

14 books that aren't bestsellers — and that's what makes them special

Books make perfect gifts. When choosing one for a friend or family member, look beyond the obvious and toward something that tells the recipient, 'I know you.'



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Critic

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It's that time of year. You need holiday presents and you don't know what to buy. Allow me to offer this gentle reminder: Books (1) are fast and easy to wrap, (2) come in multiple varieties at every price point, (3) can be ordered online or personally mailed using the U.S. Postal Service's bargain media rate, and (4) don't have to be new — this is a great time to support your local used bookshops, those bastions of civilization in a dark time.

When choosing books, here's a bit of advice: Ignore the bestseller list. To give a bestseller shows — how to be kind? — a lack of imagination. What you want is something to match the personality, taste or interests of your family member or friend. For example, any foodie — or anyone who appreciates delicious English prose — will love M.F.K. Fisher's classic "The Art of Eating," A.J. Liebling's "Between Meals: An Appetite for Paris" or the various cookbooks of Elizabeth David. If your best friend is besotted with the theater, you might look for — to name a particular favorite of mine — Kenneth Tynan's "Profiles," which celebrates a variety of stars and show people, culminating in his celebrated interview with the aging silent-film legend and sex symbol Louise Brooks. The point is this: Visit a bookstore, whether new, used or online, and spend an hour or two in focused browsing.

To help you along, below is the bookish equivalent of a sampler of holiday chocolates — an assortment of recent titles, mostly literary and historical, that not only are tempting in themselves but also hint at the range of new works available this gift-giving season.

'The Worlds of Sherlock Holmes,' by Andrew Lycett

I've seen lots of books about everyone's favorite consulting detective and the period he lived in, but none more elegant or beautifully produced. A profusion of illustrations, as well as text by Lycett, one of Arthur Conan Doyle's best biographers, will brighten Christmas morning for any would-be Baker Street Irregular.

'The Rebellious CEO: 12 Leaders Who Did It Right,' by Ralph Nader

Over the years, Nader — contrarian, political gadfly and the bugbear of Big Business — has occasionally encountered corporate executives who are, as he says, admirable men and women, nothing less than “wonders of values and performance.” In swift, clear prose, he profiles Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia, Andy Shallal of Busboys and Poets, and 10 others who have managed to be both successful CEOs and humane, responsible citizens of the world. This is just the book for anyone who enjoys the podcast “How I Built This.”

'The Avengers' and 'The Silver Surfer'

The Marvel Universe may register its ups and downs on the big screen, but its mythology now permeates our culture. Introduced by Roy Thomas, a former editor of Marvel, Folio's “The Avengers” carefully reprints many of the classic adventures of Captain America, the mighty Thor and their fellow defenders of the universe, while Taschen honors the Silver Surfer with an album the size of a world atlas. Its huge dimensions, though initially off-putting, do allow readers to immerse themselves in the action so vividly depicted by artists Jack Kirby and John Buscema. In the Surfer's history, too, Marvel presents a moving portrait of a lonely alien, forever exiled from his home planet, who must contend with humankind's unfathomable proclivity for hatred, violence and destruction.

'The Last Island: Discovery, Defiance, and the Most Elusive Tribe on Earth,' by Adam Goodheart

In a deft combination of adventure, history, reportage and elegy, Goodheart transports the reader to North Sentinel Island, part of the Andaman Islands archipelago and the home of an Indigenous people who, until recently, wore few clothes, hunted with bows and arrows, and lived in almost total isolation from the modern world.

'Shakespeare's First Folio'

How diminished our imaginative lives would be without “Macbeth” and “The Tempest”! Yet these, and the text of 16 other Shakespeare plays, are known only from this famous omnibus, first published 400 years ago. To honor its anniversary, the British Library has produced a careful facsimile of its best copy of the First Folio, right down to an imitation of the gorgeous red leather of its later Riviere binding. While you would be wise to read the scholarly Arden or Oxford editions of the plays themselves, they can’t compete with the iconic aura, even in replica, of the First Folio, published in the U.S. by Rizzoli.

‘In Cold Blood,’ the manuscript by Truman Capote

I suppose it makes a kind of sense that the handwriting of the elfin Capote should be almost microscopic. For an admirer of Capote’s classic “nonfiction novel” — which focused on two drifters who murder a Kansas family — this large album, from Editions des Saints Peres, functions like a sacerdotal artifact, a physical touchstone bringing one closer to a favorite book and writer.

‘Falling Into Place: A Story of Love, Poland, and the Making of a Travel Writer,’ by Thomas Swick

During his early career as a teacher of English in Europe, his courtship and marriage to a Polish beauty named Hania, and his life as a journalist for the Trenton Times and Providence Journal, Swick never gave up on his dream of becoming a travel writer. Reading Evelyn Waugh’s “When the Going Was Good” and Paul Theroux’s “The Great Railway Bazaar” led Swick to other classics, including Alexander Kinglake’s “Eothen,” Robert Byron’s “The Road to Oxiana,” and the works of Jan Morris, Bruce Chatwin, Redmond O’Hanlon and Colin Thubron. In 1989, Swick finally landed a job as travel editor for the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, where he would remain until 2008. Perhaps we will learn more about those years and his later freelance career in a welcome continuation to “Falling Into Place.”

‘Discovering Life’s Story: Volume One, Biology’s Beginnings,’ by Joy Hakim

Directed toward older elementary-school students and young teens, Hakim’s latest book — her earlier works include the 10-volume “A History of US” and the three-volume “The Story of Science” — traces the progress of biological knowledge from the Islamic and Christian worlds of the Middle Ages up to 19th-century Europe and America. Eye-catching photographs and illustrations supplement Hakim’s simple but engagingly fact-rich prose, making this an ideal introductory text for any budding naturalist, scientist or doctor.

‘Joanna Russ: Novels & Stories,’ edited by Nicole Rudick

The godmother of modern feminist science fiction, Russ was witty, extremely well-read, and both kind and crusty. We got to know each other back in the 1970s through a mutual friend, one of the dedicatees of her most famous novel, “The Female Man.” When, around 1980, I started The Washington Post’s monthly science fiction and fantasy column, I first consulted with Joanna, who sent me reading lists and sage advice. Thus, it’s a particular joy to see her name and work enshrined in that ad hoc pantheon we call the Library of America. I just wish this volume included more short stories and at least some of Russ’s nonfiction and criticism.

‘Falling Rocket: James Whistler, John Ruskin, and the Battle for Modern Art,’ by Paul Thomas Murphy

When the critic and social activist John Ruskin derided James Whistler’s “Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket” as simply a pot of paint thrown at a canvas, the prickly American exponent of art for art’s sake sued for libel. The resulting trial raised questions we are still wrestling with: Does art have a social or moral function? Or is it autonomous, abstract, existing for itself alone? And how does one determine value, whether aesthetic, societal or monetary? Today, Whistler’s “Falling Rocket” is a major treasure of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

‘Dear California: The Golden State in Diaries and Letters,’ edited by David Kipen

Books to browse at bedtime don’t come any more entertaining than this one. For each day of the year, Kipen — a former director of literature at the National Endowment for the Arts and an eminent writer and critic — has unearthed amusing, shrewd or touching observations from a wide variety of California visitors and natives. Take Dec. 3, for instance. On that date in 1879 Robert Louis Stevenson was reflecting on death as “no bad friend; a few aches and gasps, and we are done”; in 1946, screenwriter Charles Brackett met an aloof Aldous Huxley, whom he instantly detested but “whose work I worship”; in 1950, James Agee was happily at work on the script for “The African Queen”: “If everything works right it could be a wonderful movie”; and in 1958, the actor John Gielgud was busily cruising gay bars in San Francisco. Finally, on Dec. 3 in 1967, the poet Thom Gunn wrote chattily to a friend about “Bonnie and Clyde” and a visit from the novelist Christopher Isherwood, who reminisced about how sexy and attractive W.H. Auden used to be.

‘The Planets,’ by Andrew Cohen, with Brian Cox

Our knowledge of the solar system has increased breathtakingly in recent years, as spacecraft and advanced space telescopes have brought us astonishing images of Mars, Venus and our other celestial neighbors. This impressive volume, from the Folio Society, reproduces some of the best of those photographs, nearly all of them taken by NASA. Cohen, a BBC television producer and head of its science unit, and Cox, a professor of particle physics at the University of Manchester, then outline what scientists have learned about the makeup and surface conditions of the various planets. In short, just the book for any amateur astronomer.

‘Among Friends: An Illustrated Oral History of American Book Publishing & Bookselling in the 20th Century,’ edited by Buz Teacher and Janet Bukovinsky Teacher

Focusing mainly on the last third of the 20th century, this nostalgia-rich scrapbook brings back memories of the old American Booksellers Conventions of the 1980s. In its pages, as at those annual galas, one meets seemingly all the movers and shakers of publishing, including, among others, Carol Schneider, Joni Evans, Nan Talese, Dick Snyder, Anita Silvey, Peter Mayer, Michael Korda, Stephen Rubin and David Godine. Each of them — as well as numerous illustrators, distributors, small-press pioneers and bookstore owners (such as Washington’s own Robert Haft, founder of Crown Books) — reminisces about their careers and the works they published, edited, promoted and sold. Some of their essays should have been longer, but in partial compensation, this enormous tome, from Two Trees Press, contains hundreds of illustrations of the era’s book covers and promotional ads. As I can further testify, it really was a glorious time to be part of the book business.