

WITF Radio Smart Talk Holiday 2020 Books List

Travis Kurowski

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Fiction

The Butcher's Blessing, by Ruth Gilligan (2020). Something about the pandemic and all the political anxiety has kept me from any fiction not being beamed directly into my eyes. At the same time, 2020 gave us a bounty of great new fiction (just see all the massive end-of-year lists around). I'll mention just one here. Tin House books—the Portland-based publisher of Ruth Gilligan's new gothic Irish thriller *The Butcher's Blessing*—has become a top independent book publisher over the past decade, known for arresting fiction and genre-defying nonfiction. My aunt Sandy in Minnesota is one of the fastest, most compulsive and astute readers I've ever known. When *The Butcher's Blessing* caught my eye, I couldn't stop thinking about it—the book cover is an ominous woodcut of half the face of a cow or horse, and the story is described as moving back and forth in time, centered around “the Butchers, a group that roams from farm to farm, enacting ancient methods of cattle slaughter,” a plot described by Colum McCann as “dark, wild, mythic, unsuspecting, and absolutely riveting.” So I asked my aunt to give it a go, let me know what she thought of it, dark and absolutely riveting being her genre. Two days later she gave the book a thumbs up, adding “poetic justice in the end—with a bit of a twist.” If slaughter in Ireland isn't for you, I urge you to check out Tin House's website, as their books are beautiful and the catalog full of gems. (Full disclosure: I interned for Tin House 15+ years ago. They actually work out of a Tin House, because Portland.)

The School for Good and Evil (series), by Soman Chainani (2014-20). I have nonetheless this pandemic been reading plenty of fiction with my daughter. We just started the YA series *The School for Good and Evil* by Soman Chainani and are completely hooked. It's sort of Harry Potter meets Camelot meets Gossip Girl, focused on two girls—Agatha and Sophie—as they grow into young women and come to understand their power while dealing with the ins and outs of going to a school for fairy tales. The series is also sort of an exploration of ethics, hence the title. How can we tell what's “good”? Is it always the opposite of what we deem “evil”? I'm personally thrilled that Chainani doesn't write down to children—also that the story is saturated with fairy tale history and treats the protagonists with all the dynamism and contradictions of people beyond the page. My daughter and I are still trying to figure Agatha and Sophie out each evening as we argue and laugh and keep turning the pages. The series just concluded this past June with book six, *One True King*, and the entire work is being adapted into a major motion picture for Netflix—so get reading.

Nonfiction

A Promised Land, by Barack Obama (2020). It seems almost unfair that someone who was President of the United States for two terms, seems an excellent father and husband, and has moved seamlessly from the White House to producing Oscar-winning movies also happens to be one of the nation's finest writers. I was first turned on to our 44th president not from his

political life but his literary one, through reading his first book, the memoir *Dreams of My Father*, which covers Obama's young life up into his time as a community organizer in Chicago. The book is rife with rich imagery and detail that brought Obama's story to life, while also filled with complicated events that stayed with me. I much look forward to getting time to read this new 700+ page memoir from Obama, not least for his for surely singular insights into the presidency and American politics in the 21st century. In her clear-eyed review for the *New York Times*, novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes the book—which she doesn't see as without flaws—as “nearly always pleasurable to read, sentence by sentence, the prose gorgeous in places, the detail granular and vivid. From Southeast Asia to a forgotten school in South Carolina, he evokes the sense of place with a light but sure hand.”

The Best of Me, by David Sedaris (2020). Like so many readers I know, I will read anything by the nonfiction writer David Sedaris. He's a global literary treasure of humor, insight, and humanity, and he's charming as hell on and off the page; my daughter and I saw him read in York years ago, a story I tell every chance I get. This new 400-page collection of Sedaris's self-selected “best of” from his nearly three decades of writing is sure to be a feast.

One Life, by Megan Rapinoe and Emma Brockes (2020). I love soccer, and in what I love about soccer the US Women's National Team is up there at the very top. It's a spectacle and sport I share in enthusiasm equally with my parents, daughters, friends, and students. Not many from that list, if any, care about how my team Arsenal is doing this season. (Poorly.) But since the 1990s the USWNT has been a nearly unrivaled sports enthusiasm in this country, cutting across class and region to enthrall and inspire millions—and doing much of the work along the way of increasing the visibility and prestige of soccer in American and women in soccer around the world. Of the USWNT team today, Megan Rapinoe stands out head-and-shoulders above the rest, on and off the field, as they say. She came out early as a queer professional athlete, took a knee to protest for black lives (and took a knock professionally for it), and above all else has been a dominant force on the soccer pitch, ranked recently by FIFA as the top female soccer player in the world. This autobiography from a dominant world athlete who brought female athleticism and the global game to new heights will be a gift to many readers young and old, myself included.

Braiding Sweetgrass, by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2015; 2020). An elegantly designed and updated new hardcover edition of Robin Wall Kimmerer's award-winning instant classic book about the deep knowledge of the land and living things around us, and how we can relearn to be present to it. From the publisher Milkweed Editions' website: “Drawing on her life as an indigenous scientist, a mother, and a woman, Kimmerer shows how other living beings—asters and goldenrod, strawberries and squash, salamanders, algae, and sweetgrass—offer us gifts and lessons, even if we've forgotten how to hear their voices.” With this edition Milkweed celebrates 40 years of publishing some of this nation's seminal works on the environment and our place in it. Pulitzer-winning novelist Richard Powers says, “I give daily thanks for Robin Wall Kimmerer for being a font of endless knowledge, both mental and spiritual.”

Joe Biden: The Life, the Run, and What Matters Now, by Evan Osnos (2020). Well that was an unusual presidential election, to say the least—but it’s over, and we’re going to spend at least four years with President-Elect Joe Biden in the White House (again, of course). We are at a unique moment in presidential history, but I’m not sure many of us could say how or why. These past months I’ve heard Evan Osnos—a *New Yorker* staff writer—talk much on the how and why about this upcoming presidency and the running for it. His ideas and information has been compelling and, actually, invigorating, so I’m much looking forward to reading his new book on the subject. Thankfully, after a presidential race that seemed centuries long, the book is only 192 pages.

Poetry

Poems 1962-2012, by Louise Glück (2013). Earlier this year Louise Glück was awarded the 2020 Nobel Prize for Literature—and so I, along with many, sought out this book, the deepest and richest collection of her work to date. Glück’s is an oeuvre that ranges far and wide across the landscape of humanity in candid and uncompromising vision. I have gone to her work in the darkest times in my life and the brightest and have found in both consolation and companionship. A doorstop of a book at 652 pages, it’s offering is vast—and as I write this I am simply amazed that so much art and intelligence could be purchased for the price of a few cappuccinos. What luck.

Home Body, by Rupi Kaur (2020). Rupi Kaur is hands-down the poet I have most heard quoted, mentioned, and adored by my college students over the past 5 years. Moreover, Kaur’s first two books have likely sold more during those years than the next 20 or 30 best-selling poets *combined*. (Over 8 million copies in 40 languages, according to her publisher.) Kaur writes about deep longing, trauma, the body. Her third book, *Home Body*, came out a few weeks ago and is already #1 in nearly all the Amazon rankings it fits in. It would be easy, I think, to be dismissive about popularity in poetry, as critics can be in art and music, but I wouldn’t be so quick. Kaur’s work has turned on more readers to poetry than any I’ve seen, well, ever. I’m 42. And she inspires the writers in my classes like few others. If you haven’t checked out her work, this third collection might be the time.

Together in a Sudden Strangeness, edited by Alice Quinn (2020). In tragedy, we turn to art. Particularly, to poetry. After 9/11, people taped poems to lampposts and shop windows, scrawled lyrics in the dust. Though I haven’t turned to fiction during the pandemic, I have turned often to poetry (and written much too). Early in the pandemic, former *New Yorker* poetry editor and former director of the Poetry Society of America Alice Quinn began collecting poetry being written, and that collecting led to this book featuring 107 poets, including such luminary voices as Jericho Brown, Billy Collins, Ada Limón, Sharon Olds, and Claudia Rankine. A close poet friend of mine is often frustrated that we go about our lives as though we don’t need poetry, but then we run to it in times of suffering. But we run to it, I tell her. This book will be a salve and a litmus paper for a suffering that has engaged us all.

Comics

There are three new graphic novels that came out in 2020 that I'd like to highlight for anyone interested in great, beautiful books—but especially for any aspiring comics artists, or aspiring writers or artists in general, or anyone interested in what it's like behind the curtain of the comics world. All of these books—by well-established comics artists Adrian Tomine and Jim Terry and relative newcomer Bishakh Som—are memoirs about a life in comics. But, thankfully, they are never about simply drawing things. They are about finding a voice in a sometimes violent, ignorant world. They are about finding love and meaning in an often isolating artform. And they are above all about the power and the promise of art and stories.

The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cartoonist, by Adrian Tomine (2020). From the publisher, Drawn & Quarterly: “Tomine illustrates the amusing absurdities of how we choose to spend our time, all the while mining his conflicted relationship with comics and comics culture. But in between chaotic book tours, disastrous interviews, and cringe-inducing interactions with other artists, life happens: Tomine fumbles his way into marriage, parenthood, and an indisputably fulfilling existence.”

Spellbound: A Graphic Memoir, by Bishakh Som (2020). From the publisher, Street Noise Books: “This exquisite graphic novel memoir by a transgender artist, explores the concept of identity by inviting the reader to view the author moving through life as she would have us see her, that is, as she sees herself.”

Come Home, Indio: A Memoir, by Jim Terry (2020). Also from publisher, Street Noise Books: “This powerful graphic novel shares the author’s journey of discovering his spiritual home as a Native American. From a childhood in suburbia, disconnected from his identity as an Indigenous person, through an urban adulthood marked by a struggle with alcoholism and the death of his parents, to his life-altering experience at Standing Rock, he begins to find a new sense of self as a Native and as an American.” Terry also did the astounding cover art for last month’s debut issue of *Marvel Voices: Indigenous Voices*—“a selection of stories by Native creators, featuring some of the many indigenous characters from across the Marvel Universe” (from *The Beat* comics website).