she's devastated. Joan ends up marrying a man who has nothing to do with dancing and attempts to set aside her love of ballet—and her bitterness at not making it big—until her son shows major promise as a dancer. Joan's friends, Gary and Sandy, also have a daughter who loves to dance. Joan begins coaching their daughter as well as her son. Lives intertwine, secrets unfold, and Joan faces her old love Rusakov once again.

The narrative moves back and forth in time, so we see Joan as an aspiring dancer struggling to compete, struggling to be seen as the dancer she always dreamed of becoming. We also see envy creep in as her son's star rises higher than hers once did. If you like a well-written story with a few plot twists and generally likable characters, this one's for you. Perfect for your next vacation or when you want a fast-paced read. I liked this one enough that I put Shipstead's latest, *The Great Circle*, on hold at the library.

7. *Good Company*, by Cynthia D'Aprix Sweeney

Sweeney's novel, *The Nest*, made my Top 10 in 2016. That novel was filled with family dysfunction and some hilarious scenes. In *Good Company*, Sweeney turns to marital and relationship dysfunction. There are hints of her sense of humor here as well—all at the expense of the fakery that can be Hollywood and the lives of has-been celebrities.

In the first chapter, Flora discovers her husband's wedding ring hidden in the garage. Julian told her he'd lost it years ago so, obviously, something is rotten in this relationship and in this hoity-toity Los Angeles neighborhood. We learn early on that Flora and Julian are both actors who once called New York City home but eventually found their way to California where their friends, Margot and David, live. Margot is everything Flora is not—or so it seems at first. A once successful soap opera star, Margot is seemingly happily married, the kind of woman who appears to have everything going for her on the surface. As the story moves on, Flora's view of Margot and David changes, as does her view of Julian and their relationship.

Sweeney employs multiple points of view so we can see the story unfolding between this foursome from different angles, but we mostly hang on to Flora's perspective. When Flora learns that the ring she's found is tied to Julian's infidelity, we follow Flora as she decides whether she should stay or go. It may sound like a story you've read numerous times over, but in Sweeney's hands it feels less cliché. And the way she pokes fun at Hollywood lifestyles will give you a few laughs.

8. *This Is How It Always Is*, by Laurie Frankel

Recommended by Westwood running pals, Kathy Bach and Victoria Bischoff, Frankel takes on the topic of raising a transgendered child. Whereas Shuggie Bain was left to grapple with his sexual identity with no support system, the child in this book has far more support and privilege. Claude, the fifth child in a family of five boys, is unlike his brothers. Claude puts on a dress when he's about five years old and decides that's his apparel of choice going forward. His parents, Rosie and Penn, think it's just a phase—until it isn't. Soon, Claude is leading a double life. He dresses as a girl at home and a boy at school. The family tries to keep it a secret—until they can't.

Claude's life is upended, as is the family's, but Claude's parents try to do what they think is best—until they realize their version of what they thought was best for Claude might not be the best. Again, wanting to be seen and heard and accepted for who we truly are rings loud in this novel. Frankel has a transgender child. In interviews, she states that the novel is not about her child; at least not exactly. That said, she writes with authority about how parents navigate this situation and the decisions both child and parents must make.

9. *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox & The Horse*, Charlie Mackesy

The illustrations alone are reason to buy this book instead of borrowing it from the library. Just looking at the drawings will bring you peace. I cried my way through the first read and then re-read it, then gave it to Dave to read. There's a Zen-like quality to the book. It's not a linear story as much as it is a collection of musings and meditations on friendship, life, love and philosophy.

Some may assume it's a children's book but it's truly a book for anyone. I had no idea until I read more about Mackesy that the book had its beginnings on Instagram in 2018 where he began posting illustrations of a boy with his animal friends. It was published in 2021 and became an instant hit. The Boy, somewhat lonely, is walking about when he meets the Mole, the Fox and the Horse. Each animal offers answers to the big things and big questions on the Boy's mind. The Horse is especially wise. All I know is that we could all use a mole, fox and horse in our circle of friends. If the ongoing pandemic is bringing you down, sink into these pages for a quick lift.

10. *Weather*, by Jenny Offill

And now for something completely different. If you know Offill's work, you know she doesn't write a typical, linear narrative. Nor does she move back and forth in time in a structured way. Her form and style are experimental. If you didn't read *Department of Speculation*, then you need to know Offill writes in short paragraphs, sometimes no more than a sentence long. The paragraphs don't always connect to each other, and she uses white space liberally. You feel like you've entered the main character's stream of conscious, but, weirdly, it works. Perhaps because the way we think today is so fast and fractured, what with being bombarded by social media and other digital inputs.

In *Weather*, Lizzie, a college librarian, is worried about her brother who's recovering from a drug addiction, worried about her husband and daughter, and absolutely worried about climate change. It's a stressful cocktail but Lizzie approaches it all with a sharp wit and even sharper comebacks when she

takes on a side hustle answering doomsday emails for one of her former professors. Lizzie is also a big empath so everyone in her circle tends to rely on her, including her brother who has a baby with a woman and ends up the caretaker. Actually, Lizzie ends up taking on the caretaking role to help him, or, in Lucy's mind, to save him and the baby. Lizzie spends a lot of her time worrying about saving things—the planet, her brother, her marriage—and about whether these things can be saved at all.

Some may find Offill's form off-putting because it's so atypical of what we typically read. I find it intriguing although, admittedly, it takes me several pages to get into her wonky rhythm. I could never write like her and that's what makes me admire her work even more.

All the books I read this year in the order I read them:

Shuggie Bain, by Douglas Stuart
Braving the Wilderness, by Brene Brown
Nothing to See Here, by Kevin Wilson
The Blind Assassin, Margaret Atwood
Monkey Beach, Eden Robinson
The Boy, The Mole, The Fox & Horse, Charlie Mackesy
How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy, by Jenny Odell
This Is How It Always Is, by Laurie Frankel
I Am, I Am, I Am, by Maggie O'Farrell
A Swim in The Pond in the Rain, by George Saunders
Astonish Me, by Maggie Shipstead
Writers & Lovers, by Lily King
My Year of Rest and Relaxation, by Ottessa Moshfegh
Mudlarking: Lost and Found on the River Thames, by Lara Maiklem
Braiding Sweetgrass, by Robin Wall Kimmerer
Negative Space, Lilly Dancy
When We Were Magic, by Sarah Gailey
The Absolutist, by John Boyne
The Unfinished Work of Elizabeth D, by Nichole Bernier
Good Company, by Cynthia D'Aprix Sweeney
The Language of Flowers, by Vanessa Diffenbaugh
The Butterfly Lampshade, by Aimee Bender
Weather, by Jenny Offill
Bear Town, by Frederik Backman
The Plague, by Albert Camus
My Brilliant Friend, by Elena Ferrante
Hamnet, by Maggie O'Farrell
A Children's Bible, by Lydia Millet
Bless Me, Ultima, by Rudolfo Anaya
The Last Thing He Told Me, by Laura Dave
Be Right Back, Julie Naismith (dog training)
The Sentence, by Louise Erdrich
Oh, William, by Elizabeth Strout
Zak George's Guide to a Well-Behaved Dog, Zak George