

# Christmas gifts 2011: which books will be under your tree?

Our critics choose the books they intend to give this Christmas, and the ones they hope to receive

What do you think are the best books of 2011? Take part in our open thread discussion here

The Observer, Saturday 26 November 2011

**A** [larger](#) | [smaller](#)



Dear Santa... (l-r): Caitlin Moran, Charles Dickens, Diana Athill, Michael Palin, Tina Fey, Kirsty Wark, Julian Barnes. Illustration: Jimmy Turrell for the Observer

## Diana Athill Editor and writer

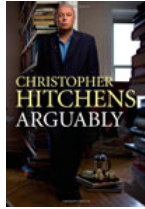


I am crazy about Craig Taylor's **Londoners** (Granta £25), a brilliant collection of "voices" in the manner of Studs Terkel. It's quite long, but I wanted it to go on and on, and I can't imagine any lucky recipient not enjoying it. One I'm sure I'll enjoy myself when I get my hands on it is Claire Tomalin's biography of the most glorious of all Londoners, **Charles Dickens: A Life** (Viking £30).

## Richard Eyre

## Theatre director

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I'd give Christopher Hitchens's collected essays, **Arguably** (Atlantic £30), in the hope that in return I'd be given John Updike's collected essays, **Higher Gossip** (Knopf £25). Hitchens is said to be the best British essayist since Orwell; anyone who doubts this, considering him a mere provocateur, will be convinced by this collection. Updike was the best novelist of his generation and also a prolific critic and essayist. His posthumous book is a distillation of his non-fiction writing over nearly six decades.

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## Russell T Davies

### TV dramatist

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magnus mills.tiff

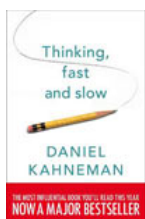
It's too late to make a Christmas present out of **How to Be a Woman** (Ebury Press £11.99) by Caitlin Moran, because as soon as I'd finished it, I bought five more copies. One each for my two sisters and three nieces. I think this is the most important book they might read in their lives. Underneath beautiful, aching and hilarious memories of family life, it's a true polemic, arguing that women still eat, shave and dress entirely for the benefit of men. As for me, I'll have **A Cruel Bird Came to the Nest and Looked In** (Bloomsbury £12.99) by Magnus Mills. For the title alone!

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## Tim Adams

### Observer writer

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Daniel Kahneman's **Thinking, Fast and Slow** (Allen Lane £25) – a terrific unpicking of human rationality and irrationality – could hardly have been published at a better moment. Kahnemann is the godfather of behavioural economics, and this distillation of a lifetime's thinking about why we make bad decisions – about everything from money to love – is full of brilliant anecdote and wisdom. It is Kahnemann's belief that anyone who thinks they know exactly what is going on hasn't understood the question; as such it's the perfect gift for opinionated family members everywhere.

It would be interesting to know what Christopher Hitchens would make of Kahneman's

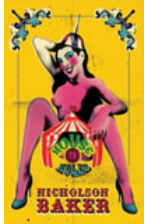
faith in doubt; one of the many pleasures of reading our greatest contrarian over the years has been his ability to give the impression that he knows exactly what he thinks about almost every subject under the sun. Hitchens's collected essays, **Arguably**, is the book I'd most like to receive, for its bravura certainties, in spite of everything.

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## Joe Dunthorne

### Novelist

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A recent issue of **McSweeney's** magazine included a severed head (opening that morning's post was like the final scene in the film *Seven*), but the current edition, the 38th, focuses on what the magazine does best: great stories, both fiction and non-fiction. I would give it to anyone with a short, persistent commute.

For myself, I'd like **House of Holes** (Simon & Schuster £14.99) by Nicholson Baker. Although reviewers have been bewildered, I'm intrigued by Baker's transition from writing a (brilliant) low-key novel about a struggling poet to this one, which is, by all accounts, a cheerful porno odyssey. Not the sort of book to be seen buying for oneself, mind you.

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## Rachel Johnson

### Editor and author

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Whoever says women aren't funny should be tied to chairs and force-read **Bossypants** (Little Brown £16.99) by **Tina Fey**, a darkly hysterical monologue-memoir by the writer/actor about growing up with dark skin in the land where yellow hair is king, writing skits for *Saturday Night Live*, her aborted honeymoon cruise (the ship caught fire) and Kotex panty-pads.

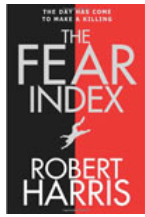
**Johnson's Life of London** (Harper Collins £20), by Boris Johnson, is not only the book I want to receive, it's the only book I can guarantee I *will* be given, as the author gives only two things to his family as presents: condiments he's made himself and books he's written. I am looking forward to both as I have been assured by my brother that his book on London is every bit as good as his apple chutney.

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## Philip Hensher

### Novelist

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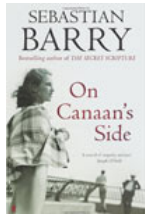
I'm giving everyone Robert Harris's **The Fear Index** (Hutchinson £18.99) for Christmas, because everyone's already read Alan Hollinghurst's superb *The Stranger's Child*, and *The Fear Index* is a total ripsnorting *Demon Seed*-type romp through the bowels of high finance and whirring computer-cogs. In the usual way of things, people kept sending me copies of things such as Samuel Beckett's wildly boring letters (Volume 2) when what I really wanted was Tessa Hadley's excellent **The London Train** (Jonathan Cape £12.99).

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## Joan Bakewell

### Journalist and broadcaster

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The past shapes our lives today, and both of my choices throw light on our own times. Sebastian Barry's **On Canaan's Side** (Faber £16.99) – the book I'll be giving – takes up the story of the Dunne family, which he has told in several previous novels. Together, these works cover the time of Ireland's troubles, from within the Unionist protestant community. The gorgeous prose adds to the pleasure.

I would like to receive Amanda Foreman's epic **A World on Fire** (Penguin £12.99), which deals with the British/American relationship throughout the American civil war. Growing up near Lancashire, I have always known that American exports of raw cotton fed the cotton mills of Britain. But I have never understood what happened when the civil war broke out. This lavishly praised book will explain this and many other things. And at 1,000 pages, it will last the year!

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## Michael Palin

### Actor and broadcaster

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Colin Thubron's **To a Mountain in Tibet** (Chatto & Windus £16.99) is an absolutely terrific book. Thubron has perfect pitch. He uses the minimum of words for the maximum effect. His descriptions are fresh and acute and he can convey atmosphere and emotion on the head of a pin. The journey to Mount Kailash is enthralling and he keeps the reader right beside him every inch of the way.

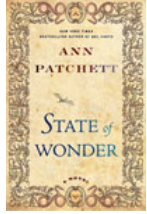
The book I'd like in my stocking is Adam Macqueen's **Private Eye: The First 50 Years** (Private Eye Productions £25). The *Eye* has given me more consistent pleasure, pain and provocation than any other publication in my lifetime.

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## Rachel Cooke

### Observer writer

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What you need at Christmas is a novel that thoroughly muffles the sound of tired and overemotional relatives. So, I will be giving all of my girlfriends **State of Wonder** (Bloomsbury £12.99) by Ann Patchett, a sort of feminist *Heart of Darkness*. It has the barmiest plot ever – plucky scientist enters Brazilian jungle in search of her lost colleague and the secret of everlasting female fertility – but, honestly, it grips like a vice.

The book I would most like to receive is **William Nicholson: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings** (Yale £95) by Patricia Reed, Wendy Baron and Merlin James. I can stare at a single Nicholson painting for long minutes at a time. He is just the best.

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## Fergus Henderson

### Chef

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Life is peculiar at the moment, but nothing could be as bad as Bernie Gunther's lot: prison camp to prison camp, interrogation after interrogation... Philip Kerr's battered hero in **Field Gray: A Bernie Gunther Mystery** (Quercus £17.99) is an ex-Berlin policeman who gets knocked around from Cuba to postwar Europe. When he finally gets his glass of German brandy I sighed a sigh of relief for the poor chap.

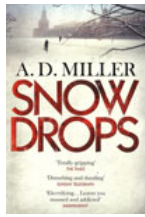
A very different kettle of fish – not much mention of the Gulag – is Sarah Winman's **When God Was a Rabbit** (Headline Review £12.99). I feel that at this point in life I'm ready to tackle a book about love, and Sarah Winman's charm will make her the perfect guide.

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## Chris Patten

### Chairman of the BBC Trust

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The most enjoyable new novel I have read this year is **Snowdrops** (Atlantic £7.99) by AD Miller. It's a very well written page-turner that confirmed all my prejudices about Putin's Russia. I came to it after reading Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, my number one discovery of the year, which to be fair to Mr Putin, does at least show how much worse things were under Stalin.

I have asked for David Gilmour's **The Pursuit of Italy** (Allen Lane £25) for Christmas. It may help me to understand rather better this heavenly country, which has given the world great buildings, cities, music and food, as well as Mr Berlusconi.

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## Mary Warnock

### Philosopher

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The book I'm going to give, specifically to people nostalgic for their childhood in the late 1960s and 70s (of whom I know many), is **Nelson** (Blank Slate £18.99), edited by Rob Davis and Woodrow Phoenix. I am fascinated by the comic strip format (like the excellent [comic book versions of Shakespeare](#)), by the different styles of each participating artist in this collaboration between 54 British comic artists, and by the way the central character develops under one's eyes as each year in her life unfolds. It is perfect for anyone without a great deal of reading time at Christmas.

The book I'd most like to get is one that I have already reluctantly given away, **Charles Dickens: A Life** by Claire Tomalin. I'm not a Dickens fan, but Tomalin is the best biographer there is.

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## Julie Myerson

### Novelist

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By far the most impressive novel I read this year was Jacqueline Yallop's **Obedience** (Atlantic £12.99). The prose is as intense, opaque yet elastic as its morally complex themes: guilt, sexuality and secrecy in a convent in wartime France. I'd give it to anyone who wants, as I do, to have their head and heart churned up by what they read.

The book I'd most like to be given is anything bought at one of the two independent

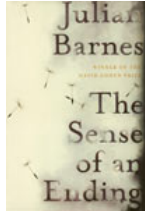
bookshops in Southwold, Suffolk. Except both have now closed down. Which makes membership of Southwold Library – now ludicrously also under threat – the best free gift you could give anyone there this Christmas.

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## Philip French

### Observer film critic

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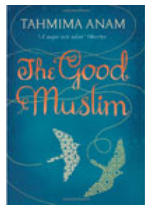
A worthy Booker laureate of this or any other year, our most versatile novelist Julian Barnes paid tribute in his acceptance speech to Suzanne Dean, cover designer of **The Sense of an Ending** (Jonathan Cape £12.99). This makes it a perfect present in these last days of the book as singular object. The one I hope someone will send me is Brian Kellow's **Pauline Kael: A Life in the Dark** (Viking \$27.95). I read her for more than 30 years and wrote an introduction to her final collection.

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## Daljit Nagra

### Poet

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Tahmima Anam's **The Good Muslim** (Canongate £16.99) is a perfect page-turner for the festive period. It is a powerfully gripping story about the birth of Bangladesh. Subtle plotting and vivid dramatisation of characters allow Anam to explore the formation of national identity. CB Editions is an exciting new poetry press which has published JO Morgan's second collection, **Long Cuts** (£7.99), this year. For me, this would be an ideal gift as I loved his first collection, Natural Mechanical, and reviews suggest this one is even better.

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## Tristram Hunt

### Historian and Labour MP

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Maya Jasanoff's **Liberty's Exiles** (HarperPress £30) is going to be in the Christmas stocking for a number of nearest and dearest. Jasanoff is an exceptional scholar of British history in all its global dimensions, and her evocative chronicle of the loyalist diaspora from the American war of independence allows us to rethink the cultural

legacy of the Thirteen Colonies' rebellion. And, in turn, I would like an equally big book on US history by another transatlantic female historian – Amanda Foreman's **A World on Fire**. British involvement in the American civil war is still under-appreciated, and Foreman's work, on the 150th anniversary, looks like a useful corrective.

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## Wendy Cope

### Poet

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I always enjoy Caitlin Moran's columns, so I read her **How to Be a Woman** as soon as it came out. Although I didn't agree with every word, it is spot on about most things, and very entertaining. If I hadn't already given my copy to my partner's daughter, I would buy it for her. Another 2011 favourite is **Edgeland** (Jonathan Cape £12.99) by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, which I will be giving as a Christmas present. My Christmas wish-list includes **Death Comes to Pemberley** (Faber £18.99) by PD James and **Blue Monday** (Michael Joseph £12.99) by Nicci French.

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## Curtis Sittenfeld

### Novelist

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I thoroughly enjoyed **The Oregon Experiment** (Knopf \$26.95) by Keith Scribner. Set in a college town in America's Pacific Northwest, it's a novel about – among other things – anarchists, adultery, new babies, hippies, and a woman with such a powerful sense of smell that it lets her discover secrets about other people. The book is just really smart and juicy. A novel I haven't yet read but have heard is wonderful is **Love and Shame and Love** (Little Brown \$24.99) by Peter Orner. It's about a Chicagoan named Alexander Popper and his messy family – and I do always like family messiness!

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## Geoff Dyer

### Novelist and essayist

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The book I'd most like to receive this Christmas is **Magnum Contact Sheets** (Thames and Hudson £95), edited by Kristen Lubben: a collection of the pictures that were made either side of some of the famous images from the photojournalists' archive. The book is



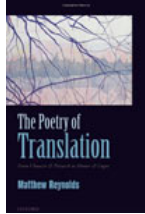
an exemplary bit of publishing in that it is stunningly beautiful – and huge, and expensive – but is full of the kind of material that might be considered the preserve of scholars or researchers. I'll be giving copies of Terry Castle's screamingly funny – and lethally sharp – collection of autobiographical essays, **The Professor** (Atlantic £20).

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## Marina Warner

### Writer and academic

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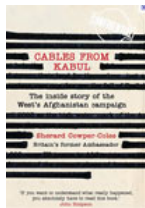
So much of what I read is in translation – from Alice Oswald's new reworking of the Iliad, *Memorial*, to Richard Hamilton's compendium of Marrakech stories, *The Last Storytellers*. Matthew Reynolds, in **The Poetry of Translation: From Chaucer & Petrarch to Homer & Logue** (Oxford £50), shows us what is at stake in these border crossings. Close looking is close reading's counterpart, and Deanna Petherbridge is one of its most impassioned advocates. If I don't find **The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice** (Yale £55) under the tree, I'll buy it, gladly.

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## William Dalrymple

### Historian and travel writer

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I greatly enjoyed Sherard Cowper-Coles's brilliant account of how and why we are losing Britain's fourth war in Afghanistan. **Cables from Kabul** (HarperPress £25) is the most insightful record yet published of the diplomatic wrangling that has accompanied the slow military encirclement of western forces in the country. It is also the best account I have read of how post-colonial colonialism actually works.

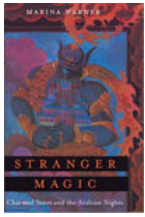
A book I would love to be given is the fabulously illustrated catalogue accompanying the Masters of Indian Painting show at the Rietberg in Zurich this summer – unquestionably the most remarkable and ambitious exhibition of the Indian miniature tradition ever mounted. **Masters of Indian Painting, 1100-1900** (Museum Rietberg £120) is a huge, two-volume affair, with essays by the three great historians of Indian art: BN Goswamy, Eberhard Fischer and Milo Cleveland Beach.

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## Mariella Frostrup

### Observer writer and TV presenter

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Robert Harris's fine new thriller, **The Fear Index**, is a must-have in every Christmas stocking. It's highly "readable" – the buzz word in literary circles this year – but more importantly, it manages to explain what a hedge fund actually is, using the example of lacy black lingerie. With our lives currently in turmoil thanks to the machinations of the financial markets, understanding how they work should be a priority, and Harris manages to combine such instruction with a fast-paced thriller.

I'd love to receive Marina Warner's epic study of the Arabian Nights, **Stranger Magic** (Chatto & Windus £28), a dissection of the myths in these enduring classics that promises to throw light on the countries from which the stories spring and the lives of women in them.

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## Hari Kunzru

### Novelist



To London friends I'll be giving festive copies of Laura Oldfield Ford's **Savage Messiah** (Verso £19.99), the seminal fanzine (now released in book form), which reveals, in photos, text and beautiful drawings, the abject underside of the regenerated city. The book I'm hoping to find under the tree is Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee's **Poor Economics** (Perseus £17.99), which apparently overturns many received ideas about what it's like to be very poor.

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## Shami Chakrabarti

### Director of Liberty



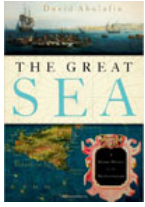
Sometimes the most serious messages are best expressed with humour, and this Christmas should be a time to try to smile. The book I'd love to receive is **Private Eye: The First 50 Years** by Adam Macqueen. But because I would love the next 50 years to be better for women, I would most like to give Caitlin Moran's **How to Be a Woman**. I've already bought a spare copy for a female friend. I will give it in celebration of Moran's wit and wisdom and in loving memory of my mother – an unsung feminist.

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## Geoffrey Wheatcroft

## Writer

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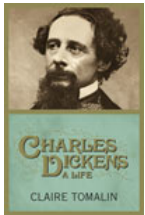
No better history books were published this year than David Gilmour's wonderful **The Pursuit of Italy** and **The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean** (Allen Lane £30) by David Abulafia. Both tell riveting but melancholy stories. Gilmour shows that the "unification" of Italy 150 years ago has been a profound failure, while in the course of Abulafia's account his great sea ceases to be the centre of civilisation.

**Bright Particular Stars** (Atlantic £25) is the latest of David McKie's sesquipedal peregrinations. This "Gallery of Glorious British Eccentrics", some of whom are a good deal more eccentric than glorious, is unfailingly droll and will make a perfect stocking-filler.

## Nicholas Hytner

### Artistic director of the National Theatre

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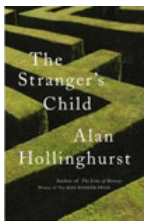
Anthea Bell's new translation of Stefan Zweig's **Beware of Pity**, published this year by Pushkin Press (£8.99), is the latest in a brilliant series of Zweig translations. A psychological thriller with an emotionally dense unreliable narrator, and a terrifyingly needy heroine, it is compulsively readable.

I hope I'm given Claire Tomalin's **Charles Dickens: A Life**. Her biography of Dickens's mistress, Nelly Ternan, is a phenomenal feat of literary reclamation, but I fear that her new book will do nothing to refute my long-held belief that the novels ascribed to Dickens could not possibly have been written by the son of a naval pay-office clerk who left school at the age of 12, and are plainly the work of the Duke of Wellington.

## Kirsty Wark

### Broadcaster

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If you want to make someone happy, lying on the sofa in front of the fire on Boxing Day, then you must give them Robert Harris's new thriller, **The Fear Index**. You might think you've had enough of the economic crisis – but this is the hugely entertaining

version. Thinking of that same sofa, I'd like to receive Alan Hollinghurst's **The Stranger's Child** (Picador £20), which somehow eluded me this year. As an added extra, please may I have Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's **Veg Everyday!** (Bloomsbury £25), which I know is a very good thing for us all. Go on Santa.

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## Andrew Rawnsley

### Observer political editor

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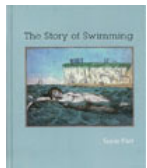
For anyone you know who likes to be provoked to both laughter and thought, I can't think of a better stocking filler than Craig Brown's **One On One** (Fourth Estate £16.99), 101 ingeniously linked encounters between the famous and the infamous. As a great admirer of Max Hastings's military histories, I would be pleased to unwrap **All Hell Let Loose** (HarperCollins £30), his latest, much-praised volume on the second world war, focusing on the experiences of those at the sharp end of the conflict.

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## Kate Kellaway

### Observer writer

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There is one book that has bowled me over – on a subject close to my heart. **The Story of Swimming** (Dewi Lewis £25), by Susie Parr, not only looks ravishing (filled with unusual mermaids, avid modern swimmers and stunning photographs by the author's husband, Martin Parr) but is also a fascinating, idiosyncratic, beautifully written history. Readers will want to do far more than dip in – I intend to give it to all my amphibious friends. Meanwhile, the book I can't wait to read is Matthew Hollis's said-to-be-outstanding **Now All Roads Lead to France** (Faber £20), about the last years of Edward Thomas.

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## Peter Carey

### Novelist

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I have twice given away David Graeber's **Debt: The First 5,000 Years** (Melville House £21.99), and Christmas will not change my habits. The book is more readable and entertaining than I can indicate in 100 words. It is a meditation on debt, tribute,

gifts, religion and the false history of money. Graeber is a scholarly researcher, an activist and a public intellectual. His field is the whole history of social and economic transactions. He has been an important figure at Zuccotti Park and Occupy Wall Street. Here, he uses his own klieg lights to illuminate the pea and thimble mechanisms that have delivered the current debt crisis. Would someone, please, give me a copy this Christmas. I promise to keep it for myself.

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## Elizabeth Day

### Observer writer

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One of the most thought-provoking novels I read this year was Amy Waldman's **The Submission** (William Heinemann £12.99), an elegantly plotted debut that charts the fallout after a New York jury chooses a Muslim architect to design a memorial to 9/11. Waldman uses this central focal point to unravel the tensions and contradictions at work in modern America.

The book I'd most like to unwrap underneath the Christmas tree (hint, hint) is Claire Tomalin's new biography, **Charles Dickens: A Life**. I've read every biography Tomalin has produced and am in awe not only of her impeccable research but also of her real feeling for her subjects and her exquisite writing.

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## AN Wilson

### Writer and columnist

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The book that I am hoping to find in my Christmas stocking is Fiona MacCarthy's **The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination** (Faber £25). I have enjoyed all Fiona MacCarthy's biographies (Eric Gill, William Morris, Byron...) and I cannot believe that this will disappoint.

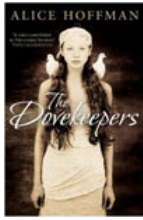
The book I shall be giving is Robert Douglas-Fairhurst's compelling critical biography, **Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist** (Harvard £20). If you only read one book on Dickens during the bicentenary year of 2012, it should be this. Every page illuminates the books and the genius who produced them.

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## Bidisha

### Writer and cultural commentator

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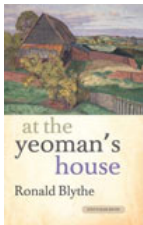


So many contenders, but I would share the incredible creative power and intense imagination of Alice Hoffman, whose novel **The Dovekeepers** (Simon & Schuster £16.99) shows just how far and deep historical fiction can go. I would love to receive Sarah Hall's short story collection, **The Beautiful Indifference** (Faber £12.99), which I expect to be as gripping and cerebral as a previous novel of hers – one of my favourites – **The Carhullan Army**.

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## Salley Vickers

### Novelist

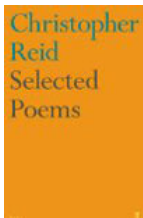


The book I shall be giving for Christmas is Ronald Blythe's **At the Yeoman's House** (Enitharmon Press £15). The "house" is the mysteriously named "Bottengoms", once home of farmers and shepherds and rescued and restored by John Nash, for whom the author worked as a young man. The book is a quiet meditation on the nourishment to be found in the past. The book I most want to be given is **Thinking, Fast and Slow** by Daniel Kahneman. I'm a speedy thinker myself, so am hoping to be endorsed in that practice.

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## Robert McCrum

### Associate editor of the Observer



Amanda Foreman's **A World on Fire**, an epic history of two nations divided by conflict, is an enthralling portrait of Britain and the US during the American civil war. It's a book that ought to be a natural Christmas present. Unfortunately, at 1,000 pages, the publishers have made it almost unreadable (ie impossible to hold in bed). This is a shame. To turn a brilliant narrative history into an infuriating doorstop is an insult to Foreman's work. Perhaps, for the gift market, Penguin should consider a two-volume paperback edition.

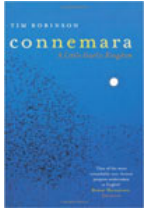
I've followed Christopher Reid's poetry for years, and was delighted when he won the Costa prize with *A Scattering*. Now Faber has issued his **Selected Poems** (£14.99). This is high on my list of books to read at Christmas.

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## Fintan O'Toole

### Journalist and author

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The book I'll be giving is Tim Robinson's **Connemara: A Little Gaelic Kingdom** (Penguin £20). In an age of sundered specialisms, Robinson – mathematician, map-maker, naturalist, folklorist – is a marvel. This last volume of his wonderful trilogy on Connemara ranges through political history, music and topography, marking him as the supreme practitioner of geo-graphy, the writing of places. I'd like to receive Derek Mahon's **New Collected Poems** (Gallery £17.95). Mahon's combinations of savage indignation and ludic delight, of high formality and apparent ease, repay endless revisiting.

*[What do you think are the best books of 2011? Take part in our open thread discussion here](#)*