

Gifts you can read

When it comes to giving gifts, it's hard to go wrong with words. Here are some of the wordy gifts the CC staff will be giving this Christmas.

Features in the [December 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Øivind Hovland)

Most of the books I read for pleasure are considered science fiction or fantasy classics. While they've stood the test of time, they also tend to be by dead White men. Rebecca Roanhorse is none of those things, and her ***Black Sun*** is an instant classic. It's the first installment in an epic fantasy series that consists of two books and counting. It contains some elements one expects in epic fantasy: detailed world-building, magic, the collision of gods and humankind. But it is set in a world that resembles the pre-Columbian Americas, so it offers a treasury of departures from and subversions of the typical medieval European tropes.

Ursula K. Le Guin died in January 2018. Three months later came ***Conversations on Writing***, a book consisting of three extended interviews of Le Guin by one of her superfans, radio host David Naimon. Each interview focuses on a type of writing practiced by the versatile Le Guin: fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. *Conversations on Writing* will delight anyone who already loves Le Guin's work, and it will provide a compelling introduction for those who haven't read her. Even read apart from her body of work, these interviews provide rich insights on writing, publishing, gender, and more.

Wingspan is a strategy-based board game that takes about an hour to play. Disclaimer: it is a few years old and rather popular, so if there is a board game lover on your list, they may already have this one. But I wanted (nay, needed) to include the recommendation because, unlike most strategy games, *Wingspan* is great for non-gamers. It is beautiful and educational, and it's fun to play even when you lose. Inspired by birding, the game has players compete to assemble the best bird sanctuaries using stylish, informative cards. Each of the 170 cards is like a tiny book about a type of bird. Did you know that the songs of the yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*) influenced Beethoven?

—Jon Mathieu, community engagement editor

American Gods is my comfort novel—I have reread (and relistened to) it repeatedly over the past six years. Just out of prison, Shadow takes a job with the mysterious Mr. Wednesday and finds himself in the middle of a battle between gods over the soul of America. Neil Gaiman's masterful tale of magically real Americana asks readers to consider how we define "religion" and to imagine how myths can bring magic into our world. I usually get my audiobooks from the library, but this one got

purchased and earned a permanent place on my virtual bookshelf.

Every year, PEN America releases an anthology of poetry, fiction, essays, and memoirs written by winners of their Prison Writing Awards. All of the contributors are incarcerated writers. The theme of this year's anthology, ***Thank the Bloom***, is "a deeper exploration of self, of power, of institutionalized racism, of systemic isolation, and of the beauty that can be found in a garden bed." PEN America does incredible work teaching and facilitating freedom of expression through writing—a freedom not often afforded to people who are incarcerated. While I've only preordered this year's anthology and haven't actually read it yet, if it's anything like previous collections, it's not to be missed.

The Swimmers is the most recent novel from Julie Otsuka, author of *The Buddha in the Attic* and *When the Emperor Was Divine*. The first half of the story, which describes a group of swimmers and their connection to their local pool in glorious first-person plural, is a witty, charming, and consumable description of what it means to be a community united primarily by a place—and what happens when that place is gone. The second half follows Alice, an older swimmer losing her memory, in a heartbreaking account of motherhood, grief, and the trauma people like her faced in Japanese internment camps. I read this book in one sitting.

—Annelisa Burns, research assistant

Back in 2021, shortly after I discovered the K-pop star Taemin (the world's greatest performing artist, as far as I am concerned), I was introduced to **Bubble**—a Korean artist-to-fan communication service within the Lysn app. At the time, Taemin was on a Bubble hiatus because he was serving his compulsory military service, and the idea of paying to read exclusive posts from a celebrity seemed inane to me. But when Taemin—a historically prolific Bubble user—was discharged this April, the stakes changed. Now I can't think of an amount I wouldn't pay for access to his musings and jokes, project updates, and occasional song recommendations. I think Taemin is a genius, and subscribing to his Bubble is the most worthwhile \$4 monthly fee I've ever paid.

I am always on the lookout for Black contemplatives, so when I first heard someone call Harriet Tubman a mystic a few years ago, the idea took root. Eager to learn more about this aspect of Tubman's life, I was thrilled to hear that Therese Taylor-

Stinson was working on a book about just that. Published in February, ***Walking the Way of Harriet Tubman: Public Mystic and Freedom Fighter*** explores not only the contemplative practices that fueled Tubman's activism but also the ways that people of color are often called on to cultivate our own liberation. It's a must read for anyone interested in the intersection of race and contemplative spirituality.

After I had my third child last year, my podcast listening time declined dramatically. But the podcast I try to keep up with is *The Bible for Normal People*. Hosts Peter Enns and Jared Byas interview biblical scholars in an attempt to bring the best and newest scholarship to nonspecialists. While the podcast itself is free, a \$12 monthly membership to the **Society of Normal People** comes with exclusive articles and classes from Enns and Byas. If you like your biblical scholarship in bite-size, digestible pieces, the Society of Normal People is a worthwhile investment.

—Dawn Araujo-Hawkins, news editor

When Russia invaded Ukraine last year, Sebastian Wells and Vsevolod Kazarin did what anyone would do: they started an art magazine. ***Solomiya***'s primary focus is neither intrepid news gathering nor fierce polemic. It's striking images, especially photography. Which is not to say the magazine is apolitical. Based in both Kyiv and Berlin, the self-consciously European *Solomiya* is explicitly pro-democracy—a position that may sound like a baseline norm but is often a contested political view, both in Eastern Europe and, increasingly, throughout the West. A great gift for anyone interested in Ukraine, visual art, or both.

In our work editing a magazine, we often speak of personal essays, critical essays, and opinion essays, genre distinctions that are imperfect but real enough. Phil Christman is an outstanding essayist in a more traditional sense: he embeds all of the above in long-form pieces that explore a broad topic in creative, pleasingly discursive ways. In his facetiously titled collection ***How to Be Normal***—which draws from work published elsewhere, including in these pages—Christman begins with his famous (at least in my readerly circles) *Hedgehog Review* essay on masculinity and goes on to tackle such subjects as race, faith, and marriage. Each essay is at once playful, intellectually curious, morally serious, and impatient with tribal politics and easy answers.

I don't read many graphic novels, but I love *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal*, Zach Weinersmith's daily webcomic about science, religion, and other geeky things. So when I heard Weinersmith was adapting *Beowulf* into a graphic novel about neighborhood kids and their tree fort, I had to read it. **Bea Wolf** doesn't disappoint. It faithfully adopts the plot of its Old English source material, while dramatically downgrading the violence. Instead of a man, its hero is a brave, fierce little girl. The art, by French cartoonist Boulet, is exquisite. Oh, and the whole thing is thoroughly, deliriously silly. Best of all, it's written, like the original, in alliterative verse rich with kennings. I couldn't quite pick a favorite example, but here's one contender: referring to grown-ups as "The shushers, scolders, grounders, scrapers of screentime, / The grade-givers, unglad but grinning: red in pen and eye."

—Steve Thorngate, managing editor

I've always been interested in health and wellness. In college, I would take courses on the subject, participate in yoga classes, meditate, and watch YouTube videos from wellness coaches. So when I came across an ad for the *National Geographic* newsletter **Mind, Body, Wonder**, I signed up for a subscription immediately. It's the first paid newsletter I've ever subscribed to, and I find it to be worth it. Each Monday it offers three or four articles on topics ranging from modern health to exercise and diet to wellness tips.

Invisible is a *New York Times* bestseller by Danielle Steel. I remember the first time I read this novel: I couldn't put it down. It's exciting and aggravating all at once. The protagonist, Antonia, has a love for movies and dreams of becoming a screenwriter. Throughout the book, we see Antonia fighting norms as she tries to make a name for herself in a male-dominated profession. In this exciting novel, we get to live through a story of perseverance as we experience how far Antonia goes to follow her dreams.

Beautiful World, Where Are You is a fun novel about friends and family who are just trying to make it through life. It takes place in Ireland and follows four individuals who all end up having some connection in the end. I love this novel because it's funny, witty, and very relatable. It's as if I knew each character personally. The author, Sally Rooney, is an Irish writer and screenwriter whose novels include *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends*, both of which have

been adapted as limited series on Hulu. I highly recommend reading anything she has written.

—Marie Watson, editorial assistant

This year I plan to introduce my friends to Arthur Less, the eccentric gay novelist who is the subject of Andrew Sean Greer's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel **Less** and its sequel. In both novels, Less is indeed lost in a sea of events seemingly beyond his control. Greer's narrator describes Less as "one who never sits next to anyone on a plane who has heard of his books," with a complexion so fair that "he's like a person without skin." Less is most comfortable in a suit, even when riding a donkey down into a canyon. In *Less*, Greer's hero embarks on a trip around the world for speaking engagements, motivated by his need to legitimately decline an invitation to his ex-lover's wedding. From New York to Berlin to India to Japan and back home to San Francisco, mishaps and preposterous situations ensue.

In ***Less Is Lost***, Less desperately tries to raise money to save his beloved San Francisco "shack" by accepting a series of odd assignments arranged by his agent. Less reunites with H. H. H. Mandern, a writer of "space operettas," and Mandern's pug for a trip across the United States in a camper van. (The reunion was supposed to consist of just an interview.) Eventually, Less meets up with a traveling theater group performing a play based on his autobiographical novel. This leads to a brief reunion with his estranged father. Readers will find themselves rooting for Less and finding satisfaction when his journeys end.

To those who already know Arthur Less, I will give ***Happy-Go-Lucky***, David Sedaris's latest collection of essays. Sedaris has a gift for identifying the absurdities in everyday life, making readers laugh—because his descriptions are hilarious, the observations hit close to home, or both. He's at his best when he takes on the absurdities that emerge from his family's relationships, the primary focus of this collection. Although still biting, this collection is a little more tender. About his celebrity sister, Amy, he writes, "Movies and TV can't capture what's special about Amy. She's not an actress, exactly, or a comedian but more like someone who speaks in tongues."

—Trice Gibbons, audience development editor

I walked into the bookstore on High Street in Deal, England, and my palms started to itch. Everything about this store said to me, “Read, Amy, read.” A few months earlier, I’d walked into a recently remodeled independent bookstore, and as I wandered I felt deflated: How could there be a whole store full of books and not one thing I wanted to read? This summer, I walked into a bookstore in my parents’ hometown that once upon a time had felt shoddy and mean, and now it felt vivid and alive. New owners had made every book on the shelf feel like an old friend or a potential friend. I don’t know how this happens. I don’t know what makes a bookstore feel smart or dumb, full or empty. But this is one thing I am going to spend money on: the vivid, alive, and joyful bookstore. If you know one of these, get a **gift certificate** for a reader on your list.

At that bookstore in Deal, I put my hands on a copy of Virginia Woolf’s **Orlando**, a Vintage Classics edition. The feel of this book is perfect. It’s small and compact but not crowded. It makes you want to read it, savor it, and share it. It was worth buying new.

And speaking of reading and savoring: Ella Risbridger has a new book out, **The Dinner Table**, a collection of essays about food edited with Kate Young. If you don’t know Ella Risbridger and you like to cook or to read about food, then I would highly recommend checking out her *Midnight Chicken* and *The Year of Miracles*. They are both memoir cookbooks with entertaining essays and delicious, idiosyncratic recipes. I can’t wait to read *The Dinner Table*, probably at the dinner table.

—Amy Frykholm, senior editor

When most of us view the infamous civil rights-era photos of fire hoses and police dogs turned against Black protesters, we know instantly that they are from the epicenter of American racism in the 1960s: Birmingham, Alabama. What we know far less about is the infighting that took place between local civil rights leaders like Fred Shuttlesworth, whose expression of fearlessness serves as the title for Paul Kix’s new book **You Have to Be Prepared to Die before You Can Begin to Live**, and outsiders like Martin Luther King Jr. who wanted nothing to do with the controversial strategy of throwing Birmingham’s youth up against the savagery of local sheriff Bull Connor. The keen character development in Kix’s fast-moving drama makes it a

gripping read.

Literary journalist Tracy Kidder grabs my attention with practically everything he writes. He researches subjects comprehensively, doggedly tracking down a story for years. He also writes with a compelling personal voice. His latest work, ***Rough Sleepers: Dr. Jim O'Connell's Urgent Mission to Bring Healing to Homeless People***, is no exception. For the better part of five years, Kidder shadowed a doctor's work among Boston's vulnerable homeless population, chronicling the highs and lows of this street ministry. What makes Kidder's writing so fascinating this time is Jim O'Connell. This Harvard-trained physician, who embodies humility in a beautifully consistent way, has given four decades of his life to Boston's unhoused. He is a gift to all of us, and Kidder poignantly shares why.

"So what if their skin is black? They still have feelings but most of all are God's people!" So wrote nine-year-old Drew Gilpin Faust to President Eisenhower in 1957, on a piece of three-holed notebook paper. Raised in the segregated Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, Drew shunned the Lost Cause myth of the Confederacy that shaped much of her parents' outlook on life. If anything, their conservatism pushed her to explore justice, truth, and mercy—first in library stacks and later at her all-White girls boarding school. She went on to march in Selma and protest the war in Vietnam. Faust, who later became Harvard University's first female president, describes why a questioning spirit is vital for making sense of childhood. Her elegantly written memoir, ***Necessary Trouble: Growing Up at Midcentury***, is exquisite.

—Peter W. Marty, editor/publisher

I had the pleasure of working on Eleanor Johnson's ***Waste and the Wasters***, published by University of Chicago Press in November. It's one of those rare academic books that remixes a collection of ideas—medieval poetry, land management, weather, bees, God's vengeance, and climate change—in a style that's eminently readable, bringing the past to life and connecting it to the present in one engaging sentence after another. Medieval people "did what people do when faced with a set of problems [plague, pollution, food scarcity, floods] for which no organized vocabulary exists: they made art. . . . Medieval poets invented their own ecosystemic discourse."

Another book about big ideas is going to my only grandchild in the hope that it will help her cope with what's coming. Yuval Noah Harari has written a version of *Sapiens* for the young reader: ***Unstoppable Us: How Humans Took Over the World***, illustrated by Ricard Zaplana Ruiz. It's full of colorful sketches and provocative ideas, and I can picture it being read aloud and then becoming one of those books that a child will reread and puzzle over for years. With luck, it will start some interesting conversations.

I was introduced to Ross Gay when my proofreading assistant here at the *Century* gave me a copy of *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* for Christmas. So I shouldn't have been surprised that, when I asked her to recommend a book, she said, "Anything by Ross Gay." Reading ***The Book of (More) Delights*** is a lot like spending time with a good friend. Gay's second book of "delights" is a pearly string of tiny memoirs: his love for notebooks and pens, which he doesn't enact quite the same way I do, makes the sharing all the more delightful. His appreciation of walking sticks, especially communal ones, sparks fond memories. I found myself happier just from snacking on a few pages.

—Siobhan Drummond, copyeditor/proofreader

Michigan's Upper Peninsula is nestled between three of the Great Lakes, so its artists and poets are well acquainted with the beauty and danger of water. ***The Gift of Water*** is a clothbound anthology published by the Cedar Tree Institute, a nonprofit organization working at the intersections of ecology, religion, and mental health. Originally published in *Marquette Monthly* magazine, these 45 essays are glimpses into the vibrant waters of the Upper Peninsula—and pleas for their conservation. "She has taken on the pain of others," writes poet Heidi Stevenson about the fierceness of Lake Superior as it carves away at the shoreline during a storm. "And now she is fighting to save herself. I don't blame her."

Last year, Friendship Press, a small ecumenical publisher associated with the National Council of Churches, released an updated edition of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Now the press is exploring multiple ways to get that translation, the NRSVue, into people's hands and hearts. One of these is ***The People's Book***, an audiobook series in which the books of the Bible are read by leaders from various NCC member churches. Like the biblical authors, none of these

readers is White. Among the earliest books to be released are four that I'm particularly excited about: Vashti McKenzie reads Psalms, William Barber reads Amos, Michael Curry reads Galatians, and Shively Smith reads Revelation.

Winter's Gifts, a children's book written by Kaitlin Curtice and illustrated by Gloria Félix, tells the story of a girl named Dani who helps her friends recognize and receive the gifts of winter: rest, remembrance, and gratitude. The book is shaped by Curtice's Potawatomi values, including her commitment to resisting injustice through storytelling (see "Resisting as a way of life," October). With the help of her family's traditions—such as the *shkodé*, the fire lit at the beginning of winter—Dani models how to inhabit the changing seasons thoughtfully. "Many of her friends are afraid of the dark, but not Dani. The dark feels like a hug, and winter is a time for cozy hugs." A sequel featuring Dani's younger brother, *Summer's Magic*, will be published next spring.

—Elizabeth Palmer, senior editor

Hellebore is a small press magazine that covers British folk horror and occult studies. Each themed issue (they've tackled ritual, the old ways, and Yuletide, to name a few) contains essays by religion scholars, writers, artists, and practitioners on folklore, myth, history, archaeology, psycho-geography, art, literature, and film. Founded in 2019 by writer and editor Maria J. Pérez Cuervo and beautifully designed by art director Nathaniel Hébert, the magazine is as pleasurable to read and hold as it is to look at. Every time an issue arrives in my mailbox, I want to clear my calendar. You can order the whole bundle of back issues on their website (and grab a very cool tote bag or sweatshirt too) for the folk horror fan in your life. Hellebore has also published a travel guide (*The Hellebore Guide to Occult Britain*) and a card game (The Magical Card Battle of Britain).

When Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey* appeared in 2017, her work was hailed as a "revelation" (the *New York Times*) and a "cultural landmark" (the *Guardian*) that would forever change how we read Homer. Her translation of ***The Iliad*** likewise reveals an ancient poem in a contemporary idiom. Wilson, a classics professor at the University of Pennsylvania, stresses that her translations are as literal as possible. For example, she has Helen refer to herself not as "slut" or "whore" (as in previous translations by men) but as "dog-face." Wilson explained in

an interview that Homer uses the same word here as when Achilles insults the male character Agamemnon—and that passage has usually been translated as “you with the dog’s eyes,” not “Agamemnon, you slut!” What Wilson strips away from her translation is as interesting as what she brings to it.

If you’re a movie buff, you’re probably already subscribing to several streaming services, but the **Criterion Collection** offers more than just classic, art house, and obscure films you can’t find anywhere else. Monthly membership includes access to essays by film scholars and to *Current*, an online magazine covering film culture. Curated collections by favorite directors and film scholars will introduce you to influential, beloved, and overlooked films in your genres of interest. You can read an excellent essay on, for example, film noir and then dig into the collection to watch the movies mentioned. No more scrolling for hours for a movie that suits your mood or personal obsessions. You can go to a film fest in your own living room.

—Jessica Mesman, associate editor