Near picks

By Amy Frykholm
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“Anyone who reads independently and spiritedly is going to carry an eclectic canon around in his head,” writes Christian Wiman. “That is half the fun of it all.”

For the past five years or so, I have had the responsibility of coming up with the novels to put on the *Century*’s list of Christmas picks for fiction. At first I was baffled by this job. Did I have to read every new book? And what exactly are Christmas picks? My personal favorite books of the year? The best books of the year in a literary sense? Books I guessed *Century* readers would like?

Over this half-decade, I have started to imagine what I think of as a kind of *Century* aesthetic that I use to make my choices. I look for books that are strong in narrative but not necessarily plot-driven. I look for books that speak to a wider set of social issues or problems but are not political hammers. I look for rich characters and unusual settings.

I usually avoid the most popular books and hunt instead for the gems hiding under the vast marketing machinery of American publishing. But these choices are by and large eclectic, and I break my own rules constantly. Then I spend the first six months of the following year second-guessing myself. But, as Wiman says, “that is half the fun.”

Here are a few books that didn’t quite make my Christmas picks this year, but are still provocative and worth knowing about:

> *Evel Knievel Days*, by Paul Toutonghi. A young man in Butte, Montana—the son of a wealthy local woman and an Egyptian dilettante—goes in search of his long-lost father. The book playfully trails Khosi Saqr as he tries to understand the choices made by both his parents that have shaped his life. And at the center of the novel: food.
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> *This Is How You Lose Her,* by Junot Diaz. I couldn’t quite justify Diaz’s self-absorbed raunchiness for the “*Century* aesthetic.” But I wonder if, for the

theologically inclined reader, this fast-paced, beautifully written collection of stories might be imagined as an utterly contemporary commentary on St. Paul's famous formulation, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." Diaz's memorable character and alter-ego Yunior is an eloquent spokesperson for the divided human heart.

Our Lady of Alice Bhatti, by Mohammed Hanif. Alice gets a job in a hospital on the Pakistani border—a hospital that seems to be part insane asylum. Hanif creates a zany landscape with mixed religions, mixed motives and mixed-up politics as a commentary on contemporary Pakistan's understanding of women and religion. Alice can work miracles, but she is as broken and confused a saint as you will find.

All three of these books use off-the-wall humor to communicate their characters' anxieties in a multiethnic, multi-geographic, multi-religious modernity. Sometimes I worry that I exclude books whose primary mode is humor. So take these as an antidote to that overly serious impulse.