Choose Books

A Gift Guide for Those Who Care About Stories

Revised & Expanded Second Edition

Drawn from series at Isak, this gift-guide has a very simple, very direct message: Choose books as your gifts.

You know, of course, that the book industry is downright precarious right now—publisher layoffs are old news, fewer authors are getting published in the trimmed lists, book sales are down, and influential review sections are shuttering. Moreover, independent booksellers, those bastions of vibrant literary life, are fighting for their lives.

I quote author Joshua Henkin, who discussed this at the Emerging Writers Network last year:

What’s at stake is the wealth and diversity of book culture.

Many classics (books we read in our English classes in high school and college, books our children read or will read) simply wouldn’t be published by today’s standards and, if they were published and didn’t sell well immediately, they would be removed from the bookstore shelves. This is why it’s so important that you buy books for the holidays. …

You really can make a difference. A typical paperback novel costs less than fifteen dollars, far cheaper than a necklace or a sweater or dinner at a nice restaurant.

All this is true. Your participation in literary culture matters more than ever. And it’s not as if this is something to be done out of charity: there are so many wonderful books out
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there, dynamic and strange and absorbing books, books suited to so many different personalities and tastes.

Here’s what you can look forward to in this gift guide:

- **Hundreds of thoughtful and original book recommendations**, including those featured in expansive profiles and those recommended for particular groups of readers—like, say, sports fans, people going through hard times, children, politicos, and wannabe cooks
- A revised version of the Top Ten Magazine Gift Subscriptions
- A brand-new section on the best literary organizations to offer your gift donations

More than a mere list of my personal favorites, Choose Books is outward-looking, featuring outstanding books of different styles for different tastes (and ages). These are both contemporary titles and classics, authored by both esteemed and emerging writers, and released by both small and large publishers. While updated for the 2010 holiday season, this gift guide can also help you navigate 2011’s birthdays, holidays, ceremonies, and affectionate 'just thinking of you' surprises.

**But why, really, should you Choose Books for your gifts this holiday season?** Glad you asked. It’s because there are few things more fun than giving someone a book they fall in love with; it lasts longer and matters more than, say, necklaces or sweaters, while rarely being more than about fifteen dollars. What's more, your purposeful choice of books, purchased from indie booksellers, supports a vibrant and dynamic literary culture in a time when the book world is struggling and even literacy is horrifically low. Choose Books because you really can make a difference. Choose Books because it is joyful.

**This 57-page gift guide is free and accessible, my gift to you.** If you find it worthwhile, however, I’d appreciate it if you’d consider pitching in a donation. And also, I’d love to hear your recommendations. What’s missing in this gift guide? What books have you given to others that they’ve loved? I want to hear all your stories …

--- Anna Clark
Detroit, Michigan
December 2010

**Where To Buy These Books**

Your local independent bookseller. Find the shop nearest to you [here](#). You might also want to prowl the used bookshops for treasures. If the book you want is not in stock, the bookseller will be happy to order it for you (almost always sans shipping); just ask! If there are really, truly no indie booksellers near you, consider ordering online from an independent bookseller, such as [Brookline Booksmith](#) or [Powell’s](#), and having it delivered to your doorstep. Another option: order online directly from the publisher.
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Broken Glass Park
By Alina Bronsky; trans. Tim Mohr

Reading *Broken Glass Park* by Alina Bronsky is to be consumed. The first-person narrator boasts a striking voice that rings in the mind even after you set the book down. The text itself is not broken into chapters and bears precious little white space, presenting an immersive experience for the reader. It is vivid and, concise. I finished it in a breathless weekend.

The striking voice of *Broken Glass Park* belongs to Sascha Naimann, a fiercely intelligent seventeen-year-old living in a housing project of Berlin. Sascha’s mother has recently been murdered by her stepfather, a horrific event that happened in the threshold of their apartment while Sascha and her two younger siblings watched. While this fact is clear from the early pages, it unfolds in such a way that not all the details cohere at once. The incident is revealed in fragments from our first-person Sascha, as if she can’t see more than a shard of it at any one time.

The novel’s narrative is well poised in Sascha. She is by turns brilliant and obnoxious, condescending and endearing, hilarious and haughty—her voice feels unique even as it rings true for her age and experience. She is consumed with vengeance for Vadim, her mother’s murderer, as well as a sense of protective responsibility for her young siblings. She is most of all wakeful and alert as she swims her way through the strange aftermath of tragedy. She finds her way into an uneasy simultaneity of confrontation and connection with those she meets along the way.

**Consider for people who are one or more of the following:**

- Have a taste for drama
- Impatient with books that are “slow” or overly steeped in metaphor
- Precocious
- Anxious to be actors in their world

**Recommended Edition:**

**Europa Editions**
Paperback
$15.00

A beautiful paperback of 336 pages, this book, like all Europa Editions, features great design and French covers. It was first published in April 2010.
Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV

By Jennifer L. Pozner

Media critic Jennifer L. Pozner takes apart the twisted fairytales that saturate contemporary television in one of the most anticipated new titles from Seal Press. With humor and intellectual vigor, Reality Bites Back looks seriously at how reality television crystallizes—and creates—sadistic attitudes about femininity, masculinity, race, class, love, marriage, sex, beauty, youth, and consumption.

While many might dismiss reality television as merely ridiculous, innocuous, or a guilty pleasure, Pozner puts the phenomenon in context of the social issues of the day, including national debates about work and family. What might shows like “The Bachelor” and “America’s Next Top Model” have to do with, say, national policy on domestic violence or welfare? More than you might think.

In addition to breaking down the myths and magnetism of reality television of all types, Reality Bites Back includes chapters on media literacy and advocacy that are designed to give readers the tools to speak back to what their culture is saying to—and about—their society.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- Frequent watchers of television
- Frequent critics of television
- Subscribers to Bitch Magazine and/or readers of Jezebel
- The ones, young and old, who seem overly susceptible to the whims of pop culture

Recommended Edition:

Seal Press
Paperback
$16.95

This is the first edition of the new book; it was published in October 2010. Reading guides will be available soon on the book’s website, and Pozner will travel the U.S. throughout 2011 to give readings and multi-media presentations. It might make a nice gift package to include this book with plans on reading it together, hashing it out, and going together to one of the author's events.
Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus

*By Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*

Dr. Victor Frankenstein becomes obsessed with the idea of creating life, and so plunders graveyards in the search for the parts of a being that he pieces together in his lab. With lightning, the doctor electrifies the creature to life.

A relentless thriller and a dark creation myth, *Frankenstein* is a short novel with epic proportions, wrestling with the intersection of science, art, and religion. The novel was an instant bestseller when it was first published in 1818, when the author was only nineteen years old.

Says author Muriel Spark about this literary classic:

> Out of that vampire-laden fug of gruesomeness known as the English Gothic Romance, only the forbidding acrid name of Frankenstein remains in general usage... Mary Shelley had courage, she was inspired. *Frankenstein* has entertained, delighted and harrowed generations of readers to this day.

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**Consider for people who are one or more of the following:**

- Lovers of the film, "The Young Frankenstein." (In fact, you might consider complimenting this book by giving it alongside a DVD.)
- Folks who are into horror, science fiction, mystery and/or suspenseful books.
- People with a taste for the gothic.
- The people who you talk with about the intersection of religion and science.

**Recommended Edition:**

*Everyman's Library*

Hardcover

$18.00

This is a gorgeous hardcover at a very reasonable price. The special presentibality of this copy makes it an ideal gift: the binding is tight and the cream-colored, acid-free paper is both readable and lasting. This edition comes with an introduction by the inimitable fabulist writer, Angela Carter.
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Other Available Editions:

**Modern Library**
Paperback
$7.95

Modern Library offers this novel in an attractive and affordable edition. It comes with an introduction by Wendy Steiner, the chair of the English department at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *The Scandal of Pleasure*.

**Penguin Classics**
Paperback
$8.00

It's a ridiculously affordable price and a clean, well laid-out book. Features a revised introduction and a section with suggestions for "further reading." Maurice Hindle edits it. This edition contains the revisions Mary Shelley later made to her story, as well as her 1831 introduction and Percy Bysshe Shelley's preface to the first edition. It also includes as appendices a select collation of the texts of 1818 and 1831 together with ‘A Fragment’ by Lord Byron and Dr John Polidori’s ‘The Vampyre: A Tale’.

**Vintage Classics**
Paperback
$14.00

This copy features the original two-volume novel from 1816-17 (the earliest surviving draft), and reveals Mary Shelley's writing process alongside editing suggestions from Percy Shelley. This would be a good choice for people who are already lovers of the novel, and/or are working writers themselves.
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Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life
By Bryan Lee O'Malley

This is the first of a six-volume graphic novel series of adventures starring Scott Pilgrim—a 23-year-old in Toronto who plays enthusiastically in a crappy band, is a lazy and broke romantic, and who, after falling for the mysterious Ramona Flowers, finds out that he has to fight her seven evil ex-boyfriends in order to win her heart.

Sound weird? It is. Wonderful too.

I ripped through the Scott Pilgrim books while I was laid up with a broken foot a couple summers ago. I was utterly charmed by the mixture of absurdity and the astute rendering of twenty-something driftiness. The art is simple and thoughtful; the stories are hilarious and touching.

I'm hardly the only one who fell under the spell: the Scott Pilgrim books have caught fire. They were adapted into a film this year starring Michael Cera and Mary Elizabeth Winstead as Scott and Ramona. Ubisoft Montreal also fashioned a video game out of the Scott Pilgrim saga.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

• Fans of savvy and absurd cartoons, like “The Simpsons” and “Family Guy”
• Hipster types who have a sweet sense of a humor.
• Hopeful romantics (especially the type who loves playing video games).
• Indie music lovers (especially those that also harbor a taste for manga).

Recommended Edition:

Oni Press
Paperback
$11.95

In fact, this is the only edition of the first volume in Scott Pilgrim's six-book series. Unless you're certain that the recipient of your gift has already stocked up on the six editions of the Scott Pilgrim series, this is of course the one to get. It is delightfully portable and well made, a worthy introduction to the
bravado, cluelessness, and all-around charm that is Scott Pilgrim.

**Other Available Editions:**
You might consider giving the first edition of Scott Pilgrim’s adventures alongside the next few titles in the series. Among them are:

*Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World (#2)*
Paperback
$11.95

The publisher description says it all: "Does Scott and Ramona’s burgeoning relationship have a future? Isn’t Scott still supposedly dating Knives Chau? Who is Ramona’s second evil ex-boyfriend, and why is he in Toronto? Who are The Clash At Demonhead, and what kind of bizarre art-punky music do they play? Who’s their hot girl keyboardist, and what is Scott’s relation to her? Why are they Knives Chau’s new favorite band?"

*Scott Pilgrim Gets It Together (#4)*
Paperback
$11.95

In which Scott Pilgrim actually makes some choices. But that doesn’t mean all questions are answered. What is the deal with Ramona, after all? She seems to get more mysterious the more time they spend together. Who is the visitor from Julie’s past—and why is this girl, who went to high school with Scott, showering him with attention? Can Scott actually keep a job and pay his rent? This volume features an eight-page color section that opens the book.

really good band—and her new bass-playing vegan boyfriend, who happens to have formerly dated Ramona. Hell, as they say, is breaking loose. And so is the laughter.

*Scott Pilgrim & The Infinite Sadness (#3)*
Paperback
$11.95

This one is my favorite of the Scott Pilgrim books. Envy Adams, who not so long ago broke Scott’s heart, comes into town with her really popular,
The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women and the Artists They Inspired
By Francine Prose

This is a book that doesn't neatly fit into any genre. Pieced together through biography, letters, photographs, diaries, memoirs, art, storytelling, and original insight into that amorphous entity called inspiration, The Lives of the Muses is simply an experience to be had.

Catalyzed by intrigue for the creative process and sheer curiosity about its fascinating subject, it was a finalist for the National Book Award. It also happens to be my favorite book that I've read from the prolific Francine Prose.

Prose's book tells the strange and fascinating stories of, for example, Alice Liddell; as an adult, Liddell actually was awarded an honorary Ph.D. for being the inspiration behind Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, which Prose points out is perhaps the only time a person has been so honored for being a muse.

The Lives of the Muses also tells of the writer Lou Andreas-Salomé (my favorite), who inspired Nietzsche, Rilke, and Freud; of the emotional ballet between dancer Suzanne Farrell and choreographer George Balanchine; and of Salvador Dalí, who was the only artist to sign his art with his muse's name; how Gala Dalí smartly worked with this. The most contemporary muse/artist pairing? Yoko Ono and John Lennon: a story of mutual muse-hood.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- Artists and creative types—writers, graphic designers, tie-dyers, and so on
- People who are interested in biography, though they may be disillusioned with the typical tome format that they come in.
- Readers who are in a rut.
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Recommended Edition:

HarperCollins
$13.95

This trade paperback edition is the primary available edition of this provocative book.

Other Available Editions:

A hardcover edition may be available by special order, or discovered in a used bookshop. An e-reader edition is also available.
My Bird
By Fariba Vafi
Trans. Mahnaz Kousha & Nasrin Jewell

My Bird won of the Yalda Iranian Literary Prize for Best Novel of the Year, among many other honors given by those who were struck by the emotive power of this slim book.

Told in series of engaging, graceful vignettes, this is the story of a nameless thirty-five-year-old woman living in modern-day Tehran. She is navigating multiple identities that don’t always reconcile with each other: she is the reluctant mother of two small children, the wife of a man who fantasizes about moving to Canada (and has a habit of leaving her alone for stretches at a time), daughter of a powerful mother, and sister to women who don’t quite understand where she is coming from. Too, the narrator is haunted by the death of her father years ago in the basement of the family’s home.

As the narrator struggles to make her way through the complicated dynamics of power, powerlessness, and the perplexities of independence, My Bird presents an uncommon story of urban domestic life in everyday Iran. The book’s fifty-three very short chapters are more than the sum of their parts: an elliptical but fully-realized portrait of how even absence is a palpable presence.

Fariba Vafi, incidentally, is one of the most acclaimed and best-selling contemporary Iranian writers. Working in Persian, she is the author of numerous novels and short story collections including Royaye Tabat and Razi dar Kuche. This recently published version of the translation of My Bird represents the first time that one of Vafi’s most popular novels is available in English.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- Folks who appreciate the minimalist style of Raymond Carver or Ernest Hemingway
- Fans of Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis
- People struggling with a difficult-to-name dissatisfaction in their lives

Recommended Edition:

**Syracuse University Press**
Hardcover
$24.00

This is the only available edition of the book. It is lovely, portable, a slim 150 pages, and comes with an afterward by Farzehah Milani on Fariba Vafi and women’s literature in Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.
Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic
By Alison Bechdel

Bechdel’s graphic novel is really autobiography: a marvelously artistic two-color pictorial that tells the story of her father, who was an rural Pennsylvania English teacher, the town undertaker, a obsessively talented historical home restoration expert, and, as Bechdel found out when she came out to her parents when she was in college, he was gay. In fact, he'd had relationships with teenage men, including Bechdel's babysitters. Months after this revelation, he kills himself. This, though, is not the key revelation or plot point of Fun Home.

Fun Home is a time-shifting, living memory sort of story that leaves the chains of chronology far behind—you find out the major bits described above in the first few pages of the book. Bechdel plays at the ideas of artifice and fiction, using Albert Camus, Marcel Proust, Anais Nin, Roald Dahl, F. Scott Fitzgerald and many other writers to tell the story of the 'reality' of the love, pain, and identity in bookish family.

It’s not all melancholy and heartbreak: there is tremendous humor and joy, quick-wit and ingenuity, on these pages. Bechdel is remarkable at simply conveying those moments that hold highs and lows at the same time. In the end, this shimmering book lasts and lasts.

Fun Home won numerous awards upon its publication, including being named Time Magazine’s #1 Book of Year, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, a Stonewall Book Award, and “best book the year” listings by newspapers and magazines around the world.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- Very verbal people
- Intellectuals (especially the bookish brand)
- Fans of David Small’s Stitches
- People intrigued by how our family history informs our identities
- People who crave honesty

Recommended Edition:

Mariner Books
Paperback
$24.00

This paperback edition is also available in hardcover. It is slightly oversized and features a cover that catches the light.
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**Good for the Jews**
*By Debra Spark*

In his review on NPR, Alan Cheuse has this to say about Debra Spark's novel:

> Here's a smart, sprightly, sex-drenched and neatly plotted novel about Midwestern life set in Madison. It's got a beautiful 25-year-old inexperienced Jewish woman as its main character, some steamy sexual situations and broad swath of serious political concerns about mid-sized city bigotry and the dangers of know-nothing bureaucracies.

> From its provocative title onward, the novel moves steadily along, with credible and often compelling characters, never averting its eyes from the betrayals and hypocrisy that make life in any town, a laboratory for the study of contemporary American mores. ...

> ... Anonymous letters, missing files, vague threats, a synagogue fire, and a death, followed by a suicide: all this contributes to a superb, sometimes satirical, always cutting, investigation of the way we all live now, East Coast, West Coast, or Third Coast.

*Good for the Jews* draws from the Book of Esther in this contemporary tale set in Madison, Wisconsin, during the Bush administration. The novel—tinged with mystery, humor, and the politics of both high school and the broader world—won the 2009 Literary Fiction award from the University of Michigan Press.

In full disclosure, Debra Spark has been my writing teacher—formerly in an official way and informally in an ongoing way. She’s one of the smartest and most insightful people I know. She’s also the author of the excellent book, *Curious Attractions: Essays on Fiction Writing* and two other novels.

**Consider for people who are one or more of the following:**

- People who are interested in the cultural and political legacy of religion in the 21st century
- Readers who have overdosed on fiction set on the coasts
- Folks who have a sharp sense of humor about high school

**Recommended Edition:**

*University of Michigan Press*

$24.00

This hardcover is the one available edition this novel. Beautifully presentable and gift-ready.
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The Lost Massey Lectures: Recovered Classics from Five Great Thinkers

Edited by Bernie Lucht

There is a wonderful Canadian cultural tradition, and it’s called the Massey Lectures. CBC broadcasts an iconic and much-anticipated public lecture series that is described as a "feast of ideas." Each year, one of the brightest minds of our time is invited to give a series of broadcast lectures on a topic of their choosing—and the results are provocative, innovative and inspiring. This is a tradition that Canada has kept since the 1960s and, over time, many of the best lectures have been "lost"—that is, unavailable in any form to the public.

Here comes this collection to remedy that. *The Lost Massey Lectures* features Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking about creative nonviolence and oppression in "Conscience for Change;" John Kenneth Galbraith on economics and poverty; Jane Jacobs on Canadian cities and Quebec separatism; Paul Goodman on the moral ambiguity of America; and Eric W. Kierans on globalism and the nation-state.

These lectures are not dense—remember, they were read aloud on national radio—but they are intellectual beasts, written with passion and care.

As a whole, it seems to me that *The Lost Massey Lectures* are to ideas what *The Paris Review Interviews* are to writing. This is a book to treasure. Or to give to someone else so they can treasure it.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- The folks who lure you into conversations of big ideas, like God, government, the purpose of cities, morality, and so forth.
- People who are frustrated with sound-bite culture
- People who subscribe to *The Walrus.*
- Canadians. Naturally.

Recommended Edition:

**House of Anansi**

$24.95 / $18.95

While this is pricier than traditional paperbacks, this is both a substantial and beautiful edition of the book. I have seen the price vary at indie booksellers; there might be some issue with the original Canadian cost varying in American bookshops. I got my own copy for $18.95 in Ann Arbor. This
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Edition includes an introduction by Bernie Lucht, the veteran CBC producer who has been the man behind the Massey Lectures since 1984.

Other Available Editions:

*More Lost Massey Lectures*
House of Anansi
$18.95

You might consider a gift that pairs this book with its companion. This edition features Nobel Peace Prize recipient Willy Brandt on the dangerous inequities between developing and industrialized nations; George Grant on the worsening predicament of the West through an examination of the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche; Claude Lévi-Strauss on the nature and role of myth in human history; Frank Underhill on the deficiencies of the Canadian constitution; and Barbara Ward, in the very first Massey Lecture, on the origin and predicament of underdeveloped countries in *The Rich Nations and the Poor Nations*.

The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science
*By Natalie Angier*

“What do you wish everyone knew about your field?” That the question that Natalie Angier, the *New York Times* biology writer and National Book Award finalist, poses to a host of scientists in her quest to explore public apathy and confusion about science—as well as science’s joys.

Angier is frequently described as being a writer of exuberance and charm, and indeed, her book brims with humor and good faith. She is a clever and quick-witted companion on a journey through the fundamentals about how the world works. From scientific thinking to calibration, physics to geology, probabilities to chemistry to the “cells and whistles” of molecular biology, *The Canon* has it covered. Says *American Scientist* about the book: “Angier sets an ambitious goal: to create an intelligent layperson’s guide to scientific literacy, one that not only explains the current state of knowledge but also communicates why we should care in the first place. She succeeds by applying the skills that won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1991—thorough reporting, careful writing and a lively enthusiasm for her subject.”
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Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- Curiouser and curiouser
- Someone who takes kids to the science and natural history museums, but finds themselves engaged even more than the young ‘uns in the exhibits
- The person who gets a little embarrassed when she doesn’t know exactly how to answer a kid who asks why the sky is blue

Recommended Edition:

Mariner Books
Paperback
$15.95

The paperback edition of *The Canon* was published in 2008. This book is also available in hardcover and e-book editions.
The Great Gilly Hopkins
By Katherine Paterson

Eleven-year-old Gilly (short for Galadriel) is an obnoxious and brilliant foster kid who sabotages every home she's sent to because she hates them all. We meet her as she's on her way to the Trotters—a particularly strange family. Put off by them, Gilly devises a scheme to connect with her real mother out in California.

Katherine Paterson's 1978 classic won a truckload of awards, among them the National Book Award, the Newbery Honor medal, the Jane Addams Book Award, and the Christopher Award. For once, the awards got it right. More currently, it looks like the book's coming to the silver screen, via an adaptation written by Paterson's son.

But the public reception's not all favorable: The Great Gilly Hopkins ranks as #21 on the American Library Association's list of the 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000. Paterson's other classic, Bridge to Terabithia, is #9.

I'll be honest: this is one of my all-time favorite books of any kind. I read it for the first time in fourth grade and was haunted by it; even then I had a sense of how much better it was than most of the books I was reading at the time (sorry, Babysitter's Club). I remember hating the cover of that old edition and being surprised that such a powerful story was contained inside.

Two years ago, I found a copy of The Great Gilly Hopkins at a library book sale and I picked it up. I read it in one sitting and was crying as I finished it. Now, I'm a somewhat emotive person, but I'm not provoked to tears by many books. This was one.

I am in awe before Paterson; she packs so much into a slim book, she tells a story simply and with grace, and her characters are as memorable as any I've ever met.

The Great Gilly Hopkins is hilarious and substantive and whole-hearted and disarming and utterly original. Every reader deserves a copy of this book. But I'll try to be more specific ...
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**Consider for people who are one or more of the following:**

- Rambunctious young readers (providing they've already conquered their first chapter book)
- Precocious
- Fans of Katherine Paterson's other popular titles, including *Bridge to Terabithia*
- People of any age who are sick of stories that romanticize youth by rendering kids as either adorably mischievous, sagely innocent, and/or beings that have a thing or two to teach adults

**Recommended Edition:**

**HarperCollins**
Paperback / $5.99

An affordable paperback edition, this one is both portable and colorful. It weighs in at a trim 192 pages.

**Other Available Editions:**

**HarperChildrensAudio**
Audio / $13.99

Going on a road trip with the gift recipient? Is he or she more adept at listening to stories than reading them? Consider the unabridged audio version of *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, which was just released in 2009. It's narrated by Alyssa Bresnahan and clocks in at four hours and 39 minutes, or the equivalent of about four CDs. Bresnahan has also done the audio versions of Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia*, and about a million other books.

Curiously, the same publisher that suggests the text of this book for "ages 10 and up" also suggests the audio version for those who are "age 18 and up." I don’t get it either.
We Need To Talk About Kevin
By Lionel Shriver

In a series of striking letters to her estranged husband, Franklin, Eva Khatchadourian dissects the life of her family in the years before her son Kevin, two days before his sixteenth birthday, went to school and murdered seven of his classmates, a cafeteria worker, and a teacher who tried to reach out to him.

Eva's letters are honest and pained, as she wonders if her own failings as a parent led to Kevin's crime. She explores her ambivalence about motherhood and how she struggled with Kevin and his younger sister, particularly as her son refuses to speak until age 3 and to be potty-trained until age 6; and as the fiercely intelligent boy grows older and finds cruel delight in taunting his mother.

As the publisher puts it, We Need to Talk About Kevin is "a literary page-turner ... (and) a searing and complex look at the reasons couples decide to have children, the parent-child relationship, marriage, and the limits of love and loyalty." I'd also add that the book explores the many manifestations of violence, and their consequences.

We Need To Talk About Kevin won the Orange Prize in 2005.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- People who have a taste for mysteries
- Readers who like books and movies that wrestle with the big questions of our time
- Folks who get caught up in psychological thrillers

Recommended Edition:

HarperCollins
Paperback / $13.99

This trade paperback is 432 pages and includes a reading guide, an essay by the author ("Failed Novels, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Orange Prize"), and five pages of Shriver's book recommendations.
Archy and Mehitabel

By Don Marquis

How to describe the delight of *Archy and Mehitabel*? Let's start with the basics: Archy is a cockroach; Mehitabel is a cat in her ninth life. Archy was once a free verse poet; Mehitabel is an alley cat of uncertain trustworthiness who claims she was once incarnated as Cleopatra. At night, Archy continues to tell his stories in "vers libre" by hurling himself on the keys of Don Marquis' typewriter (Archy calls Don "boss"); the resulting poems, both hilarious and strange, comprise this collection. Of course, since Archy isn't capable of pressing the shift key and another key at the same time, all the poems are lower-case and without punctuation.

One of my favorites, "the lesson of the moth," features Archy in one of his philosophical moments:

```
i was talking to a moth
the other evening
he was trying to break into
an electric light bulb
and fry himself in the wires

why do you fellows
pull this stunt i asked him
because it is the conventional thing for moths or
why
if that had been an uncovered
candle instead of an electric
light bulb you would
now be a small unsightly cinder
have you no sense

plenty of it he answered
but at times we get tired
of using it
```
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

we get bored with the routine
and crave beauty
and excitement
fire is beautiful
and we know that if we get
too close it will kill us
but what does that matter
it is better to be happy
for a moment
and be burned up with beauty
than to live a long time
and be bored all the while
so we wad all our life up
into one little roll
and then we shoot the roll
that is what life is for
it is better to be a part of beauty
for one instand and than cease to
exist than to exist forever
and never be a part of beauty
our attitude toward life
is come easy go easy
we are like human beings
used to be before they became
too civilized to enjoy themselves
and before i could argue him
out of his philosophy
he went and immolated himself
on a patent cigar lighter
i do not agree with him
myself i would rather have

half the happiness and twice
the longevity

but at the same time i wish
there was something i wanted
as badly as he wanted to fry himself
archy

Don Marquis introduced his charmed creations in his daily column, "The Sun Dial," for the The Evening Sun newspaper (later named simply The Sun) in New York in 1916. Archy and Mehitabel were regular features for six years in the column, and for four years after that in the New York Tribune. After that, Marquis took Archy and Mehitabel to Collier's magazine and other publications, ultimately resulting in more than 500 sketches.

This book, Archy and Mehitabel, was the first of several collections of the humorous and charming adventures, published in 1927--accompanied by great illustrations (see above).

E.B. White wrote a lovely essay about Marquis and his most famous creations (with fascinating context about how journalism had changed from Marquis' time to White's). He writes:

Archy has endeared himself in a special, way to thousands of poets and creators and newspaper slaves, and there are reasons for this beyond the sheer merit of his literary output. The details of his
creative life make him blood brother to writing men. He cast himself with all his force upon a key, head downward. So do we all. And when he was through his, labors, he fell to the floor, spent. He was vain (so are we all), hungry, saw things from the under side, and was continually bringing up the matter of whether he should be paid for his work.

Indeed.

**Consider for people who are one or more of the following:**

- The cynic you'd like to see smile.
- People who think that all poems are serious/boring/intimidating.
- Readers who are smitten with clever humor, whether found in Mark Twain, Shel Silverstein, P.G. Wodehouse, Dorothy Parker, Bill Bryson, David Sedaris, or Sarah Vowell.

**Recommended Edition:**

**Random House**
Paperback
$12.95

This is the only current available edition of the original classic, though you might find excellent out-of-print editions in used bookstores (my copy came this way).

**Other Available Editions:**

**University Press of New England**
Paperback
$17.95

The first of two volumes that collect long-forgotten sketches of Archy and Mehitabel that were literally rescued from Marquis' steamer trunk after his death in 1937. It features 34 illustrations.

This would be great as a companion volume gift, perhaps also with *archyology II: the final dig*—which is truly the final volume of the adventures of the whimsical, sage cockroach and the curious cat.
If I Loved You I Would Tell You This
By Robin Black

Rarely are older women centered as protagonists in American fiction, a fact that mirrors their marginalized role in society. In *If I Loved You, I Would Tell You This*, her collection of stories, author Robin Black pushes back against this trend. Black’s bright and nuanced tales make protagonists of those who, in life as well as in art, are more often caricatures.

We meet a 70-year-old artist who grieves the end of a romance while painting a dying man’s portrait, a woman in her mid-60s who makes an unexpected connection with a stranger in Italy, and another older woman who lies about her recent stroke while coming to terms with her daughter’s marital infidelity.

(I talked with Black about feminism, the political implications of narratives in which older women play central roles, whether social change can be instigated by art, and what it means to her to be a widely heralded debut author in her 40s—see the interview [here].)

*If I Loved You, I Would Tell You This* was shortlisted for the Frank O’Connor Short Story Prize and chosen by *O Magazine* as one of its Summer Reading Picks. Compared frequently to the likes of Alice Munro, Mary Gaitskill, and Lorrie Moore, Margaret Atwood, and Grace Paley, Robin Black has written what Kirkus calls “Ten stories that cast an unsparing yet tender eye on the human condition…Sensitive insights conveyed in elegantly plain prose—an auspicious debut.”

**Consider for people who are one or more of the following:**

- Folks who just like damn good story, well told
- People who like the writing of Deborah Eisenberg, Richard Bausch, or Marilynne Robinson
- Older women that are weary of not seeing themselves reflected in any intelligent way in their culture

**Recommended Edition:**

*If I Loved You, I Would Tell You This* Hardcover

Recommended Edition

Random House

Hardcover

$24.00

This collection won’t be available as a paperback until April 2011, though it is now available as an e-book.
The Autobiography of Henry VIII: with Notes by His Fool, Will Somers
*By Margaret George*

*By Ben Haack*
*Guest Writer*

When I Google Henry VIII, a slew of results is displayed, as with everything that has been ever googled. But after clicking just a few links, Henry, as with many historical figures quickly becomes more monster than man.

Many things about him are nearly common knowledge: his obesity, his six wives, and his fight with the Catholic Church. But further digging reveals the contradictions of his life. His search for love and an heir, the thin prince he was and the overweight king he became, his creation of the protestant Church of England and his love for the Catholic Church. Dig deep enough, and the monster once again becomes human. *The Autobiography of Henry VIII: with Notes by His Fool, Will Somers*, by Margaret George, does just that—digs deep. Very deep in fact, it covers his entire life from *his* point of view, giving depth to a man that historians have treated less than kindly.

With over 900 pages, it's not a book for the light hearted, but even through some of the duller aspects that come with anyone’s life, finding out what would drive a man to chop off not one, but two, of his wives’ heads keeps the pages turning, all 900 of them. It's an amazing account of a man plagued with disillusionment and regret; who's desire to be great produced one of the greatest (or at least most notable) historical figures of all time (that would be Elizabeth I). George spent over a decade researching and writing this novel, and by the end, the story of Henry VIII seems as complete and final as only historical fiction can.

**Consider for people who are one or more of the following:**

- Lovers of history, or at least historical fiction
- Anyone that loves the television series "The Tudors," or the movie "Elizabeth" (and its sequel).
- Britophiles
- People who get excited when something is “based on a true story”

**Recommended Edition:**

*St. Martin's Griffin*
Paperback
$7.95

A satisfyingly hefty edition of the novel. Marked as a national bestseller on the cover, this version is 960 pages.
What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics

By Adrienne Rich

Poet and provocateur, Adrienne Rich is one of the most original minds of both literature and activism. She has published no less than twenty-four collections of poetry, alongside many volumes of nonfiction and essays. In What Is Found There, Rich brings her many identities together with both verve and passion. What is the purpose of poetry in a world where there is so much suffering? How can social responsibility and art co-exist? How is it even possible to have something like "artistic integrity" when, as W.H. Auden once put it, "poetry does nothing?"

What Is Found There is a hybrid book, at once a set of deeply-felt journals; sharp-sighted essays that take close readings of poets like Muriel Rukeyser, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Wallace Stevens; and something like an anthology—poems that both well-known and under-known are given space.

As well, Rich draws in threads from visual art and the natural world.

The New York Times Book Review indicates that "this is a book of wisdom ... more resonant with each rereading." The Boston Globe called it, "Essential reading for ... anyone interested in the current debates on art and politics ... and the spiritual and moral power of literature." But June Jordan put it best:

The clear-eyed depth and the visionary stretch of these notes bespeak an irresistible, prophetic intelligence and a huge heart wrestling with the transformative power of poetry up against the needs of an emerging new world.

Who knows how long it would take me to find my way to Rich’s book if it hadn't been for sale at an end-of-business sale? The only good thing about such sad sales is that it inspires readerly whims. This was one of mine. And now, it is a book that I will never be "done" reading. I want to put a copy in the hand of everyone I know.

This is a powerful book, and a joy to read.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- People who struggle to balance their individual acts of creativity with a broader sense of social responsibility.
- Politically-minded folks who might be ready for more nuance (I’m thinking of an activist friend who told me that she only reads nonfiction now because

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her reading attention is inevitably limited and she feels compelled to give it to 'true stories' so she can better understand what's going on in the world. Rich's book could be something of a gateway drug for her, so that she can better see the expansive truth that can only be conveyed through fiction and poetry.)

• Bookworms with a generous heart.

Recommended Edition:

Fugitive Pieces
By Anne Michaels

When people ask me what my favorite book is, after I pish-tosh and qualify, I often name Fugitive Pieces as being one of the books I most love. That's a fact that surprised me; I never picked out this novel for myself.

It came to me in the mail one day, a gift from a British fellow who I only knew for a short (and romantic) time. I had never heard of Anne Michaels—even though the Canadian writer had published two acclaimed books of poems before she wrote her first novel in 1998, and even though that novel won the Orange Prize (and the Guardian Fiction award, the Trillium Award, the City of Toronto Book Award, the Lannan Literary Fiction award, the Jewish Book Award, and was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year - whew). To me, though, she was a stranger.

Perhaps that unfamiliarity contributed to the sense of astonishment that I felt as I moved through this magnificent, haunting novel. It takes such a strange story—beginning from the moment that real-life poet Jakob Beer, then seven years old, broke out of the mud burying his Polish city in 1940. (He had been hidden from soldiers who proceeded to murder his family). He is rescued by a Greek geologist who doesn't at first recognize the boy as human until he begins to cry. The geologist--the intellectual Athos--smuggles the boy out of the country and eventually to
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Toronto where he raises him, rivaling Atticus Finch as one of my favorite fictional father figures.

The book follows Jakob's life as his wildness spills into his life as an artist, while at the same time splitting the novel to also follow the story of Ben, a younger man on the brink of his own brand of transformation, spiritual and otherwise.

Said Publisher's Weekly about the novel:

Searing the mind with stunning images while seducing with radiant prose ... this novel will make readers yearn to share it with others, to read sentences and entire passages out loud, to debate its message, to acknowledge its wisdom.

In all, Fugitive Pieces is a story of ghosts, art, and memory. It was made into a movie in 2007, directed by Jeremy Podeswa.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- People who liked Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping. While that is a very different novel, something in the haunted storytelling seems to rhyme with Anne Michaels' project.
- People who are into historical stories, especially ones that are connected to World War II.
- Folks who are hungry for a book that lets them surrender to gorgeous language while it is at the same time intellectually interesting

Recommended Edition:

Random House
Paperback
$14.95

I've also seen this 304-page paperback available for $12.00.
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Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong
By James Loewen

Be ready: This one is a socks knocker-offer.

This provocative book zooms in on eighteen of the leading high school American history textbooks and discovers exactly how much dull misinformation and empty-headed storytelling that we require young citizens to rote-ly learn. What's missing from the standard history we expect of the people who will be voting and leading our nation? Nearly all ambiguity, passion, conflict, questioning, and drama from our past (to paraphrase from the book's publisher).

A true passion for history comes to the fore in Lies My Teacher Told Me, as it compares historical myths of America's origins—from Christopher Columbus to the Pilgrims, Abraham Lincoln to Vietnam—with an honest and vibrant account of our past that is grounded in truth. Chapters include:

• Handicapped by History: The Process of Hero-making
• "Gone With the Wind": The Invisibility of Racism in American History Textbooks
• Watching Big Brother: What Textbooks Teach About the Federal Government

• Down the Memory Hole: The Disappearance of the Recent Past
• Progress Is Our Most Important Product

This book is a persuasive call for clarity in our foggy contemporary time a lively and powerful handbook for anyone who thinks that what happened in our nation--and what is happening--matters. Because of this, and because of Loewen's dynamic writing, this book is the sort that becomes an underground favorite, passed from hand to hand, the spark for a thousand conversations. For my part, I couldn't get the book out of my mind. It inspired an article I wrote where I compared how history was taught in three high schools with very different demographics—an experience that brought the book to life and underlined how much is at stake.

Lies My Teacher Told Me won both the American Book Award and the Oliver C. Cox Anti-Racism Award, that last of which is given by the American Sociological Association.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

• People who are in any way connected with the education world, be they teachers, students, advocates, school board members, regents, policymakers, or, hell, even coaches.
• People who dug A People's History of the United States—or would dig it, if they read it, but are perhaps put off by the heft of Howard Zinn's book.
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- The ones who you catch watching The History Channel, or "Roots," or "Band of Brothers."
- Activists, and others engaged with politics—from get-out-the-vote types, to government employees and military service-members, to elected officials.

Recommended Edition:

Sugar
By Bernice L. McFadden

In a literary world of shrinking space for book reviews, Sugar has gotten an impressive share of the attention. The Dallas Morning News compares author Bernice L. McFadden's storytelling to Zora Neale Hurston (a fact that piqued my interest).

The Chicago Defender admires McFadden's "amazing talent." Ebony is impressed with its "unforgettable images, unique characters, and moving story that keeps the pages turning until the end." And don’t even get me started on the effusive customer reviews that I’ve spied online ...

So what’s all the fuss about?

Sugar follows the "anti-heroine" of the title through mid-century America, from an Arkansas bordello, to St. Louis, to Detroit, and back to Arkansas. Raised by a trio of prostitutes, Sugar’s heart hardens as she moves from place to place. When she returns to Arkansas after her mother's death and practices the world’s oldest profession in the small town of Bigelow, the local woman turn against her. Meanwhile, Pearl--Sugar's neighbor—has her own haunting story and her own reasons for wanting to go against the town sentiment to make friends with Sugar.

Sugar is McFadden’s first novel and it won several awards, including the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers
Award; the Gold Pen Award; the Black Caucus Ala Literary Award; and the Black Writers Alliance Award. Since this book's publication, McFadden has published five other novels.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- Folks who like strong narratives that don't forget the art of storytelling, especially folks who have an affection for front-porch storytelling
- People interested in fiction with strong, vibrant landscapes that both intersects with the fortunes of its characters
- Those who have an interest in fiction set in the South and in gossipy small-towns

Recommended Edition:

**Penguin**
Paperback
14.00

This is the most recent edition of the book originally published in 1999. You might be interested in giving this book alongside its sequel, *This Bitter Earth: The Story of Sugar Lacey.*
**War Talk**  
*By Arundhati Roy*

Sure, you remember Arundhati Roy for her splendid 1997 debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, which won the Booker prize and a whole lot of deserved international attention. It's the only piece of fiction that Roy has published.

Since *The God of Small Things*, Roy has embraced the form of the essay. She's published quite a lot of collections, almost entirely with independent publishers. *War Talk* is one of them.

In a series of plainspoken essays, Roy examines the ideas of "democracy and dissent, racism and empire, and war and peace," as South End Press describes it. First published in 2003 and drawn from her Lannan Foundation lecture on the first anniversary of 9/11, Roy's essays pay special attention to the United States wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Given the recent announcement of a series escalation of troops, Roy's examination of militarism is hardly dated.

*War Talk* turns expansive in its look at the rise of religious and racial violence, frightening government tactics against Muslims in India, and nuclear aggression between India and Pakistan. At its base, the book questions what it means to be a nation, to be part of an ethnic group, to be a writer, or an activist.

---

Roy writes in the title essay:

The last question every visiting journalist always asks me is: Are you writing another book? That question mocks me. Another book? Right now? This talk of nuclear war displays such contempt for music, art, literature, and everything else that defines civilization. So what kind of book should I write?

What might be onerously heavy material is, in Roy's hand, accessible and clear, first-person and honest. *War Talk* benefits from concise writing in simple language; its origins as a speech intended to be delivered out loud are apparent. Also apparent: Roy's passion and conscience, which give every page energy. This is an eloquent collection from the writer who was jailed in India after she refused to comply with attempts to silence her criticism of the government.

Essays include:
- "Ahimsa"
- "Come September"
- "The Loneliness of Noam Chomsky"
- "Confronting Empire"

This book was a finalist for the 2004 Independent Publisher Awards in Essay/Creative Nonfiction.
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A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- People who made anxious comments after the escalation of the war in Afghanistan.
- The folks who carpoled with you to anti-war protests.
- People who send you links to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Beyond Vietnam" speech, or of Dwight Eisenhower calling out the military industrial complex in his farewell speech.
- People who loved The God of Small Things.
- People who care about war and violence, but perhaps feel like they don't have the "facts" to support their opinions. That is, the folks who say, "I don't know enough" when Iraq comes up-- and are intimidated to read large academic tomes on the subject.

Recommended Edition:

**WAR TALK**

*South End Press*
Paperback
$12.00

A slim, attractive paperback, War Talk is 154 pages.

**Drinking Coffee Elsewhere**
*By ZZ Packer*

"This is the old time religion of storytelling."

That's how The New York Times Book Review praised ZZ Packer for this collection of eight vivid stories. Packer must have been pleased, as this sentiment rhymes so well with the epigraph she chose for her book, written by Alex Haley in Roots: "Join me in the hope that this story of our people can help to alleviate the legacies of the fact that preponderantly have been written by the winners."

In "Brownies," (one of my favorites), we follow a Brownie troop of black girls who face off with a troop of white girls. Its first line begs you to read on: "By our second day at Camp Crescendo, the girls in my Brownie troop had
decided to kick the asses of each and every girl in Brownie Troop 909."

Meanwhile, in "The Ant of the Self," my other favorite Packer story, we meet a studious young man who goes with his father to the Million Man March, wrestling along the way with caged exotic birds and where to place his loyalty (first line: "Opportunities,' my father says after I bail him out of jail.")

Other tales follow an isolated student at Yale who disdains her classmates, a group of drifters in Japan, a nurse with dreams of religion and romance, a girl who runs away to meet her crack-addicted mother in Atlanta, an inspired young girl in 1961 who decides to stage her own one-person sit-in at a segregated diner, and a young woman who leaves Kentucky to teach at an urban school in Baltimore—and it's not just her students that bring her to her defeat.

Packer's writing is versatile and insightful, edgy and fierce, and it is powered by a strong storytelling voice. The stories wrestle with ideas of race, religion, belonging, family, education, rage, indifference, and longing. In all, this collection moves between the humorous and the wise—and is altogether memorable.

I'm not the only one who loves ZZ Packer's stories: *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award; an ALA Notable Book; a finalist for the Atlanta Choice Award; winner of the Alex Award; a New York Times Notable Book; and the San Francisco Chronicle Best Book of the Year. John Updike chose it as a Today Show Book Club pick.

**Consider for people who are one or more of the following:**

- People who are great storytellers, who can have a table laughing with some tales and, with others, have the group hushed and attentive
- People who laugh and hush before those great storytellers
- Former Brownies and attendees of the Million Man March
- Fans of Percival Everett, Flannery O'Connor, Richard Bausch, Allan Gurganus, Eudora Welty and/or Edward P. Jones

**Recommended Edition:**

*Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*
Riverhead Books
Paperback
$15.00

This edition of the 2004 paperback is 288 pages.
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

Reluctantly Alice
By Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Alice McKinley is starting the seventh grade at a junior high school in Maryland ... and things aren't going well. Between fending off a bully and navigating the romantic entanglements of her widowed father and much older brother, Alice's attempts to be helpful and have everyone like her prove to be more complicated then she expected.

What makes this book extraordinary is the vital and realistic portrayal of Alice and the surrounding characters. I have rarely seen twelve-year-olds written about in such an authentic way. The book is by turns hilarious and heartbreaking, wise and rousing, and sharply honest.

Want proof? Naylor's Alice books are among the most banned books in the nation (#1 in 2004), ostensibly due to sexual content, offensive language, and being "unsuited to age group."

In truth, Naylor's writing gives great credit to the intelligence and compassion of young people; she in no way condescends to Alice or her young readers, or tries to feed them simple stories that are 'good for them.'

In fact, this Newbery-winning author is an antidote to all that. This particular title was named one of School Library Journal's best books of the year.

Reluctantly Alice is one of many books that Naylor has written about the growing up of Alice McKinley (inspiring a vibrant online community) ... but as the first one I read, it remains my favorite.

Consider for people who are one or more of the following:

- Young people on the brink of (or the thick of) the ravages of middle school
- Folks that made it through the ravages of middle school ... and would like to be assured that not all young adult fiction is like Gossip Girls
- People with siblings/nieces/children/nephews who are at the beginning of teenager- hood
- People who can't sing. You'll see why when you read it ...
- Fans of Katherine Paterson, Judy Blume, Laurie Halse Anderson, Jerry Spinelli, Louis Sacher, E.L. Konigsburg, Walter Dean Myers, and/or Norma Fox Mazer.
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

Recommended Edition:

Aladdin
Paperback
$5.99

This is the new 2008 edition of the title that was originally published in 1991. It is 208 pages and even more affordable than lunch at your local sandwich shop.

Other Available Editions:

Athenaeum
Hardcover
$16.95

At the price of paperbacks aimed for adults, this edition is affordable while offering the specialness of a hardcover.
Choose Books:
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... for people who like books with a bit of magic

- *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, Aimee Bender. (Doubleday)
- *Magic for Beginners*, Kelly Link. (Harcourt/ Harvest)
- *Coast of Chicago*, Stuart Dybek. (Macmillan)
- *Kindred*, Octavia Butler. (Beacon)
- *The Breakwater House*, Pascale Quiviger. Tr. Lazar Lederhendler. (House of Anansi)

... for philosophically-minded people

- *Orphans: Essays*, Charles D’Ambrosio. (Clear Cut)
- *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry. (Princeton)
- *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*, Barbara Ehrenreich (Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt)
- *After the Fall*, Arthur Miller. (Penguin)

... for people who like unusual books

Choose Books:  
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- **Further Adventures in the Restless Universe**, Dawn Raffel. (Dzanc)
- **The Bloody Chamber**, Angela Carter. (Penguin)
- **The Selected Levis**, Larry Levis. (U. of Pittsburgh)
- **The Book of the Unknown: Tales of the Thirty-Six**, Jonathan Keats. (Random House)
- **Novels in Three Lines**, Felix Feneon (New York Review of Books)
- **Notes of a Native Son**, James Baldwin. (Beacon)
- **The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America**, Susan Faludi. (Metropolitan)
- **While in Darkness There is Light: Idealism & Tragedy on an Australian Commune**, Louella Bryant (Dzanc)
- **Newjack: Guarding Sing-Sing**, Ted Conover. (Vintage)
- **Dead Man Walking**, Sister Helen Prejean. (Vintage)
- **What is the What**, David Eggers. (McSweeney's)
- **Fame: A Novel in Nine Episodes**, Daniel Kehlmann. Tr. Carol Janeway. (Pantheon)
- **Self-Help**, Lorrie Moore. (Vintage)
- **The Heidi Chronicles**, Wendy Wasserstein. (Mariner)
- **Portable Dorothy Parker**, Dorothy Parker. (Penguin)
- **A Map of Home**, Randa Jarrar. (Penguin)

... for people who like stories with adventure

- **Laughter in the Dark**, Vladimir Nabokov. (New Directions)
- **Fat City**, Leonard Gardner. (U. of California)
- **Big Machine**, Victor LaValle. (Spiegal & Grau)
- **The Postman Always Rings Twice**, James M. Cain (Everyman's Library)
- **The Book of Night Women**, Marlon James. (Riverhead)
- **Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits**, Laila Lalami. (Harvest)

... for young people (around ages 11-15)

- **The Princess Bride**, William Goldman/S. Morgenstern. (Harcourt)
- **The Giver**, Lois Lowry. (Random House)
- **Speak**, Laurie Halse Anderson. (Puffin)
- **A Wrinkle in Time**, Madeline L'Engle. (Square Fish)

... for younger people (around ages 7-10)

- **Ramona Quimby, Age 8**, Beverly Cleary. (HarperCollins)
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... for spiritual-seekers
- *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* by Paul Elie (FSG)
- *Doubt: A Parable* by John Patrick Shanley (Theatre Communications Group)
- *Small Wonder: Essays* by Barbara Kingsolver (Harper Perennial)
- *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck (Penguin)
- *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* by Marilynne Robinson (Picador)
- *Awakening to the Sacred: Creating a Personal Spiritual Life* by Lama Surya Das (Broadway)
- *The Fall* by Albert Camus (Vintage International)

... for writers
- *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* by Elif Batuman (FSG)
- *A Novel Bookstore* by Laurence Cossé. Tr. Alison Anderson (Europa)
- *The Flexible Lyric* by Ellen Bryant Voigt (U. of Georgia)
- *In Search of Duende* by Frederico Garcia Lorca. Tr. J.L. Gili (New Directions)
- *The Resistance to Poetry* by James Longenbach (U. of Chicago)
- *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* by Zadie Smith (Penguin)

... for sophistics
- *From the Land of the Moon* by Milena Agus. Tr. Ann Golstein (Europa)
- *The Cello Suites: J.S. Bach, Pablo Casals, and the Search For a Baroque Masterpiece* by Eric Siblin (House of Anansi)
- *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* by Truman Capote. (Random House)
- *The Group* by Mary McCarthy. (Harcourt)
- *Radio Golf* by August Wilson. (Theatre Communications Group)
- *Of Human Bondage* by W. Somerset Maugham. (Modern Library)
- *Let the Great World Spin* by Colum McCann. (Random House)
- *Paris Stories* by Mavis Gallant (NY Review of Books)

... for even younger people (around ages 3-6)
- *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan. (Simply Red)
- *Big Wolf & Little Wolf* by Nadine Brun Cosme. Tr. Claudia Bedrick. (Enchanted Lion)
- *Hip-Hop Speaks To Children: A Celebration of Poetry With a Beat* by Nikki Giovanni (Sourcebooks)

... for writers
- *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* by Elif Batuman (FSG)
- *A Novel Bookstore* by Laurence Cossé. Tr. Alison Anderson. (Europa)
- *The Flexible Lyric* by Ellen Bryant Voigt. (U. of Georgia)
- *In Search of Duende* by Frederico Garcia Lorca. Tr. J.L. Gili. (New Directions)
- *The Resistance to Poetry* by James Longenbach. (U. of Chicago)
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... for lovers of nature and the outdoors

- *Stiltsville*, Susana Daniel. (Harper)
- *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, Edward Abbey. (Touchstone)
- *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard. (Harper Perennial)
- *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*, Norman Maclean. (U. of Chicago)
- *Out Stealing Horses*, Per Petterson. (Picador)
- *The Art of the Commonplace: Agrarian Essays*, Wendell Berry. (Shoemaker & Hoard)
- *Manifestos on the Future of Food and Seed*, Ed. Vandana Shiva (South End)

... for history buffs

- *The Vagrants*, Yiyun Li. (Random House)
- *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, & Murder in the Jazz Age*, Kevin Boyle. (Henry Holt)
- *The Known World*, Edward P. Jones. (Amistad)

... for people interested in community-building

- *Café Europa: Life After Communism*, Slavenka Drakulic. (Penguin)
- *The Mars Trilogy books*. Kim Stanley Robinson. (Spectra)
- *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings*, Ed. Robert Ellsberg. (Orbis)
- *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, Rebecca Solnit. (Viking)

... for people going through a hard time

- *Let’s Take the Long Way Home: A Memoir of Friendship*, Gail Caldwell (Random House)
- *The Lone Ranger & Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Sherman Alexie. (Grove/Atlantic)
- *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, Pema Chödrön. (Shambhala)

... for people curious about the world

- *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot. (Crown)
- *Woman: An Intimate Geography*, Natalie Angier. (Anchor)
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

... for people who love poetry

- *Poetry of the Universe*, Robert Osserman. (Anchor)
- *Apocalyptic Swing*, Gabrielle Calvocoressi. (Persea)
- *A Thousand Threads*, Steve Orlen. (Hollyridge)
- *Loose Women*, Sandra Cisneros. (Knopf)
- *If I Were Another*, Mahmoud Darwish. Tr. Fady Joudah (FSG)

... for young women (especially, but not only, ages 17-26)

- *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, Ed. Boston Women’s Health Book Collective. (Touchstone)
- *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape*, Ed. Jaclyn Friedman & Jessica Valenti (Seal)

... for parents-to-be

- *Pushed: The Painful Truth About Childbirth and Modern Maternity Care*, Jennifer Block. (Da Capo)

... for sports fans

- *Tip Off: How the 1984 NBA Draft Changed Basketball Forever*, Filip Bondy (Da Capo)

... for politicos

- *Big Girls Don’t Cry: The Election That Changed Everything for American Women*, Rebecca Traister. (Free Press)
- *A Man of the People*, Chinua Achebe. (Anchor)

... for food-lovers, cooks & wannabe cooks

- *The Cookbook Collector*, Allegra Goodman. (Dial)
- *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*, Michael Pollan. (Penguin)
- *Vegetarian Planet*, Didi Emmons. (Harvard Commons Press)
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

This year, consider giving the gift of ideas.

When you offer a gift subscription to an outstanding magazine, you aren't just sending a source of delight to the recipient's mailbox throughout the next year. You are also delivering the opportunity to participate in the public conversation, to catalyze the imagination, and to tap into new ways of thinking.

At the same time, you get the chance to disseminate favorite periodicals into the world, strengthening support for the brightest lights on the newsstand. It is one of my favorite items to give. There are literally hundreds of excellent opportunities for magazines as gifts; here is what you need to know about ten of them.

The Top Ten Magazine Gift Subscriptions
**Choose Books:**
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

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1. **The Sun**


**Gift Subscriptions:** First one-year subscription is $39; each additional gift is $25 (35% off the regular price). Each recipient gets a card announcing the gift. Gift subscriptions received by December 15 will begin with the January issue.

**Trademarks:** No ads in any issue; the magazine depends on subscription support. Beautifully designed, and features outstanding writing animated by hope. As it describes itself, *The Sun* uses "words and photographs to invoke the splendor and heartache of being human."

**Consider this as a gift for:** Idealists. People who are fed up with a culture of soundbites and summary, who long for expansive perspectives. Artists.
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

Details: 6 issues/year. Founded in 1975 and remains an independent nonprofit publication. Publishes essays, fiction, poetry, and book reviews. Newly redesigned, it is now published as glossy magazine.


Gift Subscriptions: One-year subscription is $25 (33% off cover price). Two-year subscriptions are $45.

Trademarks: The Boston Review describes itself as "committed to equality and reason, convinced that the imagination eludes political categories." And indeed, this proves true. An admirable balance of political analysis, with a global vantage, and creative work.

Consider this as a gift for: People who are—or want to be—deeply engaged in the public conversation. People who are hungry for investigative journalism. People who love excellent newspapers.

2. The Boston Review

Tagline: Ideas Matter
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

3. One Story

Tagline: N/A

Details: Publishes one short story about every three weeks for 18 issues/year. Only available via subscription. It is a nonprofit publication founded in 2002.


Gift Subscriptions: A one-year gift subscription is $21, amounting to about one dollar per issue. All recipients will receive either a custom eCard or a standard postcard (your choice) informing them of the gift. Gift subscriptions will start with issue #144 in early January.

Trademarks: One Story publishes really good stories in a variety of styles. Top-notch. It is attractively simple and perfectly portable—you can slip it into your pocket. One Story also publishes a writer one time only, ensuring its commitment to different voices.

Consider this as a gift for: People who are weighed down by the books they carry everywhere. People who love reading, but have trouble finding time for it. People interested in engaging with the best of contemporary literary culture.
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

4. Bitch Magazine

Tagline: Feminist Response to Pop Culture

Details: 4 issues/year. Founded as a zine in 1996, it has grown to have a circulation of 50,000. It is a nonprofit independent magazine. Publishes columns, essays, interviews, comics, "Love It/Shove It," and reviews of books, music, and film.


Gift Subscriptions: $24.95 per year. You can choose to start the subscription with the current winter Confidential issue, or the upcoming spring Primal issue.

Trademarks: Each issue has a creative theme that coheres the issue, such as "Art/See," "Noir," "Lost & Found," "Masculinity," and "Fake." Bitch is whip-smart, funny, and a total original.

Consider this as a gift for: Younger people, especially women in their teens and twenties. People who are overwhelmed by—or buying into—creepy media messages about how they should behave. Smarty-pants types who spend a lot of time watching television on Hulu and playing Guitar Hero.
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

5. Orion Magazine

Tagline: nature / culture / place

Details: 6 issues/year. Founded as a quarterly in 1982 and is operated by The Orion Society, which also engages in community activism and environmental teaching. Publishes long-form essays, poetry, photography, book reviews, and the regular "Sacred & Mundane" section.


Gift Subscriptions: Typically, a year-long subscription can be had for a total of $35. As I type, there’s a deal to get the same subscription for $19—look here for details. You can also, separately, subscribe to the online-only issue.

Trademarks: Gorgeous format and fascinating writing. "Exists at the intersection where real change can occur, delving into the connections between nature, science, justice, art, and politics."

Consider this as a gift for: Your hiking partner. People who recycle. Travelers and nomads; those who are struck by wanderlust. Gardeners, especially those who also like poetry. Fans of Wendell Berry and Annie Dillard; Edward Abbey and Aldo Leopold; Henry David Thoreau and Rebecca Solnit; Barry Lopez and Bill McKibben.
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

Details: 4 issues/year. Published out of the University of Central Arkansas. Publishes columns, essays, fiction, poetry, and features that fall in regular departments: "Writing on Writing," "Lit Crit," "Reflection," "Travel," "Lifestory," and "Local Fare."


Gift Subscriptions: Offers the first gift subscription for $20; the second gift subscription for $15. One of these issues will be the annual Southern music issue, and include a CD.

Trademarks: Celebrates writers and artists with connections to the South, both as subject and as the authors of this magazine’s articles. Eclectic, fascinating writing that disarms readers of any region. Impressive art, photography, and design.

Consider this as a gift for: Book-lovers and writers who live in the South (or who wish they did). Armchair travelers and road-trippers. People who are hungry for a livelier version of traditional literary magazines. Fans of the living tradition of Eudora Welty, ZZ Packer, Tim Gautreaux, Allan Gurganus, Roy Blount, Jr., and/or Ernest J. Gaines.

6. Oxford American

Tagline: The Southern Magazine of Good Writing
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

7. Gulf Coast

**Tagline:** A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts

**Details:** 2 issues/year of about 250 pages apiece. Publishes fiction, nonfiction ("lyric essay"), poetry, book reviews, art, and interviews. Founded in 1986 out of the University of Houston by Philip Lopate and Donald Barthelme.

**Recent features:** "The Question of Where We Begin" (nonfiction by Kyle Minor); "The Cold Boy" (fiction by Benjamin Percy); "Interior Sci-Fi" (poem by Joseph Chapman); "Bandied About From Both Sides: An Interview with David Shields" (interview); "Withholding Reality: An Interview With Mark Strand" (interview); "An Elegy and Siren for the Gulf" (art).

**Gift Subscriptions:** One-year subscriptions are $16, and two-year subscriptions are $28, or 30% off the cover price.

**Trademarks:** An especially tasteful journal in every way, one that's good for paging through over several weeks.

**Consider this as a gift for:** Artists. Dreamers. Voracious readers.
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

**Bookforum**

*Tagline:* N/A

**Details:** 5 issues/year, each including extensive reviews of fiction, nonfiction, and graphic novels, as well as columns, interviews, and essays. Its sister publication, *Artforum*, focuses on contemporary art. Founded in 1994.


**Gift Subscriptions:** One-year subscriptions are $16. Two-year subscriptions are $24.

**Trademarks:** Luxurious large-form publication.

**Consider this as a gift for:** Booksellers (formal and otherwise). People who are members of book clubs and/or volunteers for the library. People who scribble suggested titles for you on tiny scraps of paper.

Tagline: N/A

Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

Details: 12 issues/year. Founded in 1850 (it is the second-oldest continuously operated publication in the country) and is operated independently. It publishes essays on literature, politics, culture, and business, as well as fiction, miscellany, and its famous "Harper's Index."


Gift Subscriptions: One-year subscriptions are $16.97, which is 84% off the cover price (!). Subscription includes online access to the full Harper's archive; that is, every page of every magazine since 1850.

Trademarks: Enormously influential and a feast of ideas. Pays more attention to the environment than its counterparts. Sedate, clean design. Seymour Hersh broke the story of the My Lai massacre in Harper's. Has published everybody from Winston Churchill to Jack London to Sylvia Plath to George Saunders to Mark Twain.

Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

Details: 9 issues/year. Founded in 1975 “to unite the growing yoga community and provide "material that combines the essence of classical yoga with the latest understanding of modern science." It's now one of the most prominent influences in the American yoga community (15.8 million practitioners strong in the U.S.).


Gift Subscriptions: Your first gift subscription is $15.95 for nine issues (65% off the cover price). Your second subscription is a mere $11 for the same nine issues. “Plus, an elegant gift card will announce each gift.”

Trademarks: An impressively comprehensive and vibrant magazine (and associated website). Whole-hearted and with something for people at all levels of experience with yoga and meditation.

Consider this as a gift for: Certainly people who practice yoga (newbies or long-timers). For people who might be interested in exploring yoga for the first time, this subscription might nicely accompany a gift certificate for classes at a local yoga studio (that perhaps the two of you will attend together!)

10. Yoga Journal
Tagline: N/A
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

Honorable Mentions:

1. Tricycle
2. Cook’s Illustrated
3. Tin House
4. maisonneuve
5. Mother Jones
6. The Paris Review
7. Ebony
8. BOMB Magazine
9. The Kenyon Review
10. World Literature Today
11. Tikkun
12. Utne Reader

13. Yes! Magazine
14. Ode Magazine
15. make/shift
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

Your gift can spark something extraordinary.

You and I couldn’t begin to count the number of organizations that are sparking revolutions large and small by carving out space for ideas, creativity, expression, literacy, and a flourishing, thrilling culture that makes the world better for all of us. This year, consider giving a gift that adds fuel to the literary fire. Your donation might stand on its own—your end-of-year testament to the sort of society you want to live in—or it might be in the name of a loved one who finds special purpose in the organization’s cause. Either way, your gift matters. It might go towards expanding access to books in prison, teaching adults to read, publishing unusually meaningful work, or bringing writers into public schools. Here are ten of the top bookish nonprofits that are worth your attention and your generosity.

The Top Six Gift Donations
(with a bookish bent)
Choose Books:
A Gift Guide for People Who Care About Stories

1. InsideOut Literary Arts Project

Fostering Literary Arts Among Detroit Youth Since 1995
www.insideoutdetroit.org

Mission
The InsideOut Literary Arts Project’s engages children in the pleasure and power of reading and writing. It places professional writers in schools to help students develop their self-expression and give them opportunities to publish and perform their work.

What’s It About?
InsideOut uses innovative classroom techniques and celebrates students’ creativity by providing performance opportunities and publishing their work. The residencies consist of 25 weekly sessions, allowing writers to become an integral part of students’ experiences. These year-long in-school residencies bring students together with practicing writers who serve as models of the creative life and help students to take themselves seriously as writers.

Publications celebrate and display students’ work in eye-catching, attractive magazines. They bring students’ work to the community at large, creating a sense of pride and interest in written expression of the highest quality.

2. Girls Write Now

Mentoring the Next Generation of Women Writers Since 1998
www.girlswritenow.org

Mission
Girls Write Now provides guidance, support, and opportunities for New York City’s underserved or at-risk high school girls, enabling them to develop their creative, independent voices, explore careers in professional writing, and learn how to make healthy choices in school, career, and life.

Why Girls Write Now
We need more women’s voices in the public discourse. Today, women writers are still a minority: A 2007 study found that only 15 percent of directors, producers, writers, cinematographers, and editors on top-grossing films in the U.S. were women; according to Editor & Publisher, a scant one in four opinion columnists at the largest syndicates are women. And while the teen years are a time of haywire hormones, they’re also a time of intellectual awakening. As girls explore the world around them, they’ll encounter peer pressure, sexism, and racism—all factors that can steadily erode self-trust and affect decision-making. A successful, safe, girls-only space can create time and opportunities, so that each girl is taken seriously for who she is and who she will become.
3. Dzanc Books

www.dzancbooks.org

**Mission**

Dzanc Books was created in 2006 to advance great writing and champion those writers who don’t fit neatly into the marketing niches of for-profit presses and to advance literary readership and advocacy across the country.

**What’s It About?**

As a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, Dzanc:

- Publishes innovative and award-winning fiction
- Supports independent imprints and literary journals
- Publishes *The Collagist*, a monthly literary journal
- Recognizes the best writing published online with the *Best of the Web* anthology series
- Provides low-cost writing instruction to beginning and emerging writers by connecting them with accomplished authors through the innovative Dzanc Creative Writing Sessions
- Runs the Dzanc Writers-in-Residence Program, which places published authors in public schools to teach creative writing to students
- Conducts the yearly Dzanc Prize, which recognizes a writer for literary excellence and community service
- Organizes the Disquiet International Literary Program in Lisbon, Portugal

4. The Loft Literary Center

www.loft.org

**Mission:**

The mission of the Loft is to support the artistic development of writers, to foster a writing community, and to build an audience for literature.

**What’s It About?**

Incorporated in 1975 above a Minneapolis bookstore, The Loft Literary Center has grown to become the nation's largest and most comprehensive literary center. It is located in the award-winning Open Book literary arts building in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at the heart of one of the most literate and book-friendly regions in the country.

The Loft Literary Center is a nonprofit arts organization offering services for readers and writers at every level. From novels to children's literature, from playwriting to poetry, from spoken word to memoir, there’s something for everyone at the Loft. Programs include readings by acclaimed local and national authors, classes, weekend genre conferences, competitions and grants, open groups, writers’ studios, and much more. The list of acclaimed authors who have appeared at the Loft over the years reads like a *Who's Who* of letters. The Loft is a unique community of people engaged in the reading and writing life.
5. Reach Out and Read

*Preparation America's Youngest Children to Succeed in School*

www.reachoutandread.org

**Mission:**

Reach Out and Read prepares America's youngest children to succeed in school by partnering with doctors to prescribe books and encourage families to read together.

**What's It About?**

Reach Out and Read is an evidence-based nonprofit organization that promotes early literacy and school readiness in pediatric exam rooms nationwide by giving new books to children and advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud.

Doctors, nurse practitioners, and other medical professionals incorporate Reach Out and Read's evidence-based model into regular pediatric checkups, by advising parents about the importance of reading aloud and giving developmentally-appropriate books to children. The program begins at the 6-month checkup and continues through age 5, with emphasis on children growing up in low-income communities. Families served by Reach Out and Read read together more often, and their children enter kindergarten with larger vocabularies and stronger language skills, better prepared to achieve their potential.

6. Prison Creative Arts Project

www.prisonarts.org

**Mission:**

The Prison Creative Arts Project's mission is to collaborate with incarcerated adults, incarcerated youth, urban youth and the formerly incarcerated to strengthen our community through creative expression. Founded in 1990, PCAP is committed to original work in the arts in correctional facilities, juvenile facilities, and urban high schools. Its process is guided by respect and a spirit of collaboration in which vulnerability, risk and improvisation lead to discovery. PCAP makes possible the spaces in which the voices and visions of the incarcerated can be expressed.

**What's It About?**

PCAP has facilitated hundreds of workshops in theater, creative writing, art, dance, music and video, each culminating in a final performance, reading or exhibit. It publishes the Literary Review by Michigan Prisoners, and hosts a major annual art exhibition and symposium on prison and art. It also created the Linkage Project, which links incarcerated youth and adult artists, writers, musicians, actors, and dancers with a community arts mentor upon their release, supporting them as they make the transition back into the community.