

The books we're giving as Christmas gifts

If your secret Santa were a *Century* editor, here's what you might be getting.

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This article appears in the [December 16, 2020](#) issue.



Madonna and Child Hope for the World, by Patricia Brintle (Private collection © Patricia Brintle/Bridgeman Images)

The most brilliant and chilling novel I have read in a very long time is ***The Memory Monster***, by Israeli author Yishai Sarid. The book is written as a report to the director of Yad Vashem, the Jerusalem memorial to those who perished during the Holocaust.

The author of the report, an expert in Nazi methods of extermination, serves as a guide for Israeli youth who visit the camps and killing fields in Poland. As time passes, he becomes detached from the horrors he describes, offering increasingly more brutal details to attempt to shake the teenagers out of their complacent

attention to their phones. All of the big questions appear in this book, including: How does one fight against tyranny without becoming a tyrant oneself?

For anyone with an interest in present-day Cuba, Anthony DePalma's ***The Cubans: Ordinary Lives in Extraordinary Times*** provides a close look into the struggles, griefs, and small triumphs of several residents of Guanabacoa, across the harbor from Old Havana. The heartbreaking decrepitude of a once beautiful culture is not exactly conquered by the resilience and creativity of its residents, but each one has a compelling story of how they have either managed adversity or escaped from it.

For poetry lovers, I recommend two books. In ***Here***, Sydney Lea explores aging, illness, love, grandchildren, life in the country, and grace, all in his usual straightforward, unflinching style. For those living through hard times, his poems are beacons of hope.

Another favorite poet with a fine new collection is Ned Balbo, whose ***The Cylburn Touch-Me-Nots*** is as rich a repast as one could find in contemporary formal verse. Through Elvis, Noah's raven, St. Joseph, and Mary Magdalene, Balbo captures the unheard voice. These poems touch the core of what it means to be human, balancing past and present in verse that reveals both tenderness and grit.

Jon Meacham's ***His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope*** is the biography of a man who set out to desegregate Nashville at age 19 and ended up as a congressman for more than two decades. Lewis preached the love of Christ at the core of the nonviolent movement, and he suffered violent attacks by those who fought against rights for Black Americans. Meacham describes the horrors of that time in riveting detail, but ultimately this is a book of hope about a man of integrity and conviction.

—**Jill Peláez Baumgaertner**, poetry editor

This summer, my husband and I had a discussion about how we could best support Black lives and Black economic freedom at this stage of our lives. One thing we agreed to do was to be more intentional about supporting Black-owned businesses, including all of our Christmas gift shopping. The books I'm giving this year have to meet a threefold test: they must be written by Black authors, be available at a Black-owned bookstore, and be hopeful (because 2020).

For the contemplatives in my life, I'm giving Lalah Delia's ***Vibrate Higher Daily: Live Your Power***. In this book, Delia teaches readers how to remain spiritually grounded in the midst of negative people and circumstances. What I like about her approach is that it isn't overwhelming. Instead, she gently coaches readers on tapping into the life-giving forces that can help them aim a little higher each day.

For my woke but less mystical friends, I'm giving ***A Black Women's History of the United States***, by Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, the fifth book in Beacon Press's ReVisioning History series. There really isn't a bad time to counter the White supremacist version of history that most of us were taught, and this new book does an excellent job highlighting the contributions Black women have made to the American experience.

And for my poetry lovers, I'm giving ***The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks***. I will be honest here: I don't get poetry. But I am trying. Brooks, the first Black Pulitzer Prize winner, has been an effective entry point for me because of her indomitable love of Black people. Reading her work feels like a balm for the soul. This anthology is a must-read—especially if you think you don't like poetry.

—**Dawn Araujo-Hawkins**, news editor

I picked up Chris Grabenstein's 2013 chapter book ***Escape from Mr. Lemoncello's Library*** because the title names two of my favorite things. As it turns out, it isn't about an icy cold Italian liqueur. It's about something better: a group of kids who play a larger-than-life game that involves finding clues about books, solving puzzles, and exploring their way through the Dewey decimal system. I'm giving it to my older daughter, who loves libraries as much as I do. (Bonus: there are several sequels.)

I'm giving my younger daughter two beautiful new picture books about children crossing cultural barriers. Thrity Umrigar's ***Sugar in Milk*** (illustrated by Khoa Le) is about a girl who feels lonely when her family moves to the United States. After her aunt tells her a folktale about a group of Persian refugees, she starts to see brightness and joy in her new country. Judith L. Roth's ***Hiding Baby Moses*** (illustrated by Melanie Cataldo) is about Miriam as much as it's about her famous brother: "Our baby is quiet as Mama kneels to float the basket among the reeds." When things get scary, the young narrator reminds herself—and readers—that God is a protector and a refuge.

Because my husband spends his days thinking about how molecules fit together, I'm giving him Ainissa Ramirez's delightful new book, ***The Alchemy of Us: How Humans and Matter Transformed One Another***. Ramirez, a materials scientist who excels at storytelling, writes about the invention of eight everyday objects to show how science and culture shape each other, often in unanticipated ways. (The chapter on photographic film and racism is particularly revelatory.) Ramirez brings her characters to life, using humor to jab at their foibles and philosophizing about the lessons we might learn from their inventions.

My in-laws, Canadians who have lived for decades in South Carolina, have nuanced perspectives on race and politics. That's why I'm giving them Michelle Obama's ***Becoming*** and Barack Obama's ***A Promised Land***. Michelle's memoir offers a glimpse into the joys and challenges of some of her most formative experiences, from childhood to the end of her time as First Lady. *A Promised Land*, Barack's third memoir, assesses the accomplishments, frustrations, failures, and surprises of his first term in office. Both books are disarmingly honest and quite eloquent.

—**Elizabeth Palmer**, senior editor

What I and perhaps the people I love need this year is more time away from our computers. Cal Newport's ***Digital Minimalism*** is an insightful and inspiring guide to maximizing the value and minimizing the pain of digital engagement. Like Newport's previous book, *Deep Work*, *Digital Minimalism* is practical and erudite, and it makes a compelling argument for changing our habits. I am giving it to my college-age son just to let him know: you have choices.

A Long Petal of the Sea juxtaposes fictional figures with historical ones ranging from the Spanish Civil War to the Pinochet regime in Chile. Isabel Allende's novel tells the story of interlocking families—rich and poor, communist and fascist, upper class and lower class—both in Spain and in Chile. The book provides interesting commentary on the recent election in the United States, as we too struggle with freedom, morality, class, and ideology. I'm giving this book to family members who've lived in Chile, but Allende's ability to move seamlessly from one perspective to another makes it good reading for anyone who loves to think broadly and historically.

And for plain old, high-spirited, good reading, I am giving ***Deacon King Kong*** by James McBride. I loved this novel especially for its portrait of a small, flawed, Black church in Brooklyn that is struggling against all odds to re-create its identity. There is a lot to this book: a mystery, a depiction of New York's diversity, a history of the Great Migration. I am giving it to Heber Brown, founder of the Black Church Food Security Network, because of the surprising role that gardens play in it.

—**Amy Frykholm**, senior editor

Voter suppression in our time is no joke. The pernicious effort to strip millions of Americans of the right to vote is alive and well, thanks to deep racist roots that keep growing new sprouts. Reading Carol Anderson's impeccably researched ***One Person, No Vote*** may get your blood boiling. It did mine. But it's a necessary, if disheartening, read. Part investigative journalism and part historical scholarship (with 130 pages of footnotes), this book lays bare the history of government-sanctioned racial discrimination through ever-changing voting requirements.

When people ask me for a resource to help address their general bafflement with scripture, Mark Allan Powell's ***Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*** is my go-to answer. This magisterial work of art—attractively bound with beautiful images, helpful charts, and thematic essays—walks students and teachers alike through the entire New Testament, book by book. Powell's writing is engaging and accessible to any nonspecialist with a curious mind. He's also a first-rate scholar who writes just as deftly for the academy. I lean on his second edition myself for its incisive summaries and marvelous organization of topics.

You don't have to be a writer to enjoy Trish Hall's ***Writing to Persuade***, though you'll love this book if you are one. The subtitle—*How to Bring People Over to Your Side*—hints at the author's interest in influencing others through writing, speaking, and just plain living. As former editor of the *New York Times* op-ed page, Hall willingly takes on a range of fun subjects, each one in her own witty style. From the role of empathy in persuasion to the conviction that beliefs outweigh facts, Hall keeps her readers constantly thinking about their own effectiveness in the art of persuasion.

—**Peter W. Marty**, editor/publisher

When I left New Orleans in my twenties I left behind a Catholicism I couldn't find anywhere else, in part because, though I didn't fully understand this, it was shaped by traditional African religious practices as much as by the religion of French and Spanish colonists. In ***The Magic of Marie Laveau: Embracing the Spiritual Legacy of the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans***, folklorist Denise Alvarado unpacks the way the church both incorporated and erased the religion of the enslaved Africans and free Black people who built the city.

Laveau, who was baptized Catholic as a baby in the iconic St. Louis Cathedral, remained devout until her death. She was also a master of her ancestral African religion, a skilled herbalist and healer, and a canny businesswoman—which is probably why even though she lived an exemplary life of serving the poor and healing the sick, she went on to become the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans lore instead of a Catholic saint. How her name came to adorn magic shops rather than holy cards is a fascinating story of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and bad journalism, and Alvarado tells it masterfully. I'm giving this book to some of my friends, an increasing number of whom are interested in recovering their ancestral religious roots.

My fascination with folk religious practices and horror stories also led me to the Merrily Watkins series by Phil Rickman, which I'm giving to readers who like their cozy British mysteries with a supernatural twist. The hero of the novels, Merrily Watkins, isn't a detective; she's a priest in the Church of England, the diocesan exorcist (excuse me, deliverance minister), and a single mom of a teenage daughter with a troubling interest in witchcraft. Nevertheless, Watkins reliably solves the twisted cases that bloom unexpectedly in her tiny parish, much like the ancient cider orchard in the first installment, ***The Wine of Angels***. She's like a feminist Father Brown.

These books are page-turners for sure, but the ancient landscape of forest and fen is a haunting backdrop to Watkins's ongoing personal and spiritual struggles. By positioning his hero there, Rickman is able to explore both the institutional church and the older traditions of the British people with seriousness and respect—even as he exploits them for thrills.

—**Jessica Mesman**, associate editor

With COVID-19 keeping me at home, I'm on pace to read more than 60 books this year. Among the best I've read so far are two I gladly recommend for gift giving.

At a low time for me during the pandemic, I was delighted to discover ***In the Shelter: Finding a Home in the World*** by Pádraig Ó Tuama, a book that is inspirational and deeply theological. Ó Tuama is an Irish Catholic poet who was once the leader of the Corrymeela peace community in Northern Ireland. Reading this book of prose reminded me of both Henri Nouwen and Kathleen Norris. Ó Tuama is a delightful storyteller and thinker who brings fresh insights on topics like beginnings and repentance, borderlands and peacemaking, bodily existence and incarnation. "Good writing," he says, "is when we read something we've always known but never been able to put into words." This book is replete with evidence of that.

This year two different friends pointed me to ***Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*** by Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Kimmerer has a bifocal vision that draws from the stories and practices of her native tradition while staying in sync with the best of scientific thinking. "To plant trees is an act of faith," she writes. Amen to that.

The reverence Kimmerer brings to nature should be the lifeblood of any serious effort to address climate change. I was disappointed that my local library had only an audio copy, since I prefer print. But that turned out to be a blessing, because Kimmerer herself is the reader, and she tells her many stories with understated passion and deep conviction.

—**Richard A. Kauffman**, contributing editor

My family talks about books at the drop of a hat, but we're each so different. It's always tempting to share my favorites, the most delicious books I've read lately, but I want my gifts to appeal to each person's tastes. This seems like a good year for fiction—escape, hope, and imaginary friends in places we likely wouldn't visit even if travel were unrestricted. And when it comes to fiction, the flavors are endless.

I couldn't wait to read Erin Morgenstern's latest, ***The Starless Sea***, and I wasn't disappointed. The opening scenes are so evocative—like reading poetry with a plot and interesting characters. And just when I'd fallen in love with both the jailed pirate and the girl who reads to him, the page turns to new, even more vivid scenes and dives down into a fantastic underworld of secret readers. A book to savor.

Speaking of the underworld, Robert Macfarlane's ***Underland***, although not fiction, is a fascinating tale—actually, a marvelous collection of them—about what's below ground. The sheer scope and variety—from vast mining tunnels under the English Channel to the Paris catacombs to caves on remote islands in the far north—make for a whirlwind tour. But Macfarlane has his feet firmly planted, weaving astute observations and genuine emotion as he leads us underground. Between *Underland* and Richard Powers's *The Overstory*, the earth has become a more familiar place.

And nowhere do I feel more alienated these days than in the world of politics, so it was curiously reassuring to read Curtis Sittenfeld's ***Rodham***. Although fiction—it's perfectly clear that it's an alternate universe Sittenfeld imagines for the life of Hillary Clinton—the book is also oddly realistic, grounded in familiar territory, true to the spirit of the woman and her career, and forging a human connection between the unknown reader, a mere voter, and a stellar politician and stateswoman.

—**Siobhan Drummond**, copyeditor/proofreader

Billy Lombardo won me over when I heard him do a reading of his story "How I Knew You Were Mad at Me," an annotated list that captures the banal, ridiculous side of a relationship in crisis. (Reason #9: "While we drove to Home Depot in the rain you waited a long time to put the wipers on.") It's from his 2009 novel-in-stories *How to Hold a Woman*, now out of print.

This year Tortoise Books reissued the book as part of its New Chicago Classics series, giving it a helpful edit and an improved title: ***Morning Will Come***. It's an intimate portrayal of a marriage struggling to survive the loss of a child. Lombardo excels at something I love as a reader: he tackles heavy subject matter in a serious way but with the confidence to also be funny.

John Hodgman is all about the laughs. While you may know him from his small roles in TV comedy, his greatest gifts are as a humorist: along with being quite funny, he's

an uncommonly graceful writer. His advice column for the *New York Times* is a trove of exquisitely crafted silliness. In ***Medallion Status***, Hodgman explores his experience of mild fame—being misrecognized on the street, having doors opened but to mediocre places. It’s lovely prose and great fun.

Even more fun: reading an Amy Krouse Rosenthal book with a child. Rosenthal died in 2017, and this year her collaborator Tom Lichtenheld completed their final book, ***Moo-Moo, I Love You!*** It delights in her goofy wordplay and his charming illustrations, like their book *Friendshape* but less sophisticated: this one’s just page after page of moo jokes, embedded in a sweet story of parental love. My daughters and I find it delightful.

We read serious stuff, too. My older daughter has been enjoying two new biographical picture books by Amy Alznauer, ***The Strange Birds of Flannery O’Connor*** (illustrated by Ping Zhu) and ***The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity*** (illustrated by Daniel Miyares). A lot of biographies written for children read like either saints’ lives or encyclopedia entries. These ones benefit from Alznauer’s focused entrance points—O’Connor’s fascination with birds, mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan’s beautiful imagination—that reveal her subjects to young readers in an engaging way.

—**Steve Thorngate**, managing editor

Especially in a year like 2020, I’m excited to share an amazing picture book by writer Michael W. Waters and illustrator Keisha Morris, ***For Beautiful Black Boys Who Believe in a Better World***. I’m giving this one to my godson and to other families raising young Black men. The book breaks down what is happening in our country without watering down the seriousness of racism; however, its words and illustrations embody a sensitivity that young kids need.

The story celebrates the lives of Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, the Charleston Nine, and even the police officers killed in Dallas, along with others who have shed needless blood this past decade. (It was written before the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others we’ve lost this year.) The discussion questions in the back of the book will help adults talk with children about these cases and others.

For the tween girls in my life (and my daughter's life), I've discovered a neat series of coloring and activity books, Notebook Doodles by Jess Volinski. This summer a friend gave my daughter one of the books in the series, ***Girl Power!*** She loved not only coloring in it but thinking through the activities. The whole series is designed to boost confidence and self-esteem in tweens—something every young girl can use.

For my sister friends, I'm excited about the new edition of an older title by one of my favorite authors, Michelle McKinney Hammond. She's updated ***The Power of Being a Woman*** and rereleased it, and I've already enjoyed rereading the timely message about embracing my God-given femininity. Hammond isn't trying to take us back to a time when women were silent, but she is trying to get us to look more honestly and deeply at the basic notion that men and women are designed differently by God. She encourages women to embrace that message and walk in that power, rather than hide or deny it.

—**Katara Patton**, community engagement editor

Sarah M. Broom and I are both native New Orleanians living in self-imposed exile. Both of our widowed mothers lived in yellow houses in pre-Katrina New Orleans. We share trauma that “the Water” brought as we witnessed the destruction via television from our points of exile, spending days without knowing the extent of damage to places and lives we cherished. My mother's house, though flooded, survived. The house in which Broom grew up did not.

What we share drew me to Broom's ***The Yellow House***. But the book highlights the differences in our experiences—differences based on race, privilege, and location within the city. Broom offers readers a glimpse into her resilient African American family of 12 siblings, a portrait of New Orleans that shatters some of its myths while celebrating others, and a house that lives on in the memories of those who lived in it.

I eventually migrated to St. Louis. Before beginning an apartment search, I was warned, “Just don't go north of Delmar.” That was the beginning of my introduction to the city's entrenched structural racism. In ***The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States***, historian Walter Johnson explains that “significant differences in virtually any marker of social well-being” exist between the Black and White sides of the city delineated by Delmar Boulevard.

I wasn't surprised by the images of a St. Louis couple waving guns at Black Lives Matter protesters walking down their street in June—a mere six blocks south of Delmar and nine miles south of Ferguson, where Black teenager Michael Brown was shot by a White police officer in 2014. Through the lens of racial capitalism and empire building, Johnson helps explain how we got to this point. He begins with the fur trade and traces the history all the way through today's for-profit policing and mass incarceration.

Broom's and Johnson's histories are not merely St. Louis and New Orleans stories, they are American stories. We have to try to understand them if we are to have any hope of effectively dismantling the systemic injustices that are alive and well today.

—**Trice Gibbons**, audience development editor

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Books we're giving for Christmas."