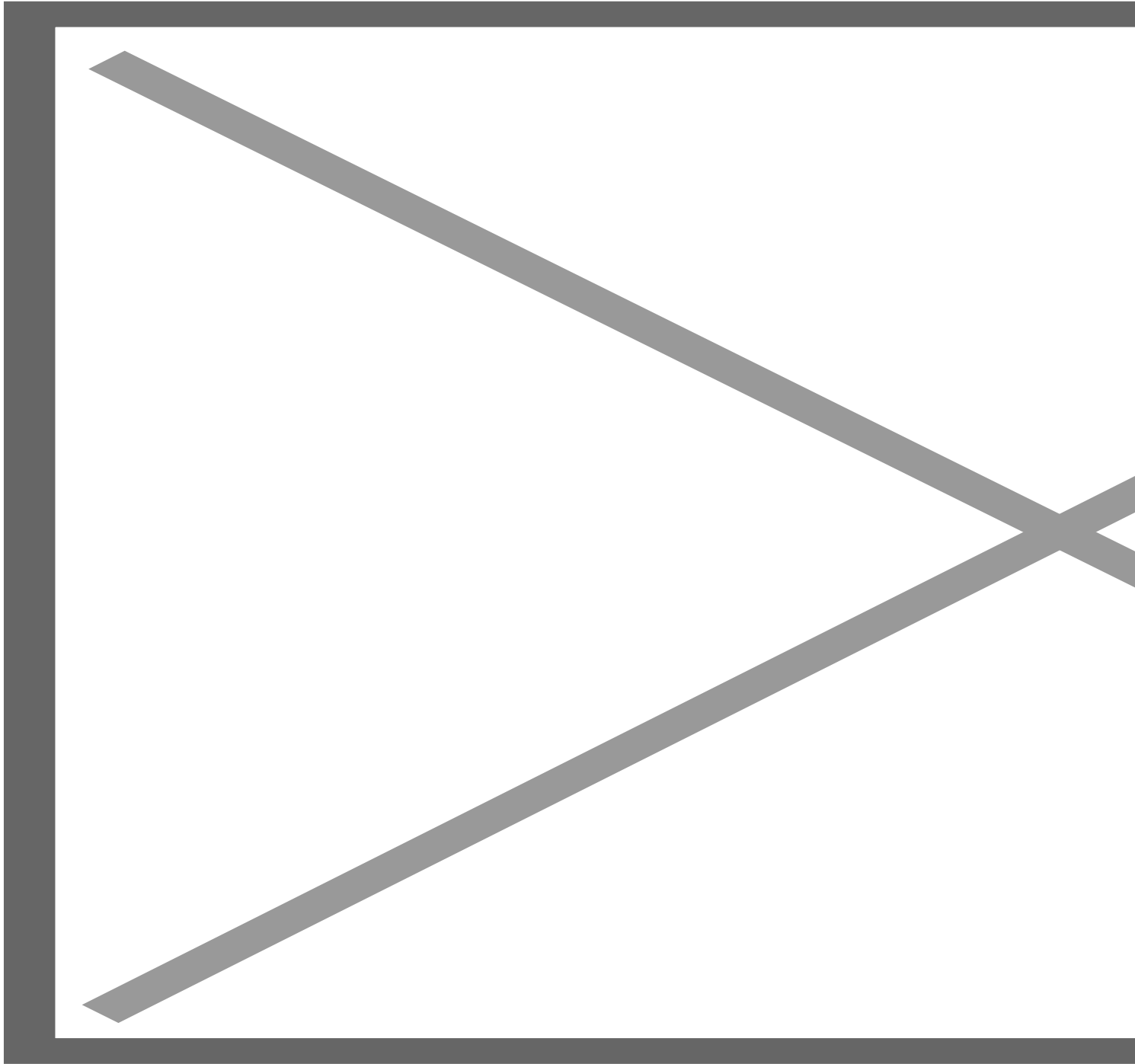


Gifts you can read

What can we say? We love words.

Features in the [December 2025](#) issue

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Century illustration

For home chefs: Historian Toni Tipton-Martin's cookbook, *Jubilee: Recipes from Two Centuries of African American Cooking*, celebrates the diverse culinary heritage of US American cuisine. Inspired by the biblical Jubilee, Tipton-Martin's collected recipes simmer with liberatory joy. At my house, we keep the warming combo of West African groundnut stew and rich buttermilk cornbread on rotation during the cooler fall and winter months, and one of these days I'm going to give the curried pastry crust a whirl. I don't reach for this cookbook only as a tool for orchestrating holiday gatherings or weeknight dinners. I also read its mini essays for insights into the country's identity and the kind of ingenuity that crosses boundaries and melds cultures to create something new.

For those who need to be enchanted: Any Niall Williams novel is a pure delight, but this companion pair is my favorite. Set in 1960s rural Ireland, *This Is Happiness* and its sequel *Time of the Child* unfold with lyrical, intimate prose that feels akin to a prayer. Chronicling the arrival of electricity and an unexpected adoption at Christmastime, each story quietly reveals characters and a sense of home that feels deeply authentic and written from the soul of someone who knows how to pay exquisite attention. These books satisfied my craving to slow down and savor being enveloped in a different time and place, which, in an age of short-form media and doomscrolling, is a true gift.

For lovers of the natural world: I picked up *The Quickenings* because it was a staff pick at an indie bookstore I love, and the subtitle endlessly intrigued me—*Antarctica, Motherhood, and Cultivating Hope in a Warming World*. Environmental writer Elizabeth Rush shares her story of sailing alongside scientists to study a place on earth rarely marked by the presence of humans: Antarctica's Thwaites Glacier, otherwise known as the Doomsday Glacier because of its capacity to significantly contribute to rising sea levels. Rush attends to the histories, concerns, and unseen labor of people historically on the margins of exploratory voyages (namely, women and people of color), all the while giving a distinct voice to the icy waters that have defied our attempts to know them.

—[Jasmin Pittman](#), assistant editor

Everyone seems to have their favorite among *The New York Times*' steadily growing slate of games. My wife and I are **Spelling Bee** people. The goal of the game is to create as many words as possible using just the seven letters—six outer letters and one central letter arranged in a hexagonal honeycomb—that are revealed each morning. Any of the outer letters can be used more than once and in any order, while the central letter *must* be included at least once in each word. Longer words score more points, and as your word lists and point totals grow, you can climb the ranks from "Beginner" all the way to "Genius"—with a special designation of "Queen Bee" saved for folks who can list every possible word on the editors' list. On our shared *NYT* family account, my wife and I (both prone to a bit of competitiveness) often need to collaborate in order to reach these highest levels, thereby strengthening cognitive function and marital bond at once.

Exhibitionist is a new art book from Peter Mendelsund, creative director at *The Atlantic*, who is also a revered book jacket designer, a classical pianist, and recently a novelist. As he posted up with his family outside New York City at the beginning of the COVID pandemic, he was already partway into an increasingly debilitating period of anhedonia—a depressive state characterized by the inability to take pleasure in any activity. Very gradually, and in fits and starts, he found himself making abstract paintings in a barn adjacent to his house when he could do little else. Documenting his daily thoughts and feelings during the same period, this book presents his journal entries alongside images of the completed paintings, which often recall the work of Frankenthaler, Krasner, Matisse, Miró, Tàpies, Twombly, and others. Taken all together, these documents of Mendelsund's very personal struggle—which he eventually overcame—are transformed into an inchoate argument for the potential role of intimate creative expression in mental and emotional wellness.

Watching various AI art generators pop up over the past few years, graphic designer and illustrator Pablo Delcan wondered, “If these [AI] tools can generate what I make—faster, cheaper, maybe even better—where does that leave me?” So on a whim he decided to turn himself into a non-AI generative artist in his free time. In a project that is now ongoing, he has asked his followers on social media to deliver text prompts (any prompt, such as “Love” or “Sisyphus taking a break,” for example) to which he responds by creating first-thought drawings with no quality control or self-editing, using white paper and black ink. He then takes photos of these drawings and posts them to an Instagram account along with the corresponding prompt. Delcan’s new book, **Prompt Brush 1.0**, collects a curated selection of drawings from the first year, a period in which he generated more than 1,500 drawings. The result is a wonderfully analog—and beautifully designed—volume of sly creative resistance.

—[Daniel Richardson](#), art director

My list this year does not include any books per se (I promise I love to read!), but the closest thing is the audiobook narration of Craig Wasson. I was only vaguely aware of Wasson as an actor, but I rediscovered him this year when I listened to his reading of Stephen King’s **11/22/63**. I’ve struggled in the past with audiobooks when the readers’ style or pace fails to draw me into the content. But Wasson’s variance, accents, and emotions kept me hooked—which was perfect for a book as sweeping as King’s time-traveling adventure. If you’re not a King fan, Wasson also narrates some John Grisham novels and many crime thrillers by James Ellroy.

Many video games are perfect for booklovers because they incorporate so much textual storytelling. My favorite that I played this year was **Citizen Sleeper**, a gem released by Jump Over the Age studio in 2022. The game enjoyed a bit of a resurgence this year with the release of its sequel (*Citizen Sleeper 2: Starward Vector*). In *Citizen Sleeper*, you wake up not knowing who you are—except that you are a cyborg of sorts, living on a factious spaceship from which you must escape. Woven through the game’s strategic decisions are big questions about identity, personhood, and connection. I haven’t yet played the sequel, but either installment could make a great gift for the gamer in your life.

I’m also always on the lookout for board games that tell, and draw me into, a story. One genre I find myself returning to is whodunit mystery games. These are lovely because they’re nearly all cooperative, so they often appeal to people who don’t love the competition (and/or inscrutable instruction tomes) of many other games. I’m currently working through **Detective: A Modern Crime Board Game** with my sister and her wife. While this one does have a somewhat steep learning curve, once you dive into the game it’s fairly easy to acclimate to the rules. When you do, you will find yourself tracing and tying together multiple story lines that connect World War II, 1960s America, and the present day.

—[Jon Mathieu](#), community engagement editor

Amy Frykholm’s first novel, **High Hawk**, is a lot of things: a story of the institutional church and its complicity in child abuse, a sensitive portrait of a Native community on a reservation, a gentle homage to people who make it their business to look out for others. What fascinates me most about my former century colleague’s book, however, is its membership in a highly specific literary guild: its protagonist is a troubled, morally ambivalent Catholic priest. Father Joe is a humble man who genuinely respects and cares for the people in the not-so-prominent place he’s been assigned to; he’s also a pastor whose limited vision, confidence, and ethical clarity make his already difficult job even harder. It’s a small-scale, deeply empathetic story of the vulnerable human beings on both sides of the altar rail.

The two protagonists in **Wellness**, Nathan Hill’s sophomore novel, are middle-aged White people who moved to Chicago’s near northwest side when they were younger and came to straddle two worlds there, one scruffy and arty and the other more buttoned-up and bourgeois. (Reading it made me nostalgic because that description

applies to me, too.) The book follows the two as they move from mutual admiration to a meet-cute at a rock club and on to marriage and parenthood. Together they find themselves inhabiting various identities: starving artist, bohemian intellectual, gentrifier, normie. The novel is at once a funny, closely observed piece of storytelling and an emotionally honest exploration of childhood trauma; an unexpected bonus is a narrative detour that offers the best dramatization I've seen of the pernicious, manipulative power of social media. There is one conspicuous absence for a book set in Chicago, as our reviewer noted in the October 2024 issue: the main characters don't seem to interact with any people of color.

Comedian Maria Bamford has long mined her own mental illness for material, so it's no surprise that her first book, ***Sure, I'll Join Your Cult***, is on the subject. The surprise is that Bamford, whose distinctive speaking voice and cadence have made her an in-demand voice actor, is also the rare comedian who is as funny in writing as she is on stage or screen. The book's loose organizing principle is an annotated list of groups, 12-step and otherwise, that she has joined over the years. Along with providing Bamford ample opportunity for hilarious commentary on herself and others, this structure underlines the book's secondary theme: It's a chronicle of American joining, of the deep need for belonging that persists in our atomized culture. Bamford has joined a whole lot of groups, and her reflections are filled with wise insight along with the laughs.

—[Steve Thorngate](#), managing editor

Brontë fans are anticipating the February release of Emerald Fennell's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* with fear and trembling. Margot Robbie as Catherine Earnshaw?! Given the depraved but I-can't-look-away nature of Fennell's last movie, *Saltburn*, which could have been a twisted update of *Brideshead Revisited*, I can't wait to see what the source material has inspired, though I'll probably watch it through my fingers. I love to see classics taking on new life, and I hope the movie sends a new generation to the library to discover the gothic romance novel par excellence, which was also received as coarse, shocking, and depraved when it was published in 1847. For my daughter's library, I'm eying an ornate clothbound box set of the best of the Brontë sisters' novels from Penguin Classics, which includes Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, and Anne's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. For those who want to know the real story of the doomed family, Juliet Barker's magisterial biography ***The Brontës: Wild Genius on the Moors*** clocks in at over 1,000 engrossing pages that complicate (and at times confirm) the lurid myths that survived the sisters.

Speaking of rediscovering classics, the NYRB Classics imprint is my favorite way to find new books and writers across eras and genres. They republish fiction and nonfiction, often in translation, with a new introduction that puts the work in context. Familiar titles like Dante's *Inferno* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* are on the list, but through the **NYRB Classics Book Club** I've discovered surprises like *The Unforgivable and Other Writings*, a collection of all the essays published by Italian writer Cristina Campo in the 1960s and '70s. "I have written little," Campo once said, "and would like to have written less," but what she did write includes these deeply spiritual meditations on fairy tales, Shakespeare, and theophagy, translated into English for the first time by Alex Andriessse. Each month, club members receive a new book selected by the editors. I've just been following along on the website, but I'd love to find a new title every month in my mailbox. Christmas all year!

I've also got my eye on the **subscription service available through A24**, the film production company responsible for some of my favorite high-brow horror, including *The Witch* and *Midsommar*. (Every time we start a movie and the A24 logo appears on our screen, my teenage son says, "I'm out.") Their online gift shop has screenplays, art books with production stills, and subscriptions to thematic zines produced by filmmakers, actors, and artists. If I'd been a subscriber in 2025, I might have gotten my hands on the zine commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Talking Heads documentary *Stop Making Sense*, which includes step-by-step breakdowns of David Byrne's now iconic dances. Unfortunately, that one is sold out. But I can still get my hands on *Not Today Satan!*, horror director Ti West's primer on surviving the 1980s satanic panic.

—[Jessica Mesman](#), senior editor

Most of my friends are nerds, and I'm okay with that. The word nerds will delight in ***Cryptic: From Voynich to the Angel Diaries, the Story of the World's Mysterious Manuscripts***. Journalist Garry Shaw takes readers on a winding journey through the lives and backstories of medieval and early modern European manuscripts that rely on codes, ciphers, symbols, illustrations, and secret languages to hide the ideas they contain. Some are hoaxes, others are translatable, and the jury is still out on others—including the early 15th-century Italian text at the center of Shaw's exploration, the Voynich manuscript. Behind all of the fun facts about alchemy and secret societies and angelic visitations linger serious questions about the transmission of knowledge that have the potential to animate our own era.

Number nerds will value ***Unequal: The Math of When Things Do and Don't Add Up***, by mathematician Eugenia Cheng (whose previous books include the gems *How to Bake Pi* and *x + y: A Mathematician's Manifesto for Rethinking Gender*). With the help of her academic specialty, category theory (the study of sameness), in *Unequal* Cheng explores what we mean when we say that two quantities or entities or ideas are equal. She combines examples from real life (from exam grades to party politics to affirmative action) with mathematical theory to demonstrate just how large and robust the space can be between "the same" and "not the same." In winsome and accessible prose, Cheng makes the case for dwelling in that space, letting it shape our ways of thinking, and finding in it more beautiful ways to live together.

Nerds with babies in their life will love ***War and Peace: A BabyLit Opposites Primer***. Written by Jennifer Adams (and Leo Tolstoy) and illustrated by Alison Oliver, this extra-thick board book—the newest volume in Gibbs Smith's BabyLit Classic Lit series—introduces babies and their literary lecturers to ten pairs of opposites, each framed by a quotation from *War and Peace* and illuminated with drawings that reflect the colors, styles, moods, and patterns of the Russian aristocracy during the Napoleonic era. From hot and cold to day and night, babies will build a sense of the full scope of human experience while their reading companions revel in "the fine dry snow on the faces of those in the sleigh" and the "strange, beautiful, and majestic city . . . with her golden domes and crosses scintillating and twinkling." Everything about this book is a marvel.

—[Elizabeth Palmer](#), senior editor

Michael Waters's ***The Other Olympians: Facism, Queerness, and Making of Modern Sports*** was one of the most powerful books I read this year. It's an account of the policing of trans, intersex, and gender-nonconforming athletes by sports organizations and the ways that fascism bolsters an obsession with controlling gender performance in sports. And no, this isn't a commentary on the state of the world in the 2020s; it's a historical research project into the 1936 Berlin Olympics, also known as the Nazi Olympics. Waters tells the stories of Czech sprinter Zdeněk Koubek, British track-and-field athlete Mark Weston, and other gender-nonconforming athletes in support of his argument that our current panic around trans people in sports is both scientifically unmerited and deeply rooted in Nazi ideology.

Speaking of current sports controversies, this summer, Olympic champion Jordan Chiles released her memoir, ***I'm That Girl***. Although she's only 24 years old, the gymnast has more than her fair share of stories to tell. Chiles walks us through the process of having her individual bronze medal retroactively taken away in the 2024 Paris Olympics, elaborating how it actually happened through a frustrating, semantic technicality and, perhaps more importantly, revealing the profound grief and trauma it caused her. She also situates this scandal within a pattern of difficulties faced by Black gymnasts, including mental and emotional abuse. But her memoir is filled with joy, too, as she describes her supportive family and coaches, her close relationships with Simone Biles and her other teammates, and her inner strength, resilience, and passion that refuse to let her be anything less than

That Girl.

I didn't just read nonfiction about the Olympics this year; I also devoured Monica Wood's novel ***How to Read a Book*** in approximately three days. The story follows Violet, a young woman returning to the outside world after being in prison for two years following a drunk driving accident; Harriet, a retired teacher who leads a book club in prison that Violet participated in; and Frank, whose wife was killed in Violet's car crash. When the three figures converge at a bookstore one morning, they begin a journey of healing, grief, forgiveness, redemption, new love, and family—with the power of books (and a charming African gray parrot) seeing them through the challenges.

—[Annelisa Burns](#), editorial assistant

Historically (well, since the 1980s), most people who've worn nameplate jewelry have sported either their own moniker or that of someone close to them. But I am not most people; I am a devotee of the legendary K-pop group SHINee. So when I learned this fall that Kinn Studio makes custom nameplates in a small selection of Asian languages, I knew immediately that a ??? (SHINee in Hankul) **Dear Kaia nameplate** would make the perfect gift for my SHINee-loving friends. Not only are these pieces very cool and ethically made, but purchasing from Kinn Studio also supports a woman- and immigrant-owned brand.

Now, I will proclaim SHINee supremacy until the day that I die, but I admit to being charmed by XLOV, a genderless K-pop group that debuted in January. Led by Wumuti, an ethnic Uyghur, and largely self-produced, XLOV's backstory is compelling—and their songs are catchy. I have already been gifting XLOV albums to my sister (who does not like K-pop but who does appreciate queer artists), and I wish I could pass out their latest LP, ***UXLXVE***, like candy. As one TikToker put it, XLOV's grassroots success is proof that, despite an enduring conservatism in the industry, queer concepts not only work in K-pop, they work well.

I spent the better part of this year reading John Anthony McGuckin's massive textbook on the first millennium of the church. And while this book failed to endear me to the Nicene Creed (which was my intended purpose), it did introduce me to the theology of Gregory of Nazianzus, and now I want to both read and share McGuckin's 2001 tome, ***St. Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography***. Gregory's fourth-century sermon "On the Love of the Poor" is thought to be the first time in Greek thought that anyone argued that people had intrinsic God-given value, not just value relative to their socioeconomic status. He also had intriguing ideas about gender equality. Given the state of the world right now, I don't think it's a bad idea to have reminders that respecting the dignity of others is Christian orthodoxy.

—[Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#), news editor

The iconic Patagonia clothing label is attached to some of the most beloved outdoor equipment and attire in the world. The story behind the socially and environmentally responsible company, however, hasn't been thoroughly told before now. *New York Times* correspondent David Gelles spent two years tracking its founder, Yvon Chouinard, across two continents to figure out what made this 87-year-old visionary so committed to protecting the planet. ***Dirtbag Billionaire: How Yvon Chouinard Built Patagonia, Made a Fortune, and Gave It All Away*** is the remarkable story of Chouinard renouncing his claim to a multibillion-dollar fortune—and relinquishing ownership of the company to a trust and nonprofit organization that is dedicating all of the company's present and future profits to combating climate change.

I've never fully understood why there is such disparity in funding for our school districts, given that we pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States and not to our local zip code. If education is a fundamental right, and one that ought to be available to all children on equal terms, why is it societally acceptable that poor school districts receive so much less educational funding than affluent districts? In ***The Containment: Detroit, the***

Supreme Court, and the Battle for Racial Justice in the North, Michelle Adams explores both race and class issues in Detroit in the early 1970s. She outlines the racially restrictive housing covenants and many of the governmental and private sector actions that kept Detroit's Black population confined to specific neighborhoods and out of the suburbs. You won't be able to set this 500-page volume down without lamenting that a fully functioning multiracial democracy is still unrealized in our day.

If you enjoy early American history as much as I do and want access to some unknown facets of the life and mind of Benjamin Franklin, curl up beside a warm fire this winter with Joyce Chaplin's ***The Franklin Stove: An Unintended American Revolution***. Franklin invented one of the most iconic consumer products of all times—the Franklin stove—during a period of global cooling in the mid-18th century known as the Little Ice Age. Determined to invent his way out of that climate crisis, where bitter winters and a shortage of wood (due to rapid deforestation) were threatening a way of life, Franklin may have been one of the first climate scientists in the country. Appropriately, his flaws are not ignored in this account. From harboring profound racial prejudice to relying on enslaved people to work Pennsylvania's iron industry, we learn that Franklin lived with deep complexity beneath his genius.

—[Peter W. Marty](#), editor/publisher

In Riley Sager's thriller ***With a Vengeance***, protagonist Anna Matheson has a painful backstory. Her father was framed for mass murder and then murdered in prison while awaiting trial. Her beloved brother was among the murder victims. Her mother died by suicide after these events, leaving Anna without any immediate family. When evidence proving Anna's father's innocence mysteriously appears, it also reveals who was involved in framing him. So Anna anonymously invites the responsible parties for a nonstop ride from Philadelphia to Chicago on the train her father once owned. Her plan is to deliver them to the FBI in Chicago—and to watch them suffer along the way as she reveals the evidence. Her plan begins to fall apart when her guests begin dying. Who is killing them? And will anyone be alive when the train reaches Chicago?

Fredrik Backman, author of *A Man Called Ove* and *Anxious People*, is one of my favorite novelists. In his latest novel, ***My Friends***, we meet Louisa, who, on the eve of her 18th birthday, leaves her foster home and sneaks into a snooty art auction to see her favorite painting, *The One of the Sea*. While being chased by the gallery's security guards, she literally runs into the painting's artist in the alley behind the gallery and mistakes him for an unhoused person. Only when they begin to paint together does Louisa realize who she's painting with. Within the next 24 hours, Louisa inherits the painting (which is worth millions of dollars) and finds herself with Ted, the artist's best friend since adolescence, on her first train ride. On the journey, Ted relates the story of the artist and his group of friends, thereby revealing the meaning behind the painting. The story is narrated with Backman's signature wit that makes me laugh out loud and his insight into human nature that often provokes a tear.

Through colorful and clever illustrations by Levi Hastings and a simple yet informative narrative by Kyle Lukoff, ***Are You a Friend of Dorothy? The True Story of an Imaginary Woman and the Real People She Helped*** tells the story of a time when LGBTQ people in the United States used the code phrase "Are you a friend of Dorothy?" to identify each other and build community because it was not safe to be openly LGBTQ. This picture book, intended for ages four through eight, tells of the difficulties LGBTQ people faced and still face, using simple and nonthreatening language. It tells of military and government spies trying desperately to find the mysterious Dorothy—a woman who never existed. Are you a friend of Dorothy? I am.

—[Trice Gibbons](#), audience development editor