

## The gift of words

Here are some books and other wordy presents the CC staff will be putting under the tree this year.

Features in the [December 2024](#) issue

Published on December 5, 2024



Century illustration

When we were kids, my best friend Bruce and I often camped in my backyard in the tent I earned by selling seed packets door-to-door. So, when I heard Riley Sager interviewed about his latest mystery, ***Middle of the Night***, which begins with ten-year-old best friends Billy and Ethan camping in Ethan’s backyard, I was immediately intrigued. Ethan wakes up in the morning to find he’s alone in the tent. The side of the tent where Billy had been sleeping has a large gash in it. When Ethan returns to live in his childhood home 30 years later, Billy is still missing. Bizarre things begin to happen—things that suggest Billy might have returned, too. No other book has literally caused chills to run up my spine or so delighted me with its twists and turns. If I can find Bruce, who has gone missing from my life, he’s getting this book for Christmas.

Nobody thought rancher Sonny Lamb would ever amount to anything. He was considered a “good-hearted loser” who married above his station. After all, the townspeople watched Sonny purchase his own beloved bull Joaquin at auction when it became clear that the only other person bidding had dog food in mind as Joaquin’s fate. Unlike others, political operative L. D. Sparks saw potential in Sonny—potential to become a state representative, flipping Sonny’s west Texas district from blue to red. Both Sonny’s campaign and his tenure as a legislator prove that Sonny, although not perfect, does indeed have a good heart plus a creative mind. Lawrence Wright’s characters in ***Mr. Texas***, though fictional, will certainly be recognizable. He plays with stereotypes, then surprises readers by challenging or destroying those stereotypes in a fun way. This novel is clearly informed by Wright’s Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalism.

My family loves word puzzles, particularly Wordle and crossword puzzles. However, they are busy people who don’t have the time to benefit from a full subscription to the *New York Times* (although they do read the *Century*). I was delighted to discover that purchasing a gift subscription solely to the *Times* puzzles is an option. The subscription includes full access to ***Spelling Bee, Wordle, the Crossword***, and other games from the *Times*.

—Trice Gibbons, audience development editor

A treasure trove arrived this week, and I haven’t been able to put it down. ***Twelve Classic Christmas Stories: A Feast of Yuletide Tales***, edited by Victorian literature scholar Timothy Larsen (who also created *The Oxford Handbook of Christmas*), is a most eclectic, masterful, and sometimes unpredictable collection of

stories that Larsen insists form a “true, literary genre.” They include a ghost story, a romance, a detective story, and many stories of suffering. For Christmas? Larsen reminds us in his astute introduction that “every Christmas story does not bring the glitter of gold. . . . Some Christmas stories bring myrrh.” The many authors represented include Louisa May Alcott, O. Henry, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Anthony Trollope, Willa Cather, G. K. Chesterton, and of course Charles Dickens. They are, all of them, wonderful read-aloud stories for families and Yuletide gatherings.

A book for anyone who has ever read *Huckleberry Finn* is **James** by Percival Everett—a retelling of Mark Twain’s story from the point of view of Huck’s enslaved friend, Jim. Everett portrays Jim as a reader and a writer, a master of code-switching, which he uses as a means of survival, and a wise and mature companion for Huck. The secret Jim reveals to Huck near the end of the book is one that I didn’t see coming—but Jim’s transition into James, a fierce seeker of justice, makes complete and utter sense. This is a masterpiece.

Marda Messick’s **Feral Princess** is an enchanting collection of poems with a front cover of a girl standing on her head in a cypress grove with an alligator balanced on her toes. You will want to frame it. This is a chapbook, short enough to be read and savored in one sitting—but one that makes you want more, more, more. It chronicles a girl’s rite of passage from birth to the end of her life. It is both fanciful and poignant; it reveals a woman’s deepest longings as she faces loss and the wisdom that comes with it if she is willing to embrace it. “What’s inside us, the being / human, aches,” she writes. You will love these poems for their grit, their brilliance, and their deep understanding of the womanly world.

—Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, poetry editor

I bought **Good for a Girl: A Woman Running in a Man’s World** as a birthday present for my brother, who is—unlike me—an avid runner. Before I wrapped it up, I read it myself. This sports memoir follows the life and career of athlete Lauren Fleshman as she comes to terms with and fights against sexism in the competitive world of professional running. It brought me into the realm of female athletes and the challenges they face in a profession built on unhealthy, even dangerous standards for physical and mental health. Well-written, empowering, and at times heartbreaking, this book did the impossible: it made me want to go for a run.

One of the best novels I read this year was **Horse**, by Geraldine Brooks. We follow Jarett, an enslaved groom in the mid-19th-century South; Martha, a gallery owner in

20th-century New York; and scientist Jess and art historian Theo in 2019. Running through it all is Kentucky, the greatest racehorse of all time (based on a real racehorse named Lexington). Brooks weaves together these multiple points of view and points in time to tell the untold story of how Black (often enslaved) horsemen built the American racing industry. As much about art, African American history, racial injustice, and niche museum science as it is about horses and racing, *Horse* is a captivating, beautiful book that I look forward to rereading.

In an effort to read more by Palestinian writers this year, I read Susan Abulhawa's 2020 novel ***Against the Loveless World***. The story follows Nahr, a Palestinian refugee who sits in prison and recalls growing up as a refugee in Kuwait, moving home to Palestine, and discovering love, family, and, eventually, radicalization. This book is not an easy read. It reflects themes that are true to the experience of living under occupation, holding trauma, fear, anger, loss, and violence alongside love, family, beauty, strength, and hope. I've spent this past year learning as much as I can about Palestine from nonfiction sources. *Against the Loveless World* reminds me that we can learn truth from fiction as well.

—Annelisa Burns, research assistant

If you'd asked me a year ago which types of fictional storylines I'd be reading, lesbian necromancers and swordfighters uncovering ancient secrets in outer space would not have been my first guess. But then I was in a bookstore and came across the haunting cover art (by illustrator Tommy Arnold) of Tamsyn Muir's ***Gideon the Ninth***, book 1 in the still-being-written Locked Tomb series. I pulled out my phone and looked up the series, noticing that its books have been nominated for nearly every sci-fi and fantasy award there is. I took a leap and have not been disappointed by this irreverent tale of two women trying to save a galactic death cult.

It might feel strange to see a video game on this list, concerned as it is with words and literature. But if you're not a gamer, take it from me that some video games—the best ones—are beautiful blends of cinematic, literary, musical, and strategic elements. Of the games I've enjoyed recently, one of the most word-heavy and delightful has been Remedy Entertainment's ***Control***. In this action thriller, you play as Jesse Faden, who discovers her own psychic powers while being unexpectedly named director of the shadowy Federal Bureau of Control. Along the way you discover memos, ranging from redacted test reports to book club emails, that help you figure out what is going on.

I do occasionally seek entertainment that is not dark science fiction—such as the age-old game of chess. Like many people, I began playing for the first time during the isolated days of the pandemic. And like many people, I turned to “the internet’s chess teacher,” Levy Rozman (aka GothamChess), to learn game basics, openings, and intermediate tactics. While I have opted for Rozman’s free YouTube content and paid courses on Chessly.com, those who prefer old-fashioned book learning may want to check out his **How to Win at Chess**. It is designed for beginners, so don’t buy it for your friend who’s a lifelong chess aficionado. But for new and casual players, Rozman’s instruction is probably the most accessible you can find.

—Jon Mathieu, community engagement editor

I should probably be embarrassed to admit how obsessed I am with Art of Marza’s **Good Samaritan vinyl sticker**. Just off the top of my head, I can think of five places I could and would put one. The words she includes with her artwork on this stunning icon—“Refusing to harden your heart is a radical act”—have become something of a mantra to me, an empath who’s constantly angered by the state of the world. They are an important reminder to me that while anger is a valid and important emotion, I cannot truly help anyone if I am embittered and spiteful.

Nine years ago, veteran copy editor Karen Yin launched the website the Conscious Style Guide—a resource for writers and editors that compiled the latest guidance on using compassionate and inclusive language. It’s been an invaluable tool for me throughout my career (I even have an “I Heart the Conscious Style Guide” widget on my personal website), so I was thrilled to learn that Yin was publishing a print version this year. I wish I could buy a copy of **The Conscious Style Guide: A Flexible Approach to Language that Includes, Respects, and Empowers** for every wordsmith in my life.

In Kansas City, Missouri, we have two Black-owned bookstores. The first, Willa’s Books and Vinyl, almost closed this year when its 83-year-old owner finally decided to retire. (It was saved by a local Black news outlet that offered to run it.) The second, BLK + BRWN, is still in danger of shuttering. According to owner Cori Smith, the vertiginous rate of gentrification in midtown has caused her rent and utility rates to drastically increase. Meanwhile, selling books online has become more expensive, both because of rising shipping costs and because more and more books are being lost or misdelivered. A **donation to BLK + BRWN’s rent fund** would help to ensure that the people of Kansas City always have a place to find the perfect Black book to give as a gift.

—Dawn Araujo-Hawkins, news editor

In his 2018 debut novel *There There*, Tommy Orange juggles 12 main characters as he explores the contemporary life of urban Native Americans. His follow-up ***Wandering Stars*** is both prequel and sequel: it focuses on one family from the first book, following them from ancestors to descendants. Where the first book offered a kaleidoscopic view of a moment in the present life of an often overlooked community, the second is striking in its historical sweep. It begins in 1864 at the Sand Creek Massacre and goes on to linger at such landmarks as the Fort Marion prison castle, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and the occupation of Alcatraz before picking up, halfway through the novel, where *There There* left off in 2018. The result is epic in scope and deeply affecting.

Socialist magazine ***Jacobin*** sells subscriptions, but I don't have one—the thick, heady magazines I do subscribe to already pile up unread. But *Jacobin* also sells individual copies, and this year I picked up its religion-themed spring issue. It's filled with rich food for thought: a profile of the Institute for Christian Socialism, a consideration of Luther alongside Marx, an essay on the connections between 1960s radicals and the Jesus people, a genealogy of union bosses' appeals to scripture. Lots of 19th-century socialism, too: in Irish Catholic labor activism, in Utah Mormonism, in Victorian stained glass. And that's just the Christianity-related stuff. Reading through the issue offers a colorful reminder—one perennially needed in American discourse—that liberals and leftists are very different entities, in religion as in most everything else.

I'm fascinated by contemporary iconography, whether traditional in approach or otherwise. In ***The Modern Saints***, Gracie Morbitzer depicts a wide variety of Christian saints in present-day context. In her paintings, their faces are lifelike, colorful, and expressive. Alongside the images are original reflections, compiled by Morbitzer and written by James Martin, Eve Tushnet, Tsh Oxenreider, Laura Kelly Fanucci, Christena Cleveland, and many others. (Disclosure: one, by my friend Jenny Booth Potter, briefly discusses the decision my wife and I made to name our daughter after a particular saint.) Taken as a whole, this thick, beautiful book makes a powerful argument for the saints as edgy, relevant, and fully alive to God and the world.

—Steve Thorngate, managing editor

I got to know the work of Episcopal priest Gil Stafford when I was writing an essay for the century about Pamela Colman Smith, a Catholic convert who was also the long-credited illustrator of the most recognizable tarot deck in the world. Stafford's ***The Bible and the Tarot*** is both a practical guide to contemplation of the tarot and an unconventional Bible study. It's giving me another way of thinking about my own life story via archetypes that appear in both of these mystical texts. If you or someone you know is drawn to tarot but also is unsure about how a Christian might engage faithfully with the practice, Stafford is an ideal guide.

***Reclaiming Art in the Age of Artifice***, by philosopher J. F. Martel, is a journey into the uncanny realities revealed to us in the great works of art of the past and present. Martel argues that art connects us with realities that, though normally unseen, are crucial to living, and it works against "false art" that seeks not to liberate but to manipulate and control. You'll want to get the audiobook version of this one, because it includes the somewhat reclusive, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Donna Tartt (author of *The Secret History* and *The Goldfinch*) reading her own introduction in her lovely Mississippi accent.

Progressive feminist and novelist Elisa Albert made headlines in September when a panel she was invited to moderate at a literary festival was canceled; the panelists, who were scheduled to talk about women's coming-of-age stories, dropped out when they discovered that Albert is a Zionist Jew. The same biting voice that told reporters that refusing to participate on a panel with a Zionist is "a straight-up, bare-assed excuse for antisemitism" appears in ***The Snarling Girl and Other Essays***, which compiles 16 essays written over the last decade of her career. Throughout the collection, which I would love to shelve under "Inspirational" in the bookstore, she offers readers the gift of her fierce convictions. Whether she's writing about antisemitism or about training to be a doula, her prose is so rollicking and propulsive that I find myself snarling right alongside her.

—*Jessica Mesman, associate editor*

I've been fascinated by the intricacies of the brain for years. Why am I so good at remembering names and so lousy at recalling the particulars of certain travel experiences? Charan Ranganath's ***Why We Remember*** is a marvelously accessible book that helped me answer both. Ranganath is a neuroscientist and psychologist who teaches us how to put the right expectations on memory and why certain types of forgetting (that we obsess over) are so valuable. Memory plays an outsize role in helping us navigate the present. I learned from this author the surprising support it

provides for imagining one's future.

Put a little Scandinavian into your Christmas this year with ***The Hygge Game***. *Hygge* (pronounced HOO-guh) is a Danish word for enjoying the good things in life. Cards containing 330 questions make for great table conversation, insight, and laughter. I find that every time a player answers even one question, spontaneous and extended conversation takes off from there. What is the longest line you ever remember standing in, and what were you waiting for? Regardless of your current station in life, how would you summarize yourself on a dating site in just three words? For what episode in your childhood do you probably owe your parents an apology? You get the idea. It's "cozy conversation in pleasant company," as the game's subtitle describes its value.

Is ***The Wisdom of Sheep and Other Animals*** by Rosamund Young a diary? A memoir? A journal? It's hard to say. All I know is that this book has a soothing effect on the reader. I bought it because of my interest in sheep from a biblical and pastoral perspective. It turns out that the book is about all kinds of animals that live on the author's organic farm in the Cotswolds, in southwest England. For a city dweller like myself, it was a joy to read tender portraits of how sheep and other grazing animals have pretty remarkable inner lives full of emotional and intellectual complexity. Who would've known?

—Peter W. Marty, editor/publisher

A friend once ditched me at a conference to have dinner with Joy Williams, who had just published *Ninety-Nine Stories of God*—a microfiction collection that the *New York Times* reviewer described as "a treasure trove of bafflements and tiny masterpieces . . . informed by a learned yet half-feral Christianity." After the dinner, I asked my friend what Williams was like. She said, "Elusive, wry, enigmatic."

Williams's newest collection, ***Concerning the Future of Souls: 99 Stories of Azrael***, is also a treasure trove, elusive and wry, learned and half-feral. When read slowly and repeatedly, these puzzling mini-stories begin to coalesce into a group portrait: mostly of Azrael (aka the Angel of Death) and the souls he transports from one body to the next, but also of his frenemy the Devil—and even, perhaps, of God.

Amy Tan is best known for her novels, but she also has a talent for nonfiction writing and drawing. ***The Backyard Bird Chronicles*** began as a journal (actually nine journals) filled with drawings and observations of the birds that have visited her backyard bird feeders since 2016. From the ubiquitous Townsend's warbler to the



elusive purple finch, the birds who show up in this book draw Tan into meditative attentiveness. She imagines her way into their motives, learns about the science of their bodies, and studies their behavior patterns. They become characters to her, in a way. She writes, “With both fiction and birds, I think about existence, the span of life, from conception to birth to survival to death to remembrance by others.”

Tan’s beautiful drawings of birds spurred me to get my older daughter a copy of ***Drawing Nature: The Creative Process of an Artist, Illustrator, and Naturalist***. This coffee-table book by Linda Miller Feltner is part drawing guide, part memoir, part illumination of the natural world’s hidden beauties. All the mechanics of illustration are here, from design sketches to value studies to color testing to image transfer. But the book’s real value is in the abundant details that fill each page, making it feel almost like a portable natural history museum. A helpful mantra that runs throughout the book—don’t erase; just move on and try again—is about life as much as drawing.

—Elizabeth Palmer, senior editor