

WITF/Radio Smart Talk
2019 Holiday Books
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FICTION

Girl, by Edna O'Brien. I've only read one Edna O'Brien story before, "The Connor Girls," and that was twenty years ago, but I still remember how powerful it felt, like I was stealing secrets. At 88, O'Brien is one of the most highly regarded fiction writers on the planet, often writing about girls and women, Ireland and war. Her new novel, *Girl*, is a departure—in setting at least, if not in subject; she's still writing about girls under violence, about girls on the run. The novel fictionalizes the kidnapping and brutalization in 2014 of dozens of Nigerian schoolgirls by Boko Haram. The novel begins powerfully: "I was a girl once, but not any more. I smell. Blood dried and crusted all over me, and my wrapper in shreds. My insides, a morass. Hurtled through this forest that I saw, that first awful night, when I and my friends were snatched from the school." No reader can stop there.

Exhalation, by Ted Chiang. I have so far only read the first story in this book, but I've been thinking about it ever since. That's the kind of writer Ted Chiang is, an artist playing the long game. Chiang is the author of "Story of Your Life"—a phenomenal, perspective-altering short story that was turned into the equally phenomenal and mind-bending movie *Arrival*, a science fiction film starring Amy Adams and Jeremy Renner about alien linguistics that absolutely brought me to tears in the movie theater. "Story of Your Life" was included in Chiang's first book, a collection of stories published in 2002 that took him over twelve years to write. *Exhalation* is his sophomore album—seventeen years later. But it's more than worth the wait. Chiang's science fiction and fantasy stories read like heartbreaking riddles that stand up to the best of Jorge Luis Borges and Ray Bradbury (and, I would say, greatly exceed them both in the heartbreak). Get this collection, gift it. Take fifteen years to read it. I have no doubt it's worth every word.

The Testaments: The Sequel to The Handmaid's Tale, by Margaret Atwood. It's Margaret Atwood. It's the sequel to her 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, one of the best novels of the 20th century. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been reborn as a hit Hulu television series that has served not only as great television, but also as a vicious balm to the current evisceration of democracy (fingers crossed), and also as a reminder that community and love are worth fighting for. All to say: someone you know is getting this as a gift this holiday season, likely multiple people. And we're all the better for it.

NONFICTION

The Book of Crying, by Heather Christle. I already bought this book for my oldest daughter for Christmas. I've been reading Heather Christle's poetry for over a decade, writing I always look forward to for surrealism and humor that always breaks my heart. *The Book of Crying* is Christle's first work of nonfiction. It's told in chunks of emotionally rich prose reminiscent of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*. Christle started the book after losing a friend to suicide, and so then dealing with her own deep depression alongside the birth of her first child. She wanted to know about all this crying, what it is and why, and why such silence on the subject. I wanted to buy myself a copy, too, but my daughter is always up for sharing books—usually because she wants someone to talk to about them. That's one of the best things about giving books as gifts: they can be shared, passed on, spark conversations. We all need to talk much more about crying; I know I do. This book should be an important start.

White Flights: Race, Fiction, and the American Imagination, by Jess Row. I'm writing a novel, which means that my friends and family have heard over and over about what I'm anxious about and what I'm worried about messing up. (Sorry, everyone.) One of these anxieties is writing as a white male writer in American today who is more privileged than not. How do I write into a history and present that silenced and silences voices that don't look and sound, at least on the surface, like my own? Reading Jess Row's brilliant analysis of the place of race and the racial imagination in American writing and literature today was like plugging jumper cables on my own concerns and anxieties. Row seemed to channel my thoughts, but with greater care, greater insight, at greater length, and in the important context of history. There is nothing I've read, recently or perhaps ever, that has better and more directly attacked and unpacked the white writing and white reading that has affected and continues to direct (directly or indirectly) all aspects of American culture and literature. This book is a must-read for any writer and reader interested in where we've been, where we are, and how we might think about the future of the stories we consume and those we tell.

Astro Poets: Your Guides to the Zodiac, Alex Dimitrov and Dortothea Lasky. This is the book I already bought my brother for Christmas. (I give a lot of books.) This is because a large portion of our conversations these past years have been about astrology (and tarot cards, etc.); moreover, though we don't talk much about poetry, he's devouring it. He recently loaned me his copy of Prageeta Sharma's intoxicatingly heartbreaking new collection *Grief Sequences*, and he has now moved on to reading Alice Notley's 1996 *The Descent of Alette*. What do you get your astrology-hyped, poetry-enthusiastic brother? Obviously you get him a new book about astrology from two fantastic poets, Alex Dimitrov and Dortothea Lasky. (I've read and reread Lasky's poetry collections *Rome* and *Milk*, both of which I can't recommend enough.) If you want a taste of Astro Poets right away, check out their massively popular Twitter feed that has over 500K followers: @poetastrologers

The Senate Intelligence Committee Report on Torture: Executive Summary of the Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program, published by Melville House. I know, the US Senate's "torture report" doesn't exactly scream holiday cheer. But you try sitting down to the detailed and powerful new movie *The Report* (directed by Scott Z. Burns and starring Adam Driver) and then reading about the intelligence report for the

following two hours on the internet and tell me that every American shouldn't have a copy in their home as a reminder of what we've done, and to remember what we instead aspire to. The *Report on Torture* was published by Melville House, who also published, similarly, the recent *US Climate Report*, and also a handsomely packaged gift edition of the *Supreme Court Decision on Marriage Equality* in a handsome slipcase.

POETRY

A Fortune for Your Disaster, By Hanif Abdurraqib. Like lots of readers, I first heard about Hanif Abdurraqib when his 2017 essay collection *The Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us* was suddenly all over the place, on everyone's year-end best of lists, in emails from my writer friends, splashed across Twitter feeds. Since then I've been reading his essays and poetry wherever I can find it. I've read Abdurraqib writing about soccer-savant Mohamed Salah, a Carly Rae Jepsen concert, and getting stopped by the police—pretty much anything he puts his mind to at this point I'll check out; he is that exciting as a connector of ideas, that good at putting words to the world. But poetry seems to be where Abdurraqib's heart is, what draws him to writing. *A Fortune for Your Disaster* is his second collection, and it's much like his essays—a mix of music and pop culture, heartache and history. The book is shaped like a magic trick, but also sharp: the opening poem, "The Prestige," starts, "the poem begins not where the knife enters / but where the blade twists."

The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems, edited by Jen Bervin and Marta Werner. It is the year, the decade, perhaps eventually the century of Emily Dickinson. It seems every year there is a new movie, biography, collection, and now television series about the seldom-published Amherst poet we can't stop seeing ourselves in. The new venture is the new Apple TV series *Dickinson*, an addictive punk, magical realist reimaging of Dickinson's young passions. If you're going to get anyone a collection of Dickinson's poetry this holiday season, or pick up one for yourself, it's always a question of, "Well, which?"—because Dickinson wrote over 3,000 poems in her life, but only published a handful. What we have of Dickinson unlike any other poet is a fully-lived life interwoven with a fully-written one. Therefore, I would recommend *The Gorgeous Nothings*, which reproduces full-size and in color all of the Dickinson's envelope writings; these are poems, like many of the poet's, written on scraps, found objects, in letters to friends. Here, those scraps are all envelopes, with poems written on the back or on pieces torn off. Poetry was Dickinson's life, not simply a career, and this book unlike any other collection of her work demonstrates that in utter amazement. Also, it's an absolutely beautiful book.

CHILDREN

The Very Short, Entirely True History of Unicorns, by Sarah Laskow (illustrations by Sam Beck). My 9-year-old daughter bought this book the other month at The Odyssey, a fantastic bookstore across the street from Mount Holyoke College. I thought it was just another silly

book about unicorns, but when we started reading it together I was instantly captivated. Written by senior editor for science at *The Atlantic*, Sarah Laskow, this true history of unicorns covers thousands of years of human conjecture and speculation about unicorns from all over the globe—from the narwhal to the Tibetan Chiru—in just 96 pages, and accompanied with charming maps and pictures by Sam Beck. (Moreover, if you ever just wanted to know the science of how horns grow, or what’s in Brooklyn’s Instagram-ready unicorn latte, this is the book for you.)

Choose Your Own Adventure books. Like many American children of the 1980s, I was an avid reader of the Choose Your Own Adventure series—books like *The Abominable Snowman* or *Journey Under the Sea* that every few pages forced you to choose the direction of the story, each new reading then unfolding in a different sequence of events and conclusions. *Do you go back for your travel partner? Turn to page 17. Or do you accept the wizard’s offer? Turn to page 62.* One option leads to adventure, another perhaps to a tragic end. I recently started reading these books with my young daughter, and she was immediately hooked; I couldn’t help but be filled with joy upon learning that she was reading the books over and over again at school, trying to discover what different adventures she could have in the same book. Though the series lost steam at the end of the 1990s and quit publishing, this past decade the books were relaunched with new stories about spies, history, Greek myths, and so forth (and with a more diverse line up of writers at that). I already bought my daughter for Christmas the new Magick Box set of books, which includes stories about monstrous beasts and ancient gods. Sounds like quite an adventure.

COMICS

Making Comics, by Lynda Barry. One of the most exciting classes I teach is about making comics, and I’m not known for my comics (at least not since middle school). If you want to know why I’m teaching comics, get this book. If you have a child or cousin or anyone who wants to make comics, get this book. Or just get this book; you won’t be disappointed. There are few teachers or comics artists out there like Lynda Barry, someone who sparks joy in the minds of her students, reminds us that the imagination and art are gifts everyone is born with, gifts we sometimes abandon due to shame or distraction, gifts that we should all return to, to the wonder of the image blossoming under a pencil and the stories we might imagine.

The Watchmen, by Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons. It feels like there is no television event this year talked about with as much passion and excitement and pride as HBO’s *The Watchmen*. The show, thanks massively to show creator Damon Lindelof, has used this 1980s superhero comic book series as a vehicle to interrogate how race and inherited trauma affect how we build a nation, consider justice, and tell stories. I can’t think of any television show in the current “golden age of television” that has been so considered not just outstanding but absolutely necessary. The original *Watchmen* comic—with or without the TV show—is an absolute feast of reading. Written by Alan Moore and with art by Dave Gibbons, *The Watchmen* comic book similarly uses the superhero myth to consider ideas of justice, storytelling, and community, but through the lens of weapons of mass destruction rather than race. It’s the sort of book—like

Ulysses, *Don Quixote*, or *Mrs. Dalloway*—that proves itself richer and more rewarding upon each rereading.