



# The perfect gift

19 authors write about the books they've  
loved to give and receive

**W**rapping paper is superfluous when it comes to books. Traditional books — physical books you can hold in your hands — are ideal packages already. The gift lies between covers: the meaning and feeling conveyed both by the book itself and by the act of giving — an act commemorated, perhaps, by a thoughtful inscription. We asked a number of authors to tell us about a memorable book they gave or received. Here's what they told us.

— Jennifer Day, editor of *Printers Row Journal*



Alex Garcia/Tribune photo

## George Saunders

Author of "Tenth of December"

One Christmas when I was in engineering school and just starting to talk about being a writer someday (not writing, just talking about it), my mother gave me one of those big ornate collected works volumes you could get at B. Dalton — the Collected Works of Mark Twain, I think it was — and inscribed it very sweetly to me, and dated it. This book was followed, in the years to come, by a steady stream of other such volumes — Dickens, Jack London — which I read and kept with me all through the long apprentice years, and still have — her neat, loving handwriting and those long-ago dates fading a bit now. I took these as her way of saying that she had faith in me — that even though I was mired in engineering school (for which she and my dad were paying, at great personal sacrifice), and was getting a steady string of C-pluses, and was not writing a word (I had no idea how to start, had never met a writer) she heard me when I'd haltingly declared my dream, and was rooting for me. What loving and memorable gifts those were — perfect mother-to-son gifts — because they said (or so it seemed to me): I see you, kid, I hear you, and will be on your side forever.

## Eric Schlosser

Author of "Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident and the Illusion of Safety" and "Fast Food Nation"

My grandfather was a muralist, a renaissance scholar — and a proud union man who belonged to the United Scenic Artists of America. When I was a boy, he gave me a copy of "The Robber Barons," by Matthew Josephson, one of the classic muckraking texts. It offered a view of American history that wasn't being taught at my school. Later he shared other classics of the genre: "The Treason of the Senate" by David Graham Phillips; "The History of the Standard Oil Company" by Ida Tarbell; and Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle." At the time, those books seemed fascinating but largely of historic interest. Over the past few decades, their central themes — the dangers of unchecked greed, the corruption of government by private interests — became unfortunately relevant. And as the muck got deeper and danker in this country, so did the need for writers willing to expose it.



Sharon Milne illustration



Sharon Milne illustration

## Debora L. Spar

Author of "Wonder Women: Sex, Power, and the Quest for Perfection"

This year, for his 21st birthday, my husband and I gave our son a first edition of "The Twenty One Balloons," the brilliant 1947 novel by William Pène du Bois. It had been my favorite book as a child, and one of my children's favorites as they grew older. It is the story of a Victorian explorer, an exploding island, a staggering trove of diamonds and a series of jerry-rigged industrial designs. In other words: a smart book, with wide and whimsical appeal. Thanks to the 21st century ingenuity of Amazon, I managed to track down a very gently used copy, graced with classic mid-century graphics and a carefully scripted name on the book's front cover: Mary Simpson. Including shipping, the 21st birthday cost of "The Twenty One Balloons" was \$9.98. My son was touched and delighted. His older brother was touched. And jealous.



Ben Kirchner illustration

## Curtis Sittenfeld

Author of "Sisterland" and "American Wife"

In 2004, the first year my then-boyfriend and now-husband and I were together, I gave him three of my all-time favorite books for his birthday, all of which happened to be story collections: "Emperor of the Air" by Ethan Canin, "Sam the Cat" by Matthew Klam, and "Open Secrets" by Alice Munro. As cheesily pretentious as this sounds, I think I was trying to give my husband a kind of atlas to myself — to show him how important the intelligence and poignance of Canin's work, the raunchy hilarity of Klam's, and the emotional intensity of Munro's were to me. My husband enjoyed them all, which I like to believe means that if I had set up some sort of mutual test, we both passed it.



Ben Kirchner illustration

## Peter Orner

Author of "Last Car Over the Sagamore Bridge" and "Love and Shame and Love"

Last year for Chanukah/Christmas (we do it up in my family — why limit yourself to one mostly commercial holiday when you can have two?), my brother gave me a signed copy of "The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther" by attorney Jeffrey Haas. OK, not especially light holiday reading. But this is also how we roll in my family. The holidays aren't a time to retreat from the world; rather we try to look outward at all the things we've missed during the year. And this book rocked my world. It is the (mostly) untold and (mostly) forgotten story of the life and murder of a dynamic and young — very young — revolutionary. On Dec. 4, 1969, the 21-year-old Hampton was shot in the head by police while lying in his bed. You want to know how the law operates? Forget glossy, packaged, mass-marketed legal thrillers with clever endings. Pick up "The Assassination of Fred Hampton" and see how the police and the local and federal government conspired to cover up state-sponsored murder. Even more important, the book celebrates and illuminates the life and death of a brave young man who once said, "Why don't you live for the people? Why don't you struggle for the people? Why don't you die for the people?" As his mother Iberia Hampton says: "Who knows what he may have become."



Brett Hall Jones/ Putnam photo

## Christine Sneed

Author of "Little Known Facts"

When I was in college, my father gave me a copy of "One Hundred Poems From the Chinese," translated by Kenneth Rexroth. In it, he inscribed, "You might need these one day." He was right — I did, and still do. Poetry is like the quiet friend who, when she speaks, always has the smartest things to say.

## Karen Joy Fowler

Author of *"We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves"*

In all modesty, I am a great rereader. Always have been. In 1959, the book of my heart was "The Green Poodles" by Charlotte Baker. This book had every-



Neilsen Barnard/Getty photo

thing — orphans, secrets, valuable paintings, bad guys and (your key to quality literature) dogs. I took it out from the library at every opportunity. On Christmas morning, I was overjoyed to find it wrapped beneath the tree.

A few months later, I brought it home from the library again. "Did you forget that you own this book?" my mother asked. I hadn't forgotten; I just felt the library copy was probably feeling

abandoned. This prompted an Aristotelian discussion as to whether each copy of each book was its own creature or merely an appendage of one large Book-Entity. What we lacked in valuable paintings, my family made up for in philosophical verve.

I still have and treasure the book though it has been quite some time since I reread it.



Ben Kirchner illustration

## Anne Lamott

Author of *"Stitches"* and *"Bird By Bird"*

My dad's oldest friend, Warren Wallace, was tall and bald, with a long beaky nose. My brothers and I worshipped the ground on which he walked, because he was so brilliant and silly: Heaven.

Over the years, he turned me on to

Jorge Amado, Manuel Puig, Dawn Powell.

But best of all, he gave me "C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems." A friend of his, Edmund Keeley, was one of its translators. Warren told me that this was by far the most superior translation.

We sat on a bench in Central Park while he read me a number of his favorites.

When we got to "Ithaka," my heart nearly stopped with magic of the words.

*May there be many a summer morning when,  
with what pleasure, what joy,  
you come into harbors seen for the first time;  
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations  
to buy fine things,  
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
sensual perfume of every kind —*

After that, I always gave this book to people I loved and respected, because I knew it would blow them away, and that they would love me more, and take me more seriously, than they already did. And I always assured them, knowingly, that this was by far the superior translation.



Ben Kirchner illustration

## Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Author of *"Americanah"* and *"Half of a Yellow Sun"*

When I fall in love with a book, I often want to get other people to fall in love with it, too. I discovered Derek Walcott's poetry a little late, only a few years ago. I admire poets and poetry, and often read poems while working on my fiction. Walcott is one of my favorites. His most recent, "White Egrets," has a beautiful, stark cover and is, in many ways, an elegy about memories and aging. Last year I gave it to a friend of mine, a fellow fiction writer who doesn't read poetry. I hoped it would change his mind about poetry. It did. He enjoyed the poems, perhaps because Walcott's work is magnificently dense, his language luxuriant, his imagery rounded, like prose distilled to its best essence.

## Thomas Dyja

Author of *"The Third Coast: When Chicago Built the American Dream"*

During my college years back in the early '80s, I worked at a tremendous bookstore in New York called the Madison Avenue Bookshop. One of my co-workers, Kurt, was part of the whole East Village graffiti art scene going on then; he was friends with people like Fab Five Freddie and Keith Haring, and occasionally he'd invite me to great parties downtown that forced me — thank God — to wear something other than my pre-hipster, fresh-out-of-the-Northwest Side flannel shirts and cords. At some point, he got involved in creating a book about Haring's subway drawings, called "Art in Transit," and



Abel Uribe/Tribune photo

when it came out he gave me a copy inscribed to me by Keith Haring. It is now, without question, the most expensive book I own, but it's more valuable to me for how it brings back all the scary excitement of being a young man stepping forward into life.

## Chuck Palahniuk

Author of *"Doomed"* and *"Fight Club"*

Among my most-prized books is a special autographed, numbered, hardcover edition of the novel "Clown Girl" by Monica Drake. It was originally published as a trade paperback by Hawthorne Press and became an instant classic for a generation of readers trapped between college and their dream careers in the real world.

The novel is funny without being snarky. And it's heartfelt without being mawkish. Powell's Bookstore published a limited number of the hardcover edition, and mine is always on my desk, where the sight of it fills friends and enemies with envy. The bad news is that my special edition sold out eons ago. The good news is that Drake's second novel, "The Stud Book," came out this year, and it multiplies all the qualities that her readers loved in her first book. Hardcover books are a cinch to wrap, and "The Stud Book" is the gift that will make all your jaded hipster friends smile, for real.



Jamie Schoenberger photo

## Alice McDermott

Author of *"Someone"* and *"Charming Billy"*

The best book gift I know involves a book I didn't give or receive.

With apologies for the vanity, I must admit it was my own novel, "Charming Billy." At the end of a long pre-Christmas bookstore signing, a young man approached the counter somewhat sheepishly and asked if I could write a special inscription for his girlfriend. I told him I could, and he opened the book to show me that he had circled a bit of dialogue that appears late in the novel: "If it comes to a choice between love and money ... take money." "Could you write," he said, "If it comes to a choice between love and money, take love?" I laughed and told him I would. "And then sign your name," he said. He leaned closer. "And then could you write," he whispered, "Will you marry him, please?"



Abel Uribe/Tribune photo

## Elizabeth Gilbert

Author of *"The Signature of All Things"* and *"Eat, Pray, Love"*

When I was 6 years old, my grandmother gave me and my sister one of the best Christmas presents imaginable — a tattered, hardcover, well-loved set of the complete



Ben Kirchner illustration

"Wizard of Oz" novels by L. Frank Baum. These particular editions had been published in the 1930s and had the most extraordinary art deco-looking color prints and line drawings of all the remarkable Oz characters (not just Dorothy and the Tin Man and such, with whom I was already familiar, from having seen the movie, but the new figures who showed up in later books — Ozma, Billina the chicken, the Hungry Tiger, etc.) These books

had been in the family for years (my father and my aunts and uncles had all read them), and now it was our turn. They became the turnkey which opened my imagination — and they also taught me that little farm girls could be heroic, too. I have said it for years but will say it again: Those books were the reason I became a writer.

## Scott Turow

Author of *"Identical"* and *"Presumed Innocent"*

When I Bar Mitzvahed, age 13, I received a red cloth-bound copy of the American Heritage Dictionary in a matching red slipcover that could serve as a stand. I



Nancy Stone/Tribune photo

don't recall the giver, but I know it was a favorite relative, perhaps my cousins Joy and Sy, because I remember my instant reaction that I'd expected better from them. What was I going to do with a book I couldn't even lift with one hand?

When I left for college four years later, determined to be a writer, the dictionary came with me. By the time I graduated it had become a tool as indispensable as my typewriter. The notes of the American Heritage

usage panel, in particular, saved me from many gaffes.

The dictionary went from the East Coast to the West Coast and then back east again, and always stood on my desk at home after I returned to Chicago in 1978, until the net, a few years ago, finally made it obsolete. But it remains near at hand, a valued relic of my education.

## Rich Cohen

Author of *"Monsters: The 1985 Chicago Bears and the Wild Heart of Football"* and *"Tough Jews"*

Stephen Shore's "Uncommon Places" is a photographic hymn to the lost, laid-back, sun-splashed America in the '70s. Shore, a kid at the time, took pictures in the course of a handful of Kerouac-like Western swings, a camera-wielding Walker Evans, looking for the castoff detritus of the machine. But instead of mill towns and shanties, it was out-of-the-way places along the highway that turned up in his net: Sambo's at Fifth and Broadway in Eureka, Calif., Sept. 2, 1974; the Lamplighter Motel, in Hobbs, N.M., Feb. 19, 1975; a



Jose M. Osorio/Tribune photo

stack of pancakes on a faux wood tabletop at Trail's End restaurant, Kanab, Utah, Aug. 10, 1973. In the way of great art, these pictures make you wonder about the artist: What did he see, what was he after? He might've been photographing minutiae, but he captured something bigger: the country as it was between Watergate and Reagan, slouching shoulders, member's-only jacket, pocket comb. My brother gave me this book years back, handed

it over as you might hand over a found diary. Here's the world as it was when you were small; here's what the adults were saying just beyond your hearing. It's never far from my desk. It reminds me of the big obstacle faced by every writer and journalist. You can't recognize the nature of the time you are living in. No matter how observant, you miss almost everything that matters.



Sharon Milne illustration

## Kathryn Davis

Author of *"Duplex"*

The book is "Jane Eyre"; it's harder to pin down the year I found it under the tree. It wasn't wrapped, placing it in that period of willful delusion when I'd stopped believing in Santa but didn't want to accept the fact, just as I wanted to read "long books," even if I couldn't understand them. "Jane Eyre" was perfect, a Rainbow Classic edition with deeply atmospheric pen-and-ink illustrations by Nell Booker that never disturbed my own vision of the characters. I started reading it right away and couldn't put it down. Better yet, I understood it — unlike "Anna Karenina," my understanding of which had been hampered by the fact that I didn't know what "adultery" was. I still reread "Jane Eyre" often, that very same book. The physical object has withstood the test of time, just as the story has — along with my obsession with tracking the shifting and complicated relationship in my own life between delusion and faith.



Ben Kirchner illustration

## Anthony Marra

Author of *"A Constellation of Vital Phenomena"*

The best gift books I've received have been those I'd never buy for myself. Usually because they cost \$120 and weigh as much as a normal book that has swallowed a cinder block. Such is the case with Gary Larson's magnificent "The Complete Far Side," which my mom twice gave me for Christmas. Sometimes one 1,272-page multivolume cartoon compendium just isn't enough.

The book is lavishly produced, raising the comic strip from newsprint to illuminated manuscript. For a one-paneled comic with no narrative continuity, its single servings of the absurd are incredibly addictive. Yellowed, curled panels clipped from the newspaper years ago still quilt the wall of my old bedroom, and when I come across them recolored in "The Complete Far Side," I'm transported back to the strange and irrational kingdom of childhood.

The only problem with such a grandly designed book is that it's too cumbersome to pack and too expensive to ship. Before you even realize, it's the centerpiece around which you have built your existence. You make major life decisions to avoid the hassle of moving the book. You become one of Gary Larson's characters. To my dismay, I've had to jettison both copies of "The Complete Far Side" when moving between cities. So Mom, if you're reading this, guess what I'd like for Christmas this year?



Smeeta Mahanti photo

## Colum McCann

Author of *"TransAtlantic"* and *"Let the Great World Spin"*

For years I have been giving out copies of a novel called "Stoner" by John Williams. I have possibly bought about 200 copies over the past decade. It's a forgotten American classic. First published in 1965, the book fell off the literary radar for quite a while, but now it is beloved among serious readers. It's a novel about a professor of the classics at the University of Missouri — which, I'm aware, at first doesn't seem very compelling. But in the best literature plot hardly matters — it is all about language and then the plot takes care of itself. "Stoner" is a book that gets right under the skin. It is beautifully cadenced and under-



Sharon Milne illustration

stated in the most profound way. I have heard it described as a "writer's book," though I don't quite know what that means. It's a book for everyone, democratic in how it breaks the heart.

## Marcus Sakey

Author of *"Brilliance"* and *"Good People"*

When my brother Matt and I were 9 and 10, we were kidnapped, stolen away to the land of Fantastica.

The culprit was a book called "The Neverending Story" by Michael Ende. Odds-on all you remember is the crappy movie, but the book is the stuff of which imaginations are built, an adventure story packed with both wonder and squirmy darkness.

Our copy was a tattered paperback, but the original hardcover was legendary, supposedly filled with moody illustrations and text printed in multiple colors. We looked everywhere but never found it.

Fast forward to 1996. Thanks to the Internet, I located a copy at a shop in Munich. It was a Christmas present for my brother, and I'm not sure I have ever been so pleased to give a gift.

But that's not the end of the story.

Last year, my mother threw my young daughter Jocelyn a party. We asked that the only gifts be books.

Among them was another original copy of "The Neverending Story," with a beautiful inscription from my brother to his niece, wishing her the same joy and wonder.

I read to my daughter every night, and every night I let her pick the book. We're working our way through Sandra Boynton and Dr. Seuss. But I see the way her eyes are drawn upward, toward that beautiful hardback. And I know that one evening, not too far down the line, we'll enter Fantastica together.