

52 Books in 52 Weeks (2016)

Being an avid reader, I really wanted to take the 52 books in 52 weeks challenge. Now, for someone who generally reads a couple hundred books a year, for some reason I found this challenge particularly difficult to attain. Perhaps it was the pressure knowing that I had a limited time to finish each book or maybe it was the “rebellious me” not liking to be MADE to do anything. Regardless of the reasons, I did complete the challenge and would like to share my experience with all of you. I also encourage you to come up with your own challenge as it led me to step out of my little box and explore some different topics, genres and authors than I would normally find myself drawn to.

Week 1 - Richard Paul Evans, *Walking on Water*. This is the 5th book in “The Walk” series. This was a wonderful series that leaves you feeling encouraged and inspired. This 5th and final book is probably my favorite one of them all. 4.5 stars

Week 2 - Wanda Brunstetter, *Woman of Courage*. I rarely give 5 stars to any book but I loved this story. If you like historical fiction you might want to pick this one up. This is not her customary Amish novella.

Week 3 - Sue Monk Kidd, *The Invention of Wings*. Another of my rare 5 star ratings. If you loved “The Help” and are a fan of historical fiction I guarantee that you will love this book.

Week 4 - Harlan Coben, *Missing You*. Well, it’s Harlan Coben so OF COURSE this was an awesome book. He is a master of integrating several puzzles into his stories and then skillfully unwrapping the clues leaving the reader wishing for more.

Week 5 - Ellie Laks, *My Gentle Barn*. If you prefer reading non-fiction and you love animals? Pick up this book and be prepared for your heart to be broken and then your faith in mankind to be restored. I gave this book 4 and a half stars!

Week 6 - Charles Belfoure, *Paris Architect*. An architect approached during World War II to design hiding places into existing homes without being caught or putting the homeowners at risk. A 4 and a half star read!

Week 7 - Chelsea Cain, *Heartsick*. If you love mystery and suspense pick up this first book in the “Gretchen Lowell” series. She is definitely one of my new favorite authors to read (warning; not for the squeamish).

Week 8 - Chelsea Cain, *Sweetheart*. I loved the first one so much I couldn’t wait to read the second! So far I find Chelsea Cain to be a 4 star writer but there are four more books in this series that I cannot wait to read.

Week 9 – John Grisham, *Sycamore Row*. To throw in what I considered a real clunker (sorry John Grisham fans), my Week 9 read, *Sycamore Row* gets 1 star. I found it slow-paced, tedious and coma inducing.

Week 10 - Christina Baker Kline, *Orphan Train*. This is based on factual events from an interesting yet horrifying time in history. There doesn't seem to be any middle ground in reviews for this wonderful story as people seem to either love it or hate it. I personally give it 4 stars.

Week 11 - Daniel James Brown, *The Boys in the Boat*. This is for the non-fiction reader. Due to the size of this book I put off reading it for far too long. This is definitely not a book I would normally have picked up but I'm so glad I did. Not quite a 5 star read for me simply because I found it a little TOO wordy at times but 4.5 stars for sure.

Week 12 - Fran Elizabeth Grubb, *Cruel Harvest*. Another book I wouldn't have picked up simply because the sadness and tragedies go against my nature but this book was given to me last year at a library conference we attended. It sat on a shelf for several weeks before I begrudgingly picked it up but, with that said, I read it in two days. I liked it so much that I made it my staff picks for 2015. For sure one of my rare 5 star reads.

Week 13 - David Baldacci, *Memory Man*. David Baldacci is definitely a favorite author of mine and for sure a go to author when I need to recommend a good author to our patrons. I feel like the Camel Club series has run its course so I was very excited to see this new series and as always David Baldacci did not disappoint. A lovable new character and a 4 star rating.

Week 14 - William Landay, *Defending Jacob*. Again, a book I normally wouldn't have picked up simply because legal thrillers aren't my cup of tea but this title was recommended to me by a co-worker who has never steered me wrong. Thank you, Carol, for this recommendation. In places I found the writing a bit tedious but I wanted to find out how it ended. It has been years since I read a book that had a twist that I didn't see coming. 4 stars.

Week 15 - James Patterson, *First Love*. I am definitely NOT a reader of romance but being a huge James Patterson fan I had to at least give some consideration to this book. It's in the same vein as *The Fault in our Stars*. Even though you know how it's going to end it still gets you to sob at the end. Worth 3.5 stars.

Week 16 - Danielle Steele, *Pure Joy*. This is fortunately a very short book. While this book covers a topic near and dear to my heart (DOGS) I came away from it feeling like I had wasted time that I could have actually been spending with my dogs. In my opinion 1 star might be a bit generous.

Week 17 - Deborah McKinlay, *That Part was True*. This was written in the style of *Guernsey Literary & Potato Peel Pie Society* but without the depth. My best description "cute but forgettable". 2 stars from me.

Week 18 - Sandra Dallas, *Whiter than Snow*. Historical fiction taking place back in the 1920's, it is a novel of forgiveness, redemption, survival, faith and family. If anyone has read the non-fiction book *Children's Blizzard* or knows the story, this would be like the fiction version. I give it 3 stars. Frankly I enjoyed *Children's Blizzard* much more.

Week 19 - Sarah Boston, *Lucky Dog: How Being a Veterinarian Saved My Life*. This is the true story of a veterinarian who is diagnosed with thyroid cancer and chronicles her journey through the health care system. She has very strong opinions of what medical doctors could learn from veterinarians. 3 stars.

WEEK 20 - Liane Moriarty, *Big Little Lies*. Funny, quirky characters, some that you love and a couple that you hate. And one of those twists at the end that make you go "Oh my goodness, I can't believe that just happened!" I personally loved this book. 4.5 stars.

WEEK 21 - Liane Moriarty, *The Husband's Secret*. I loved the last one by this author so much that I couldn't wait to read another. Another 4.5 star read. Moriarty's twisty endings are breathtaking.

WEEK 22 - Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. In general I avoid books about the abuse of women and/or children and frankly, I wish I'd avoided this one. Reviews and ratings on this book were top notch so I decided to give it a try since it was a fairly short one. Top ratings or not I gave this it 1 star.

WEEK 23 - Rebecca McClanahan, *Write Your Heart Out*. For the budding authors out there I found this a very readable and informative lesson on how to turn your own personal experiences, ideas and emotions into stories, memoirs and poems. A 4 star book that's very helpful.

WEEK 24 - Graeme Cameron, *Normal*. A book written from the serial killer's point of view? How fascinating one might think...a somewhat Dexterish book from this debut author. Despite the high rankings and reviews I found that after a few disappointing hours it was all a bit of a yawn and not very original. Only 1 star coming from this reader.

WEEK 25 - Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*. A popular author and good reviews compelled me to give this book a try. I suppose if you're into tragedy and family drama you may really enjoy this book, it did win a Pulitzer after all. But this reader gives it the booby prize. 1 star is being generous.

WEEK 26 - JoJo Moyes, *Me Before You*. LOVED, LOVED, LOVED IT. All I can say is JUST READ IT! I don't have words in my vocabulary to be able to give you any idea of the content of this story. Definitely a 5 star read for me.

WEEK 27 - Katie Ganshert, *A Broken Kind of Beautiful*. One of several books written by local Bettendorf author Katie Ganshert. This one's a cryer, folks. The author has an amazing gift of storytelling that will have you hooked from page 1. I only give this book 4 stars instead of 5 because I personally am not a big fan of romance and fluff.

WEEK 28 - Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch*. I heard ravings about this book for several weeks so although I found its size a bit intimidating I tackled the challenge with gusto. Book clubs were reading it, people who don't normally pick up a book to read for pleasure were reading it...and I really did not see what all the fuss was about. Mediocre is the best description I can give along with 3 stars.

WEEK 2 - James Patterson, *Invisible*. After the length and depth of my previous read I was happy to revert back to one of my favorite stand by authors. I found this one of his most chilling stand-alone thrillers yet.

WEEK 30 - Katie Ganshert, *The Art of Losing Yourself*. Another “cozy” read by our local author and another fabulous read as far as I’m concerned. Her characters quickly become old familiar friends to the reader. Katie Ganshert might be turning me into a romantic. 4 stars.

WEEK 31 - Sara Gruen, *At the Water’s Edge*. I’m a pretty big fan of this author so this book was a huge disappointment to me. I found the majority of the characters whiney and shallow and frankly I could not get to the end of this book fast enough. 2 stars.

WEEK 32 - Ginny Dye, *Storm Clouds Rolling In*. This series (Bregden Chronicles) was actually recommended to me by a patron. I LOVED this book! There are currently 8 books in this series and I plan to read them all. Love historical fiction? Book one begins just before the civil war. Definitely 4 stars.

WEEK 33 - Donald McCaig, *Ruth’s Journey*. This is the authorized novel of Mammy from Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* ...and it was horrible! I actually have to admit that I didn’t follow this one through until the end. Bored out of my mind! 1 star is as low as I can go.

WEEK 34 - Marta Perry, *Hide in Plain Sight*. This is the first book in the “The Three Sisters Inn” series and I love these stories. I’m a huge fan of both Amish fiction and mysteries so this series is the perfect combination for me. You can even find some romantic fluff for those of you who enjoy it.

WEEK 35 - Craig Johnson, *The Cold Dish*. Since I enjoy the TV series taken from these books (Longmire), I figured I would enjoy the books even more. Mystery and cowboys, what’s not to love right? Well let’s just say they weren’t for me. I found this first in the series boring, tedious and hard to follow. 2 stars.

WEEK 36 - Lisa Scottoline, *Every Fifteen Minutes*. I found this book unbelievable and overly wordy. The main character Eric, a psychiatrist is frankly too goody-goody. I give it 2 stars only because the ending redeemed the book for me just a little bit.

WEEK 37 - Susan Crandall, *Whistling Past the Graveyard*. If you love “Southern” fiction and characters you will love this book. The main character and narrator of the story is 9 year old Starla. She is a feisty, hot-headed little girl living in the deep South and dealing with grown-up problems. 4 stars.

WEEK 38 - Joe Hill, *NOS4A2*. If you like creepy, supernatural suspense you would probably really enjoy this one by Joe Hill, son of the notorious creepy writer Stephen King. This is the second of Joe Hill’s books that I have read and I enjoyed both very much. 4 creepy stars!

WEEK 39 - Curtis Sittenfeld, *Sisterland*. Sisters Kate and Vi were born with peculiar “senses”, or psychic abilities concerning future events. I thought I would really enjoy this story but I found it a little bit cheesy and annoying. I give it 3 stars only because I did enjoy the first half of the book far more than the last.

WEEK 40 - Stephen King, *Doctor Sleep*. Everybody loved Stephen King's *The Shining* right? So I was very excited to read the follow-up to young Daniel's life. Not exactly up to par with its predecessor but still an enjoyable read in a creepy sort of way. 3 stars.

WEEK 41 - Alice Hoffman, *Survival Lessons*. A tiny book with a powerful message. Definitely not my normal kind of read but I would highly recommend it to anyone going through a personal illness or hardship. The book is full of wit and wisdom that came from the author's own personal battle with breast cancer. 4 and a half stars.

WEEK 42 - Kristen Hannah, *Fly Away*. Anyone whose read my past recommendations will probably know that the author's book *Firefly Lane* is probably one of my favorite all-time books so I was thrilled that a follow up story came along. However, I really struggled with this one and must say it was a disappointment. A character that I once loved, Tully, turned into a person that I couldn't like at all. I wish I could unread this one. 2 stars.

WEEK 43 - Jeanette Walls, *The Silver Star*. I loved the author's memoirs, *The Glass Castle* and *Half Broke Horses* so I was anxious to read the author's attempt at fiction. For the most part I was disappointed. You can certainly see the influence of the author's own life in the characters but the story kind of fell flat to me. It's a coming of age story that might well better serve as young adult fiction. 3 stars.

WEEK 44 - Vannetta Chapman, *Murder Simply Brewed*. A cozy little read for lover's of Amish fiction/mystery readers with a little bit of romance thrown in. Vannetta Chapman never disappoints and this first book in a new series was no exception so I give her 4 stars.

WEEK 45 - JoJo Moyes, *After You*. The highly anticipated sequel to *Me Before You* is a tough book for me to critique simply because I loved the first one so much. As usual, it was well written and a good read but I think for myself personally it was a little disappointing. Lou and Will's story needed to end with the last page of *Me Before You*. It just doesn't carry the emotional punch that came with its predecessor. 3 stars.

WEEK 46 - Jan Karon, *Come Rain or Come Shine*. I had found myself getting a little tired and bored with this series when I read the last couple but I'm so glad that I plunged ahead and read this one. Although it is #11 in the Mitford series it might very well have been my very favorite. I sniffled, sobbed and chuckled all the way through. This is my idea of literary comfort food. 4 and a half stars.

WEEK 47 - Sandra Dallas, *The Last Midwife*. This author's early books were some of my favorites but her last few left me hesitant to read another. However, I thoroughly enjoyed this book and have become a Sandra Dallas fan again. Historical fiction is one of my favorites to read. And in this case I was reminded of how tenacious our early settlers were. 5 stars.

WEEK 48 - Debbie Macomber, *Love Letters*. I'm not a huge reader of Debbie Macomber simply because I honestly don't enjoy so much romantic "fluff" but since I did read the first two books of this series and very much enjoyed them I picked this one up. I found it too difficult to get into the characters and get beyond all the "fluff". 2 stars

WEEK 49 - Harper Lee, *Go Set a Watchman*. A long awaited sequel to *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I actually chose to listen to this book instead of read it and I have to say that its only redeeming quality is that Reese Witherspoon narrates the story. It IS just my opinion but this was a money-making stunt as far as I'm concerned. Nothing can follow a true classic like *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 2 stars.

WEEK 50 - Debbie Macomber, *Silver Linings*. While I very much enjoyed the first couple of books in this series I found this one a disappointment. It was too predictable and far too sappy for my taste. 2 stars.

WEEK 51 - Francine Rivers, *Bridge to Haven*. My first ever Francine Rivers book and I give it 4.5 stars! A prodigal story but with a daughter, not a son, I quickly found myself caught up in the lives of the characters. The story begins in the 1940's with an abandoned baby girl, the family that takes her in and a lifetime of mistakes, choices and inevitably a love of God and family to teach Abra what really matters.

WEEK 52 - Sue Grafton, *X*. Being the 24th book in the series (and yes I've read them all) I had to finish out the year with a favorite author/series. I'm uncertain where Sue Grafton will venture when she finishes the alphabet but perhaps it's time to move on to better things. I enjoyed the book well enough but it was not exceptional.

All in all it was a fabulous year of literary firsts for me, and yes, some predictability as well. I am more than excited to begin a new year of travels, adventures, suspense and love with many characters old and new. My dad passed on to me a love for books, respect for the written word and the idea that one should never stop learning. It has been by far one of the greatest gifts I have ever received.