

WITF/Radio Smart Talk  
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Holiday Book Giving  
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## FICTION

**Bewilderment, by Richard Powers.** Richard Powers's last novel, "The Overstory"—about trees and how little we understand them, our relationship to them, and so our relationship to the world—won Powers a Pulitzer Prize and, much more significantly, won him loads of forever changed readers. "Bewilderment" is something of a follow up, a spiritual bookend to "The Overstory." (Ezra Klein half-jokingly referred to the book as "the understory.") "Bewilderment" is about an astrobiologist, his neurodivergent son, and their exploration of the cosmos and what it means to be human on this planet that we are slowly, and more rapidly, changing in dangerous ways. Oprah Winfrey calls Powers "one of our country's greatest living writers. He composes some of the most beautiful sentences I've ever read. I'm in awe of his talent."

**The Ones Who Don't Say They Love You, by Maurice Carlos Ruffin.** I'm in love with the city of New Orleans, and, as readers know, being in love colors one's reading. I've been in love with the city of New Orleans for decades, but now my heart is there more than ever, and "The Ones Who Don't Say They Love You" is a book that I'm looking forward to reading, a collection of fiction—powerful fiction; I've read some of the pieces already in literary magazines—set in and around and of the Crescent City. Kiese Laymon says of the book and its author, "Ruffin, more than any of the greats I read, searches for that idea, that style, that genre we think is impossible to do well, and he makes it look easy. What he is doing in these short stories is breathtaking. They are so singular and so reliant on each other for wholeness."

**Trees, by Percival Everett.** In 2010, I saw Everett read in Mississippi, after which he told us in the audience about his time working as a black cowboy (his words) in Oregon, not far from where I grew up. I was in graduate school, young, but I knew—after hearing Everett's fiction, his calm recital, his brilliant narrative excavation of his own experience—that I'd heard from a "real writer" that evening, a voice unique, powerful, and brilliant. Everett's latest novel, his twenty-second, "The Trees," takes Everett back to Mississippi. The story follows a series of strange and brutal murders in Money, Mississippi—the town Emmett Till was killed—murders that connect Till and Money to a violent history and a violent present. Hobart editor Aaron Burch says "this just might be the book of the year."

**Harrow, by Joy Williams.** There's a theme here in the novels I selected: our violence to this planet we're riding on, and so to the people living on it. Much of my gift giving this year will again be money to charities, and I think my book gifting, and book reading, will take a similarly active engagement. Like Everett, Joy Williams is something of an unacknowledged master of American literature—and I've never read her books. Never too late. Williams's new novel, "Harrow," sounds extraordinary, both in mystery and art: a Paradise Lost of the postapocalyptic, climate fiction bent. The story describes a girl as she finds her way across the destructed planet

and into the minds of a species that brought us there. Or as Justin Taylor says much better: “Climate collapse is well underway and Joy Williams’s *HARROW* deserves the Pulitzer Prize.”

## NONFICTION

**This Is Your Mind on Plants, by Michael Pollan.** Michael Pollan is one of the most gifted, brilliant, and necessary nonfiction writers working today. From his writing on food to solitude to drugs, it feels Pollan is continually tapping into the subjects that our contemporary world needs just at the moment his books hit the stores. Pollan’s latest book, “*This Is Your Mind on Plants*,” seems no different, exploring our deep, increasingly symbiotic relationship to the plant world through three plant drugs—opium, caffeine, and mescaline. What does what we ingest—and how it changes our very selves—say about what we are as a species, and about our place on the planet? I plan to find out. (This work seems a sequel to Pollan’s absolutely masterful 2018 book about psychedelics, “*How to Change Your Mind*.”)

**Dear Memory: Letters on Writing, Silence, and Grief, by Victoria Chang.** I’ve been following Victoria Chang’s writing since back when I was a blogger—a long time. Since I first read her poems in the pages of literary magazines, Chang’s literary voice has stood out to me as a significant one; here’s how I described her writing in 2007: “Many of Chang’s poems are unbelievably expedient in their delivery, coming at you with the speed of the contemporary, like an email made of sparkling quartz. ‘Each morning,’ her recent poem ‘How Much’ from *Paris Review* no 180 begins, ‘I put on those shoes, legs, / nylons, sex, black briefs with texts. Each / dusk, there were martinis, drinks that said / Cocktail! No choice.’ We are thrust immediately into the high sensual moment at Autobahn speeds.” Chang’s current work—her recent 2020 collection, “*OBIT*,” and now her newest book, “*Dear, Memory: Letters on Writing, Silence, and Grief*”—has a calm, powerful presence to it, focusing on death, loss, trauma, and the moving we do around these things. “*Dear, Memory*” is comprised of letters that—some hard, all powerful—open into “carefully crafted collages and missives on trauma, loss, and Americanness.”

**These Precious Days, by Ann Patchett.** The well-known novelist Ann Patchett is also a powerful writer of nonfiction—from her 2009 book “*Truth and Beauty*,” about her friendship with writer Lucy Grealy; to her recent essay collection “*This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*,” about relationships, hers and others; to now her latest book, “*These Precious Days*.” I read one of the essays from the book, a piece titled “*My Three Fathers*,” when it came out in *The New Yorker*; it’s a loving and heart-holding portrait of what fathers meant in a young writer’s life, in a daughter’s life, and in a woman’s life as she changes and as three men change: her biological father, and her two step-fathers that followed in turn. I shared the essay with everyone. As both a biological and step-father myself, Patchett’s story and analysis of fatherhood and its place in her life opened like a flower inside me; it helped me see my relationship with my daughters in a new, dynamic way. I’m looking forward to what the rest of the essays in Patchett’s new book cover and expose. Donna Seaman writes that “Patchett is a commanding and incisive storyteller, whether her tales are true or imagined.”

**The Art of Communicating (2014) and How to Connect (2020)—both by Thich Nhat Hahn.** It’s been a trying few years, from political violence to pandemic trauma to economic anxiety to

everything else. Of course, there's been beauty and success, too—but it's been a time. I can't recommend, in these times, for people and for their loved ones, the series of small books written by Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hahn about, well, how to live. As my girlfriend says, often what we tell other people is really just what we need to hear. It's true; I've had a tough year, and so I've gone to these books by Hahn again and again, or picked up some for the first time. Most of the books I mean are in Hahn's small "How to" series—"How to Love," "How to Sit," etc.—but I think Hahn's 2014 book "The Art of Communicating" fits in nicely with these as a kind of bibliographic cousin. It's a small book, like the others, providing powerful pieces of advice about being present in talking and listening to others, both strangers and lovers. I loved it. It helped me see my talking and my listening and how I can open it more, be more present for those I love and those I don't know. I own a few of Hahn's "How to..." books, and I plan on picking up his recent "How to Connect" soon. In an increasingly isolating world—from Amazon to Zoom—I want to connect more and deeply, online and off, while I can. Ocean Vuong says of Hahn, "Thich Nhat Hanh's work, on and off the page, has proven to be the antidote to our modern pain and sorrows. His books help me be more human, more me than I was before."

**All of the Marvels: A Journey to the Ends of the Biggest Story Ever Told, by Douglas Wolk.** I'll keep this short—unlike, thankfully, this 384 page book. Douglas Wolk is one of the smartest people on the subject of comics. I often use his book and essays in my classes on the subject. He has now put out a book on the entire Marvel Universe of comics, after reading as deep into these stories as any human likely ever has. Superhero comics have been telling and adding to the same stories for a century now; perhaps now these are part of the biggest stories humans have ever told. I'm excited to pick up Wolk's book "All of the Marvels: A Journey to the Ends of the Biggest Story Ever Told" to find out just how big the story gets. Brian K. Vaughn—arguably the best storyteller in comics today—writes of the book, "What sounds like a madman's quest turns out to be a deeply emotional hero's journey. The best work yet from the best writer about the medium of comics."

## POETRY

**Punks: New & Selected Poems, by John Keene.** When I visit my girlfriend in New Orleans, I always at some point sit on her couch and read her copy of Harper's magazine. One time I was there recently, the issue had some poems from John Keene's newest book of poetry, "Punks: New & Selected Poems," from the great poetry press Song Cave. Usually reading these Harper's issues, I have a good time, am intellectually intrigued, etc. Reading these poems woke me up to my life and what wasn't my life. What else is poetry for? It's amazing we think we can get by without them. Keene's poem from the issue, "Portrait of the Father as a Young GI" begins, "Orpheus behind the playboy's gaze, turning mellow youth toward every lens while inwardly roiling, a cauldron of anger. What brother did not wear a mask..." Eileen Myles says simply, "Wow. Get Punks."

**Winter Recipes from the Collective, by Louise Glück.** Louise Glück—English language's most carnal and intimate poet of nature—won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2020. This is her first book since then. The title poem begins "Each year when winter came the old men entered / the woods to gather the moss that grew / on the north side of certain junipers," and has lines like

“But the trees were everything. / And how sad we were when one died, / and they do die...” Go get a copy. Gift some to friends.

**Playlist for the Apocalypse, by Rita Dove.** Honestly, the same with Rita Dove’s new book—get a copy, gift copies. Dove is an American master of the lyric, and her latest book is about the crises of our time. “In her first volume of new poems in twelve years, Rita Dove investigates the vacillating moral compass guiding America’s, and the world’s, experiments in democracy. Whether depicting the first Jewish ghetto in sixteenth-century Venice or the contemporary efforts of Black Lives Matter, a girls’ night clubbing in the shadow of World War II or the doomed nobility of Muhammad Ali’s conscious objector stance, this extraordinary poet never fails to connect history’s grand exploits to the triumphs and tragedies of individual lives.” Dove’s poem “Mirror” is well worth the price of admission—a poem told in a voice split down the middle, mirrored, where the same lines coming one way reverberate opposite going the other, a startling exploration of the built self that one has to see to understand the poem’s non-mundane power: “Mirror, / Mirror, / take this / this take...”