

Amy's Top 10 List of 2025

I began drafting this year's Top 10 List in a cabin overlooking Green Bay where the water quietly kissed the rocky shoreline. The silence was glorious. It reminded me how much we need quiet to think clearly, to rejuvenate and re-set, and to simply allow ourselves to "be" in a way that often felt nearly impossible—at least for me—amidst the fever-pitched, anger-fueled, unpleasant cacophony that consumed much of our attention in 2025. Retreating into books and creative pursuits (and also watching "The Good Place" and "The Great British Baking Show") were the noise-canceling devices I turned to when I needed to believe that the world can, indeed, be a good place.

Don't get me wrong, I enjoy the positive side of loud—raucous concerts and parties, a shout of encouragement at the finish line and, in my case in early November, a reunion with wonderful college friends. When it came to books though, I found myself drawn to the quieter stories that were page-turners in their own way, whether it was the beauty of the writing or a gorgeous setting or the emotional arc of the main character. While I have a few fast-paced thrilling (not necessarily *thriller*) reads on my list this year, most of my reads that made the top 10 allowed me to slow down, sink into a different reality and truly feel something. That's what good stories are about, yes? They allow us to set aside all of that doomscrolling on social media, cringing at the news, and worrying over unwieldy to-do lists to pretend for however long we can that nothing but the words and characters on the pages we're turning are the only things that exist. True bliss.

Before we get to the good stuff, part of this tradition is recapping the year itself, this one being a whirlwind with our move to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. If you prefer to go straight to my book picks, keep scrolling.

Speaking of scrolling, let's scroll back to mid-December of 2024 where our journey began. With our Aussies, Annie and Louie, as our backseat drivers, Dave and I said hasta luego to the mountains and our friends in Albuquerque, New Mexico and drove to Dalhart, Texas then to Kansas City and onward to Des Moines, Iowa until we reached Milwaukee on a snowy day right before Christmas. Our new home in the neighborhood of West Allis is both cozy and quiet, with woods and a walking trail across the street.

It might have been cold outside, but we received a warm Midwest welcome from our neighbors and everyone we met. I joined a running group and Dave started connecting with fellow musicians. He took some time off to write new material and settle in before searching for other players and is in the process of forming Dave Purcell and The Contradictions with the goal to debut in 2026. Dave also volunteered for Girls Rock & Ladies Rock MKE, a nonprofit that empowers girls, women, and gender-expansive individuals through music education and performance. Over one week this summer, he helped a couple dozen young girls learn how to play rudimentary drums so they could form a band with other campers and perform an original song live at the Vivarium. It was cool to see these young girls inspired to play music and the venue was jam-packed with supportive parents, friends and volunteers. Through his volunteering, he met a few other musicians who asked him to play guitar for a Halloween event that benefited Girls Rock. It was a blast!

Dave also quietly transitioned away from his job in April after hard-working years in academia, corporate environments and non-profits. It's a well-deserved departure into the

next chapter of his life, especially after teaching and advising thousands of students and working high-stress jobs leading large research teams and projects. He recently took up pickleball and is crushing that while continuing to hone his drumming and write original music for two new projects.

Speaking of music, we also saw some incredible shows in some terrific venues—it's nice to be back in this part of the Midwest where the bands we love tour more often. There's also Summerfest, Milwaukee's pride and joy, which features three weeks of music at a huge park on Lake Michigan. And, of course, the Wisconsin State Fair, which is held on the fairgrounds just a few miles from where we live. Thanks to my sister, Mary, we were treated to the insanely tasty delicacies known as cream puffs. I could go on about living in a state that does dairy right, but that's another topic for another day.

As for me, I did what I normally do to meet new friends when we move to a new place. I joined a running group and a book group. In my running life, I ended up with a meniscus tear that sidelined me for about three months. Thankfully, I found a miracle worker in Rebecca at MKE Physical Therapy who helped me recover and put me on the road again. The gel shot in my knee also helped. I ran two half marathons in 2025, the first in April better than the one in October when I was still coming off my injury. My full marathon days are most likely over, and my half marathon days may be fading into the sunset as well but I've come to terms with that, choosing to run shorter distances for more years instead of running longer distances for fewer years. Later in the year, I also took up tap dancing as a way to challenge my brain in a different way. It's loads of fun learning something new.

I'm still at Fifth Third and grateful that I can work remotely. Being closer to Cincinnati and to Chicago, where we also have a large facility, has made work travel a lot easier. The bigger news of the year is that I submitted my novel to my agent and it's now out on submission to publishers. Unfortunately, it's been rejected by several imprints at large publishers. I'm disappointed but it's also to be expected. The market is extremely competitive. To give you some insight, the popular industry statistic is that between 1 and 2% of manuscripts that a publisher receives are published. In other words, they accept one or two of every hundred manuscripts they receive. Since agents submit to at least 12 publishers, and each publisher has a 1% success rate, the overall success rate of a debut author getting a book deal is around 10%. I've also read that around 64% of manuscripts sent to publishers never get published. The stats are brutal. Yet, I remain hopeful that my novel will find the right editor and home in 2026. I also remain grateful for my agent, Maria Vicente at P.S. Literary Agency, who continues to champion my work.

In July, I also graduated as a BookEnds Fellow with 10 other amazing writers. Co-directed by Meg Wolitzer and Alison Fairbrother, BookEnds is an innovative, yearlong and low-residency novel revision program, where I worked and reworked my novel with the support of my podmates, Layla and Jeannette, my mentor and award-winning novelist, Matt Klam, and the rest of my cohort. I also read and re-read the novels of my two podmates, and I believe that their two novels will, deservedly so, end up on my top 10 list some year soon!

For both of us, being back in the Midwest reminded us how much we missed the true changing of the seasons. There's nothing quite like the brilliant, showy colors of a Midwest Fall, especially when the backdrop is the majestic Lake Michigan. Winter, with

decent snowfall, also has its own kind of quietude that matched my general reading vibe. What we found more challenging with this move was meeting new friends. With both of us working remotely, then Dave retiring, and with Dave not forming a band right away, plus the fact that we're edging closer to being in our sixties, creating a social circle took more time than anticipated. The running group, pickleball and tapping into some other networks helped and we are grateful for the friends we've made and look forward to continuing to expand our circle. All told, the move to Milwaukee has been good to us and for us. Annie and Louie have adapted well too. Annie is thrilled to roll in snow and pee on giant leaf piles again. Louie, having never been exposed to this much grass since he was born in the high desert of New Mexico, likes a good roll in the green stuff too.

Like the water I'm watching as I type, life has its ebbs and flows. The rise and the fall, the constant change, the increase and decrease. The ebb, as you probably know, is water receding. The flow is water incoming. With so much flow in 2025, I sought out the "ebb" in my reading life—books that offered the opportunity to recede and retreat into an entirely different world, sometimes fantastical in the case of *Fourth Wing* and other times very close to home like *Map of the World* which is set in Wisconsin.

If you're familiar with my annual routine, then you know that my picks aren't necessarily published in the current year. Why limit my reading to a specific year when there are so many great books to read? You also know that what I treasure most about this tradition is when you pass the list along to fellow book lovers, and then you and your pals email or message me with your fave reads so I can put them on my to-read list. If I read something you recommend and it makes the list, you get the credit you deserve.

I still dream of my list making it to other famous readers like Barack Obama, Martin Sheen, Oprah Winfrey, Jenna Bush Hager, Sarah Jessica Parker, Reese Witherspoon etc. etc. or famous people I love like Dave Grohl from the Foo Fighters or Gary Lightbody from Snow Patrol or any of the authors in this year's list. Whatever degrees of separation you have from any of the above, feel free to use whatever degrees of separation you're at and send the list along. I'm confident one of you has the powers of Kevin Bacon.

Like last year, you can order any of the top 10 books from my bookshop, [Amy's Page Turners](#), on Bookshop.org. You'll be supporting local bookstores instead of the beast that is Amazon. You can also drive to a local, independent bookstore and shop there, or you can support your local library by borrowing a book there, even an e-book!

I've been doing this every year for over 25 years now and while my first listed was printed out and snail-mailed the old-fashioned way (and lost in history), I look forward to this time every year because I get to reflect on the things I cherish the most—books and reading and the writers who share their talents with us! If you want to browse old lists, you'll find them [here](#). Here's wishing you nothing but good times, good reads and good and loving people surrounding you in 2025. As always, I'm grateful for the readership and the friendships this list has gifted me.

P.S. Remember that my No. 1 for the year is numero uno, but the rest of the list isn't ranked in order. It's simply nine of the books I enjoyed the most out of the 50-ish I read.

P.P.S. This was all written without the assistance of A.I. because my writing and any discussion of books are things I refuse to give over to A.I.

Amy's Top 10 of 2025

1. *Orbital* by Samantha Harvey

This book stayed at the No. 1 spot the entire year. I kept waiting for another book to move it down a notch but this fictional meditative journey with six astronauts orbiting the Earth had me as enthralled as I am when I'm gazing up at the Milky Way in a secluded spot in a national park. In Harvey's hands, the Milky Way is "a smoking trail of gunpowder shot through a satin sky." On every page, a poetic line; every brief chapter, a philosophical musing. I dog-eared more pages than I normally do so I could float into her prose whenever I needed a breather from the gravity of everyday life on our planet. I give credit to my Aunt Wendy for recommending this slim novella. Even though it was on my list of reads, I pushed it to the top of my TBR pile. Despite the naysayers, I believe it deserved the Booker Prize in 2024. It deserved heaps of praise for being a quiet story that tackled some powerful themes while also giving readers a taste of what it's like to orbit the Earth. A lot happened in those orbits, at least in the minds of the characters. That's where the plot, if we even need to call it that, took place. This story is a study in interiority for those of us who write fiction. For anyone, it's a story of longing, grief, loneliness, family, interdependence, trust, humanity and the privilege we have as being humans on a planet that sustains our lives—something we all tend to forget. I mean, can you imagine being stuck in a metal tube with six of your coworkers with no way to escape for days on end? Yeah. Let that settle in. The story takes place over a single day which is a far different kind of day than we experience. While Earth-bound people are going about their days, these six astronauts are orbiting the Earth 16 times in the International Space Station, getting a bird's eye view of oceans, continents and a typhoon that's heading toward the Philippines. In return, we gain insights into the mundane but mission-critical tasks of keeping the space station running, along with what it's like to eat, sleep, exercise, work and still be human in outer space. As much as the six astronauts must operate as one entity to keep the space station running, they are American, Japanese, Russian, British and Italian with diverse paths that brought them into orbit, and they have diverse lives back on Earth. Learning what each has left behind and what draws each to the windows of the spacecraft kept me reading just as much as the poetic, elegiac tone and language. While reading, I felt glimmers of hope that people will stop torturing our planet and treat it with the respect it deserves. Harvey helps her readers appreciate this big blue marble we live on and also consider the impact we have on the only marble that sustains our lives. It's worth reading the interview with Harvey [here](#).

2. *Glaciers* by Alexis M. Smith

This might be the first time I've had two novellas in my top 10. Recommended by my book-loving friend, Natalie, but also already on my TBR list was *Glaciers*. Since the reco came from Natalie, whose book tastes generally align with mine, I also moved this one up in my reading queue. First written in 2012, it was reissued in 2023. Like *Orbital*, this is another slim, tranquil read and another story that takes place over the course of one day, with several detours into the past. This time, we're Earth-bound in the city of Portland, Oregon. Isabel, an introverted and single twenty-something works in the basement of a library where she repairs books. She's drawn to old photos and postcards, anything that holds

stories of the past. Her own past occurred in Alaska where she grew up, a place that feels as remote as Isabel's quiet life. She's not what you'd call well-versed in life and love, but her co-worker, Spoke, has caught her attention. Where Isabel is clearly introverted, she can't quite suss out whether Spoke is shy like her or withdrawn into himself because of his service in the Iraq War—something he doesn't speak of. As the hours move on, Isabel contemplates making her move and inviting Spoke to a party. She heads to her favorite vintage shop where she buys a yellow dress from the 1960s, a piece the owner bought at an estate sale. As she talks with the owner, the dress takes on its own life in Isabel's imagination—the sense that it was someone else's dress for a special party or a first kiss. There's something about the dress that feels important to her, as if it's chosen her as much as she's chosen it. When she returns from the shop after lunch, Spoke suddenly reveals a secret of his own that forces Isabel to make a choice. She's torn between taking action and letting her feelings for Spoke show or letting him go. I'll leave it at that. There is a glacier in the novella, symbolic, I believe, of how life and love can move and cleave, and also of how the past can sneak up on us and, ultimately, sink us if we're not careful. You'll carry Isabel in your heart for a while after reading this little gem of a book.

3. *Wild Dark Shore* by Charlotte McConaghy

The setting drew me in, the mystery and the luscious writing about the wilds of nature and the climate crisis kept me reading. This story was more propulsive than some of the other quiet reads on my list and I also took issue with a few of the plot holes and twists from a believability standpoint but, all told, this is worth a look if you enjoy learning about a place you may never visit—in this case, Antarctica—and you like thrillers. The story opens with a woman's body bashing against the rocky and deadly shoreline of a remote area of Antarctica where Dominic and his children have remained behind to finish up the work of saving a collection of seeds that could help people survive under the onslaught of climate change. Dominic's daughter, Fen, who's more seal-like than human swims the rough waters to rescue the woman, who turns out to be the wife of one of the scientists based at the station whose communication with her had grown cryptic. Worried, the woman named Rowan charted a boat to the island, but it capsized and the captain died at sea. The island, it turns out, has had its own share of deaths, including a couple of the scientists, a friend of one of Dominic's sons and thousands of baby seals who were killed by poachers. The island is as haunted by the past as each of the characters are. Dominic is grieving for his wife. His children grieve for other humans and the destruction of nature. And they're all holding secrets—one more explosive than the other. Time is running out when Dominic and Rowan begin to fall for each other and the station at the island continues to fall into severe disrepair. With just weeks before the ship comes to take them off the island, their haunted pasts threaten to drown them and the precious seeds they've worked so hard to preserve. I could've done without the love interest between Dominic and Rowan—it felt like the hands of an editor wanting this to be a thriller-romance-“cli-fi” mashup—but applaud McConaghy for using a unique, stark and wild setting to mirror each character's emotional arc. Plus, there's a touch of ghost-y speculative fiction here that gives some of the passages and one character in particular, Dominic's youngest son, Orly, an interesting edge.

4. *Run for the Hills* by Kevin Wilson

Wilson is one of my writer crushes. I adore his work. I've also had the pleasure of hearing him give a craft talk when I was at the Sewanee Writers Conference several years ago. Three of his books—*Tunneling to the Center of the Earth*, *The Family Fang* and *Now Is Not The Time To Panic*—have made my top 10 lists over the years. In real life, he's funny and he uses self-deprecating humor in an endearing way. His main characters are often similar in that regard. He also tends to riff on the themes of family (often either dysfunctional or just plain odd), loneliness, anxiety, feeling like an outsider and finding love where and when you least expect it. Wilson never goes melodramatic or maudlin. Even when the topic is heavy, his stories carry light and I think that's part of his brilliance. In *Hills*, we meet Mad, a 30-something organic farmer, who is surprised one day by the appearance of Rube, a man claiming to be her half-brother. Turns out, their father Charles had many lives, many wives and a few more children. Rube is on a mission to find all of Charles' children and also find Charles who changed his name and his profession with every marriage. Rube convinces Mad to trek across the country in his PT Cruiser (I can't think of a better car for this crew) in search of the other kids and their father who's allegedly started another life in California. Mad agrees and they eventually meet Pep, a young basketball star, and Tom, an 11-year-old boy who adored their dad. Mad, Rube, Pep and Tom all have different memories of Charles but, once the shock wears off, they bond over having a new-found family and also over how much their father influenced their careers and passions. When they finally reach their father and confront him, each character has the chance to explore their father's influence over then as well as their feelings around his abrupt disappearance in each of their lives. From start to finish, this is a wild road trip with detours that are both hilarious and heartfelt—one of my favorite kinds of stories to read. Do yourself and your heart a favor by reading Wilson's work, whether it's this one or another.

5. *My Friends* by Fredrik Backman

I got this for my mom through the Book of the Month subscription I gifted to her in 2025. I enjoyed choosing a book for her each month and this one was a winner for her. She texted me a several times to tell me what chapter she'd just finished and that she was crying—a good kind of cry. It's not that the book is a downer. Like Kevin Wilson, Backman's novels are as humorous as they are heartwarming. *My Friends* is no exception. And without exception, I cried during the same chapters and passages as my mom did. Also, like Wilson's novel above, this is another road trip novel. Here we have awkward but aspiring artist Louisa who is enthralled by a painting that features three figures sitting at the end of a pier gazing at the sea. Louisa, alone and a product of the foster care system who has just lost her best friend, has come to an auction where the painting is being sold. She meets a man who appears to be homeless, but she soon learns there's more to people than meets the eye. Backman then takes us 20 years into the past to meet a group of four friends—Joar, Ted, Ali and the artist who isn't named until later in the book—who take refuge in each other as they endure the brutality of their lives at home. I'll pause here to declare Backman's brilliance when it comes to depicting the inner lives and landscapes of the working class and working poor. His writing is both raw and humane in that regard. Back to that group of friends. It's them sitting on the pier and one of them is, like Louisa, an aspiring artist. That painting of the pier

ends up in Louisa's hands and one of the friends, Ted, journeys back to the birthplace of that painting where she learns more about the love between this group of tight-knit pals. Along the way, Louisa meets some new friends and also finds herself. As the title implies, this is a story about friendship—what it means to be a friend, how important it is to have friends and how friends can change the course of our lives. It's also a treatise on art. Backman shows how friendship and art can be similar, especially in how we need both to survive and thrive. I marked many powerful lines including these two among so many others: "Art is what we leave of ourselves in other people." "Art doesn't need critics, art has enough enemies already. Art needs friends." People need friends too. I wanted to hug all of my friends after reading this.

6. *The Names* by Florence Knapp

I'm impressed by the unique premise and structure of this novel set in England and Ireland. I also admire the compassion Knapp brings to her main character Cora, a wife and mother in an abusive relationship. When Cora's son is born, it's a given that she's supposed to name the boy after her physician husband, Gordon. Gordon is not a good guy. His abuse runs the gamut from physical (although she gratefully spares the reader some of the gorier details), emotional and psychological. While he doesn't physically harm their daughter, Maia, it's clear that the young girl sees, feels and hears the abuse. Cora and Maia take the baby to register its birth and Cora, influenced by Maia in one narrative thread, chooses Bear for the boy's name. In a separate thread, Cora chooses Julian. And in the third thread, she sticks with her husband's wishes and chooses Gordon. Each thread plays out in sections that jump seven years in time. We witness how Cora's choice impacts her life and the lives of her children. We also see how the boy's name impacts his personality and his feelings toward his mother, father and sister. It made me think of the question we sometimes ask our friends—what other name ideas did your parents have for you? I could've been Jill. I don't mind the name but I'm so not a Jill; at least, that's my opinion. Would my life have turned out differently if I were Jill? Who knows but it's an interesting question to consider, especially given how much time and thought parents put into naming their kids these days. Anyhow, Knapp's writing and her empathy for her characters are as lovely as the interesting structure. Cora's grandmother, a secondary character, also adds another layer that delves into mother/son and mother/daughter relationships. If you like diving into the psyches of characters and family relationships in your fiction reading, this may be for you. This would be a good selection for a book group.

7. *Fire Exit* by Morgan Talty

Check out the publishers of the books you read, folks. Sometimes, you're supporting an imprint of one of the Big 5: Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, Macmillan Publishers, and Simon & Schuster. They control the majority of the book market. Amazon also has its own publishing arm in the form of Lake Union Press and they're a publishing beast of another sort. Other times, you're supporting a smaller independent press like Tin House, the publisher of *Fire Exit*, or you're supporting an author who has self-published. I'm not telling you what to read or who to support. I'm simply telling you it's good to be aware of the publisher of the books you enjoy and it's also good to

consider supporting smaller publishers who tend to support aspiring and emerging writers. Before I get back *Fire Exit*, I also recommend Talty's short story collection, *Night of the Living Rez* which I read in 2024. *Fire Exit*'s main character is Charles, a white man raised by his mother and her husband Frederick who is a Native on the Penobscot reservation. Charles has a daughter with Mary, a woman with a trace of Penobscot blood. Daughter Elizabeth isn't considered Native based on blood quantum, a method tribes used to keep track of tribal membership and citizenship. Trouble is, Mary won't accept Charles as the father and instead pretends Elizabeth is the child of another Native man to raise her percentage of Penobscot blood. Decades later, Charles feels compelled to share the truth with Elizabeth who's suffering from depression just like his own mother. He can see Mary and Elizabeth across the river from where he lives and he's been observing them for years; not in a stalker way, mind you. While Charles is struggling about his decision to confess to Elizabeth, he's also struggling with his identity and whether he's perceived as white (his friend Bobby and others believe so) or Penobscot (a large part of Charles identifies as Native). Yet, he doesn't want to be perceived as a "pretendian," someone who falsely claims an Indigenous identity. If Charles tells Elizabeth, will it send her into a similar tailspin about her identity? Will revealing the secret after all these years do more harm than good, and ultimately, who is it helping to tell her the truth? Talty also has a tender touch with dementia and alcoholism in this story. Oh, and there is a fire, but you'll have to read to find out how that all comes into play. Mainly, this novel will make you think while helping you learn more about representation and identity. It's worthy of a deep book club discussion.

8. *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros

Okay, you can pick yourself up off the floor now. I'm sure seeing this title in my top 10 shocked many of my veteran list readers since my reading tastes don't normally veer into the realm of fantasy and flying dragon riders. After seeing Yarros' name everywhere and hearing seemingly everyone talking about her series, I saw *Fourth Wing* on the staff picks shelf in my library and decided to give it a shot. I figured I'd give it about 100 pages and return it. I whipped through the 544 pages in record time. I can't lie—I ended up liking the dragons more than some of the characters. Their magic and their supernatural abilities were more interesting to me than some of the battle scenes. I also can't lie—Yarros can write a hot sex scene. I don't know if I need to give you much of a summary because I feel like everyone I know has already read this, along with the other novels in her Empyrean series. If you haven't read it, what you need to know is that there's a college for dragon riders in the city of Navarre and Violet Sorrengail was supposed to be a Scribe but her badass mother sends her off to survive dragon school. It's brutal, cutthroat and deadly. Other students are out to destroy Violet from the start, not to mention that a dragon will incinerate anyone who appears fragile or, well, maybe blinks at the wrong time. It turns out Violet (nicknamed Violent by Xaden, another wingleader who loves-hates her) has some killer powers of her own. On top of that, there's a war raging outside the walls of Navarre and the kingdom is at risk. Of course, there are also big secrets that threaten to destroy Violet and the two dragons who attach to her. Clearly this wasn't one of the quiet reads on my list. All told, it was a great escape from the daily meltdowns in 2025. At one point I found

myself wishing one of Violet's dragons would whisk me off to another kingdom. If you don't normally read fantasy or books with dragons and war schools, this might be your gateway. Will I read any others in the series? Time will tell and I mean that literally. At 500+ pages, it's an investment in time and it remains to be seen whether I'll commit my time to it when there are so many other books on my TBR list.

9. *A Map of the World* by Jane Hamilton

This was a re-read for me. Since I make the rules for my list and since it's been years since I'd read it, Hamilton's uncompromising story is allowed to make my top 10 list again. Plus, I wanted to read something set in Wisconsin, my new home state. Alice Goodwin lives with her husband and two daughters on a dairy farm in a small Wisconsin town. Her husband can barely keep up with the demands of the farm while Alice, a part-time school nurse, is barely keeping up with her precocious daughter, Emma. One morning, it's Alice's turn to watch her neighbor's two young girls. Deciding they need to go for a swim, she goes upstairs to get her bathing suit and leaves the girls just long enough for little Lizzie to wander outside unattended and drown in their pond. This opening scene is so masterfully drawn; it's one of the most memorable jaw-droppers in modern literature, if you ask me. Things go from bad to worse for Alice but before that, we get her husband Howard's point of view which is a nice relief from the drama. He also offers some insight into Alice's character. Then we hit Lizzie's funeral and, shortly after, Alice is arrested after several children accuse Lizzie of sexual abuse. Alice spends time in jail and between her point of view and Howard's, we're immersed into the interior lives and marriage of both characters, faults and redeeming qualities and all. I won't spoil it for you by telling you whether Alice is innocent or guilty, nor will I say much more about the story because I prefer that you read it for yourself. **P.S.** Many recommended *Broken Country* to me this year and, while the plots differ, I found enough similarities between the two. *Map* wins out for its character depth and writing. *Broken* was simply an easy read and I felt the author toying with the reader at the end of each chapter, like "here comes the twist, oh, but wait a few more chapters." This is the stuff of upmarket and commercial fiction these days; it's what readers tend to like.

10. *The Djinn Waits A Hundred Years* by Shubnum Khan

Shortly after we moved here, I joined the West Allis Library's Books & Coffee Book Club on the recommendation of my friend, Jen. We've had a diverse selection of books, and I've enjoyed most of them. This genre blender was my favorite of the bunch. It's equal parts speculative fiction and magical realism with hints of gothic literature wrapped in a bildungsroman tale that also shares some history and myths of South Africa. Fifteen-year-old Sana and her widowed father arrive at Akbar Manzil, a rundown mansion that is now a boardinghouse for some amazingly quirky characters as well as the Djinn, a supernatural being that's been waiting a hundred years (actually, a little less according to the book club's calculations) to be released from the room where it's been locked up. Sana is hopeful they can start a new life here, but she's haunted by the menacing ghost of her conjoined twin sister as much as her dad is haunted by grief over his dead wife. The house holds grief and grievances of its own too, and it's Sana who begins unleashing all of the proverbial skeletons in the house's closets and boarded-up rooms. When she discovers the diary of a

woman named Meena, we're taken back to 1919 when the mansion was in its heyday and owned by a wealthy Muslim man named Akbar Ali Khan. Akbar is in an arranged marriage with his Anglophile wife Jahanara Begum, but their marriage holds no love. They have a son and daughter who factor into the story's mystery and twists, so I won't say much about that. Akbar falls in love with Meena, a girl hired to work in his factory. He takes her as his wife and, eventually, love sparks between them. Jahanara's jealousy drives her to do commit some pretty heinous stuff, which Sana puts together as she continues reading Meena's journal. All the while, the djinn—who once loved Meena—is watching Sana and waiting to see how the past will unfold into the present and what consequences it will bring to the house and the characters. The prose is lovely and I was particularly struck by the way Khan makes the house a character. This was an enjoyable read through and through and also led to a lively discussion among book club members.

The books I read in 2025, in the order I read them:

Fire Exit by Morgan Talty

White Cat, Black Dog by Kelly Link

Orbital by Samantha Harvey

The Alternatives by Caolinn Hughes

Lula Dean's Library of Banned Books by Kirsten Miller

Concerning the Future of Souls by Joy Williams

Glaciers by Alexis M. Smith

The Four Winds by Kristen Hannah

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water by Michael Dorris

The Snow Queen by Michael Cunningham

The Librarianist by Patrick DeWitt

The Personal Librarian by Marie Benedict and Victoria Christopher Murray

The Hand That First Held Mine by Maggie O'Farrell

West with Giraffes by Lynda Rutledge

Anita DeMonte Laughs Last by Xochitl Gonzalez

The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox by Maggie O'Farrell

Fourth Wing by Rebecca Yarros

Leslie F*cking Jones by Leslie Jones

The Heiress by Rachel Hawkins

The Float Test by Lynn Steger Strong

Black Woods, Blue Sky by Eowyn Ivy

A Map of the World by Jane Hamilton

The History of Love by Nicole Krauss

All My Puny Sorrows by Miriam Toews

Wren, Wren by Ann Enright

Think Like a Monk: Train Your Mind for Peace and Purpose Every Day by Jay Shetty

How to Read a Book by Monica Wood

The Book of Speculation by Erika Swyler

My Absolute Darling by Gabriel Tallent

Blind Spot by Maggie Smith
God of the Woods by Liz Moore
Run for the Hills by Kevin Wilson
My Friends by Fredrik Backman
Expiration Dates by Rebecca Serle
Everything Here Is Beautiful by Mira T. Lee
The Late Bloomers' Club by Louise Miller
Mothers and Sons by Adam Haslett
The Connellys of County Down by Tracey Lange
Isola by Allegra Goodman
The River Within by Karen Powell
Twist by Colum McCann
Mother Doll by Katya Apekina
Sam by Allegra Goodman
All the Colors of the Dark by Chris Whitaker
The Djinn Waits A Hundred Years by Shubnum Khan
Wild Dark Shore by Charlotte McConaghy
The Alchemist by Paul Cuehlo
The Names by Florence Knapp
The Murder of Mr. Ma by John Shen Yen Nee and SJ Rozan
Broken Country by Clare Leslie Hall