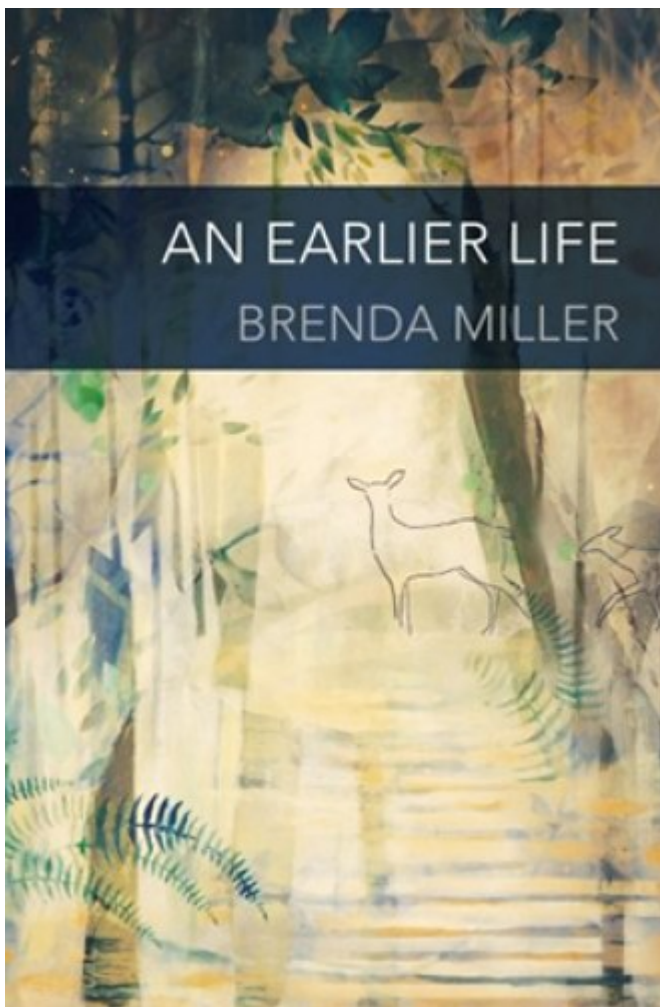


Jagged, trustworthy joy

I've hungered this year for art that honors complexity.

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [December 6, 2017](#) issue

In Review



An Earlier Life

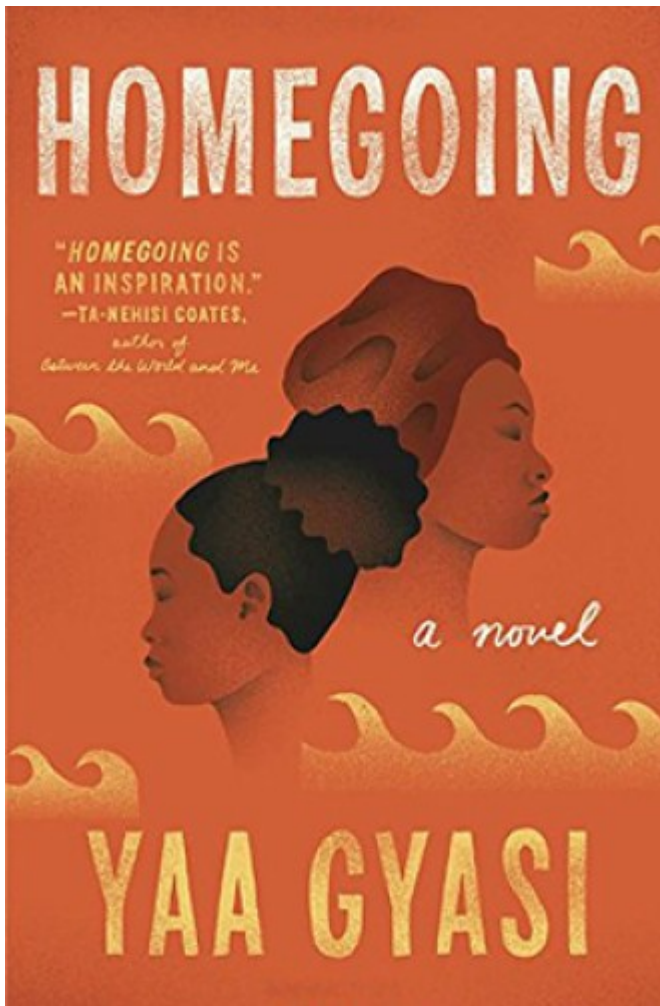
by Brenda Miller
Ovenbird Books



Magdalene

Poems

By Marie Howe
Norton



Homegoing

by Yaa Gyasi
Vintage



The Big Sick

LIONSGATE

The art forms that have nourished me this past year aren't exactly happy ones. Something in me—no doubt resonating with the times we're living in—has resisted invitations to happiness that feel convenient or quick. I've hungered instead for art that honors complexity, for words and images that offer permission to dwell deeply within questions. Here are some recent companions who have journeyed with me, offering joys both jagged and trustworthy.

Brenda Miller's *An Earlier Life* is an exquisite collection of essays exploring the writer's childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. What does it look like, Miller asks, not only to endure but to thrive as an artist and an empathetic human in a culture that places so many brutal expectations on women? A master of the lyric essay, Miller has an uncanny ability to capture the tiniest moments that make up a

life: girls with their elbows in the sand as they watch the surfer boys, a baker's efficient hands in the predawn silence, a father standing behind the dim mesh of a screen door, "already an old photograph of himself." Miller invites me to pay attention, to gaze at the minutiae of my days, to remember that life expands as we distill it. Nothing is wasted when we take the time to stop and see.

In *Magdalene*, poet Marie Howe reimagines the iconic Mary Magdalene as a woman both ancient and contemporary. In a series of stunning persona poems, Howe gives voice to an Everywoman who is spirited and weary, faithful and irreverent, forgiven and ashamed. At times, she speaks from across the centuries as the mother of Jesus, or the woman caught in adultery, or the grief-stricken disciple at her teacher's tomb. At others, she's "the woman in the black suit and heels hailing a taxi," "the woman in the blue burka forced to kneel in the stadium," a mother who adopts a daughter, or a drug addict. Always she is a woman "driven toward desire by desire." Howe's poems assure me that I don't navigate the complicated worlds of loss, trauma, and healing alone.

Yaa Gyasi's debut novel, *Homegoing*, begins in Ghana's coastal Fanteland in the mid-1700s and traces the effects of colonization and slavery on a single family over the next 300 years. Chapter by chapter, Gyasi moves between continents and generations, imaginatively reconnecting the threads of homeland, ritual, custom, and kin that were lost to the greed and violence of the transatlantic slave trade. Though much of the story is bleak and difficult to read, Gyasi's luminous prose speaks to the incredible power of memory—carefully preserved and lovingly crafted—to resurrect the dead.

The comic but poignant film *The Big Sick* tells the true love story of its cowriters: Pakistani-American standup comic and actor Kumail Nanjiani and his wife, white comedy writer and producer Emily V. Gordon. Raised in a culture that expects him to have an arranged marriage, Nanjiani risks losing his family when he falls in love with Emily. Having grown up in a South Asian American family myself, I love the way this film captures the layered pain and humor of being bicultural, without reducing either culture to caricature or stereotype.

Read the other 2017 Christmas picks [here](#).