

THE BLOG

BookFilter: Last Minute Gift Ideas/Best Books of 2015

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Freelance writer

Don't panic. Or should I say, DON'T PANIC! Books make a great last minute gift. Put a little effort into it and they're personal and thoughtful...and easily returnable for another book if they've already read it or you've gone wide of the mark. (What? Your friend's son has already read *The Hunger Games*? But didn't the movie just come out?)

You've got just enough time to order online or head to your favorite local independent store or chain and pick out a book, wrap it and place it under the tree. Here are some great gift ideas from BookFilter -- each one is among the best books of the year. The next time you want to know what to read next or what books just came out or are coming out soon or you want to browse for some book ideas before heading to your favorite indie/library/chain or website, head to BookFilter for more great ideas like these. With literally hundreds of thousands of books coming out each year in North America, these picks are literally the tip of the iceberg.

So take a deep breath, grab your list, check it twice and put some of these on it for whomever has been nice (or naughty -- everyone deserves a good book). First, my list of some great books from 2015, followed by [reviews pulled from BookFilter](#). Click on any title and you'll be taken to a page where you can quickly find links to buy the book from your favorite major retailer or indies like Powells. Happy shopping!

[THE GOLDEN AGE](#) By Jane Smiley

[A BRIEF HISTORY OF CREATION](#) By Bill Mesler and H. James Cleaves

[PRETTY GIRLS](#) By Karin Slaughter

[THE AGE OF ACQUIESCENCE](#) By Steven Fraser

[SAVING CAPITALISM](#) By Robert B. Reich

BRYANT & MAY AND THE BURNING MAN By Christopher Fowler
THE DAY THE CRAYONS CAME HOME By Drew Daywalt and Oliver

Jeffers

CARRYING ALBERT HOME By Homer Hickam

DEAR MR. YOU By Mary-Louise Parker

AURORA By Kim Stanley Robinson

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THIS DIVIDED ISLAND By Samantha Subramanian

KILLING AND DYING By Adrian Tomine

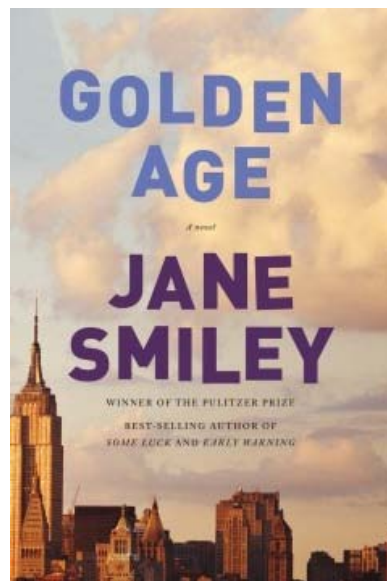
MISTER MAX: THE BOOK OF KINGS By Cynthia Voigt

1944 By Jay Winik

THE BOOK OF ARON By Jim Shepard

SYMPHONY FOR THE CITY OF THE DEAD By M.T. Anderson

ONE NATION, UNDER GODS By Peter Manseau

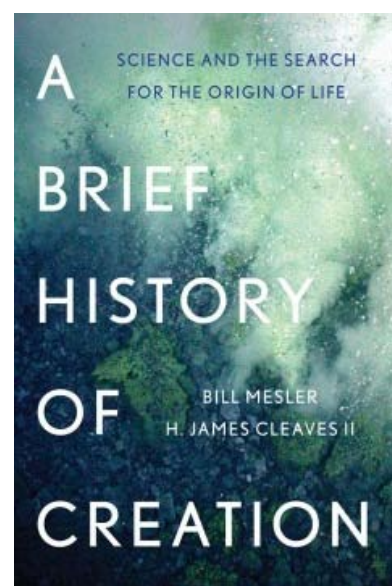


THE GOLDEN AGE By Jane Smiley

\$26.95; Knopf

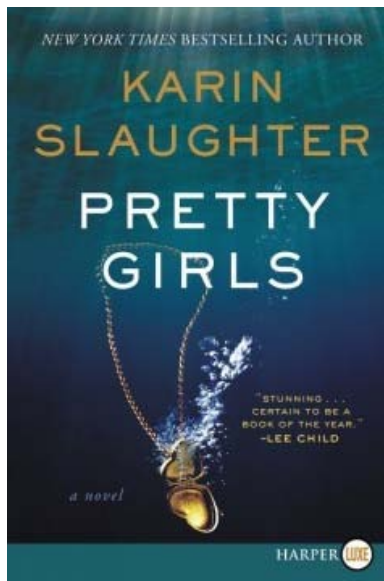
Elena Ferrante has been getting all the attention for her [acclaimed Neapolitan quartet](#), which just finished. If you've got a hip friend who has been raving about them, turn them onto Jane Smiley's brilliant American Century trilogy. The first two books are out in paperback and the finale [The Golden Age](#) just hit hardcover. It tracks one hundred years of US history, from the Great Depression to the near future. Each chapter jumps ahead a year so there are one hundred in all. Starting on a small family farm in the heartland, you watch a family spin off children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews and husbands and wives and lovers and on and on. It's pure narrative pleasure, along with Smiley's ambitious capturing of a turbulent century almost as an aside. She's especially remarkable at presenting the perspective of small children and even toddlers, not to mention the passage of time, current events

becoming family history and then legend, showing empathy for a wide range of characters from every walk of life and so much more. Smiley won the Pulitzer Prize for *A Thousand Acres*. This trilogy might be her masterpiece.



[A BRIEF HISTORY OF CREATION](#) By Bill Mesler and H. James Cleaves
\$27.95; W.W. Norton

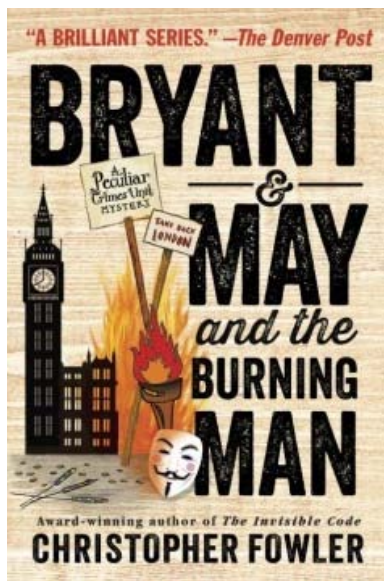
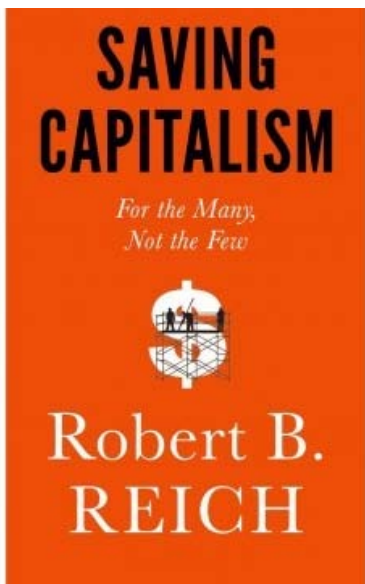
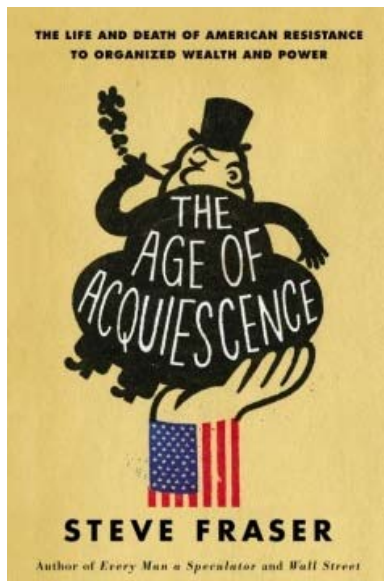
Got a science buff on your list? Or an agnostic or atheist or person of faith who is enlivened rather than threatened by knowledge? Then this is the book for them! How did life begin? It's arguably the greatest scientific question of all and certainly the one that goes to the heart of existence. This very readable and engaging history charts how that question has been tackled over the centuries, from inchoate early stabs in the dark to the latest experiments and theories drawing upon new technology and evidence collected in space. Mesler and Cleaves fill their story with petty rivalries, stubborn refusal to acknowledge facts, u-turns in theory, dead ends, eureka moments and more. Indeed, from microscopes to Hadron colliders, our understanding of the origins of life have gone hand in hand with technological breakthroughs. But some things remain: again and again, pioneers who watch their ideas become superseded can't bear to admit they've been lapped and cling to tired ideas. Others of course remain stubborn despite being laughed at but are redeemed when their theories gain primacy...only to see those built upon or passed by as well. From DNA to spontaneous generation (an idea we were taught to deride as schoolchildren but which has returned in more sophisticated form) this is popular history of the first order.



PRETTY GIRLS By Karin Slaughter

\$27.99; William Morrow

Mystery buff? Someone who told you they loved *Girl On A Train*? Give them this and they'll have something new to rave over. Karin Slaughter is a big name in mystery, a "brand name" author whose fans have bought her novels in the tens of millions around the world. Well, she's about to get bigger. Her new stand-alone thriller *Pretty Girls* is a roller coaster of a tale, filled with twists and turns, each one more jaw-dropping, unnerving and just plain fun than the one before. But it also retains Slaughter's gift for genuine, complex characters and that makes the danger palpable, the stakes real, the emotions raw. The story begins long after a tragedy. Claire and Lydia are the sisters who "survived" when their sibling Julia was abducted off a college campus two decades earlier. Of course their family was never the same. Their father became obsessed with the case and died alone; their mother won't discuss it; and the two sisters are estranged. Claire has the successful marriage, the country club membership and the showcase home. Lydia is a recovering addict (and sex worker) dating an ex-con. But nothing is as it seems: a violent murder upends Claire's world and pulls Lydia back into her orbit. Slowly we realize Lydia is on the road to recovery, Claire is on a slide into turmoil and they're both being haunted and hunted by a spectre from the past. Without ever shortchanging the adrenaline rush of a thriller, Slaughter has crafted characters far more compelling than the usual cardboard cut-outs which pass for people in most such genre fare. It's a triumph that will bring this author to a wider audience than ever. And that's saying something.



[THE AGE OF ACQUIESCENCE](#) By Steven Fraser
\$28; Little Brown & Co.

SAVING CAPITALISM By Robert B. Reich

\$26.95; Knopf

BRYANT & MAY AND THE BURNING MAN By Christopher Fowler

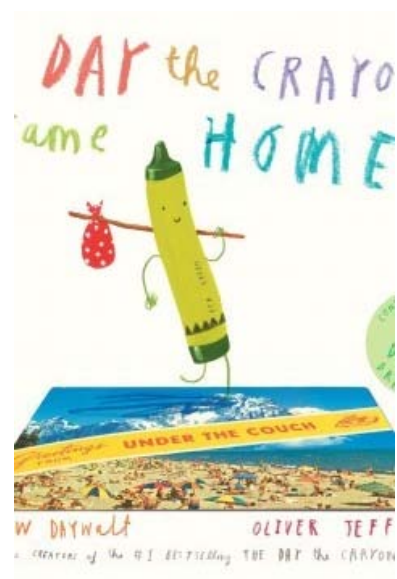
\$26; Bantam

A trio of books perfect for the anarchist, Bernie Sanders supporter, mystery buff (and British history buff), armchair economist, fan of the new movie *The Big Short* and more! Why didn't the populace rise up? That was one question after the Occupy movement dispersed and no financial figures of any note went to prison for well-documented crimes that have led to record fines (often softened by record government bailouts of Wall Street as well.) The fascinating history told again in *The Age Of Acquiescence* shows how in fact America has a long history of the people rising up and demanding change, of taking to the streets and paying for it in blood when their calls for a 60 hour (!) workweek and one day off on Sunday were decried as socialism or communism and worse. The last time inequality reached such levels, the nation was roiled by "riots" or protests, depending on your point of view. Those movements have been a regular occurrence throughout US history and are the norm, rather than the exception...until now. Fraser tells an informative, fascinating tale of protest and change that is compelling reading whatever one's politics.

Reich, on the other hand, will fall on deaf ears unless you're already won over to the idea that sometimes capitalism is its own worst enemy. He makes calm, clear-eyed mush of various paper tigers, like the idea that any new rules and regulations would interfere with unfettered capitalism (there's no such thing). He has a host of reasonable ideas and some doozies at the end that will take your breath away even if you do keep a Guy Fawkes mask at the ready. But it's capitalism explained for the general public and arms readers with intelligent take-downs of the Big Business argument that any rule is a bad rule.

Finally, Bryant & May are a pair of aging British detectives in the Peculiar Crimes Unit. *The Burning Man* is their 12th adventure and while the book proudly declares Bryant & May will be back, it certainly feels like a swan song. What's it doing with these other two books? Well, the duo most solve a string of bizarre murders taking place against a backdrop of riots that bring London to a standstill. Yet another financier has been found guilty of reckless crimes and seems to be getting off scot free. This revelation occurs during the week from Halloween (aka Mischief Night) and Guy Fawkes Day, when the quashing of an insurrection against the government is celebrated. However, Guy Fawkes has been turned from lead into gold: instead of celebrating the primacy of the government, it's become a celebration of defiance and free-thinkers. As the murders pile

up, ever-growing demonstrations spread from the financial district to the entire city of London and the tone becomes nigh on apocalyptic. (It helps that the voluble, ever erudite Bryant sympathizes with the hoi polloi and holds forth at length on inequality and the like.) Beyond the gripping backdrop, what makes this entry so special for fans of the series is the personal travails that bedevil our heroes, a very touching subplot surrounding the inevitable decline in mental faculties that will come to most everyone. It's been tried by authors portraying Sherlock Holmes in old age, but this one trumps them in poignancy. Buy a mystery buff the first book in the series or any lover of politics the latest and they'll soon start at the beginning and thank you for it.

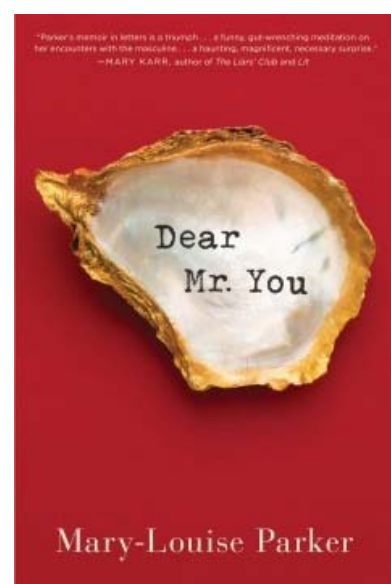
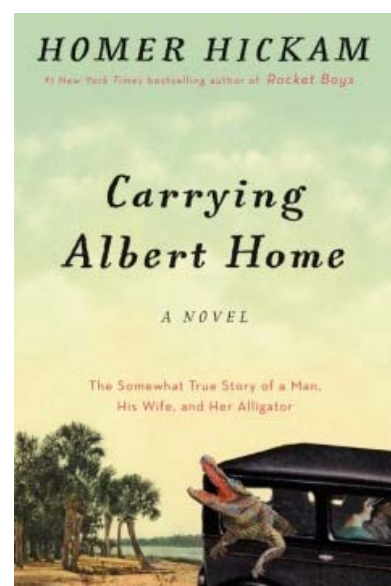


THE DAY THE CRAYONS CAME HOME By Drew Daywalt and Oliver Jeffers

\$18.99; Philomel

Picture books are filled with sequels and series. And just like most current Hollywood movies, they're rarely worth the bother. But here Daywalt and Jeffers follow their blockbuster hit *The Day The Crayons Quit!* with this perfectly adorable sequel. In the first book, the crayons in a crayon box went on strike, writing letters to the little boy who keeps them, explaining their varied reasons for needing a break. It was so witty, clever and just plain fun any adult who read it kicked themselves for not having thought of the idea on their own. But don't be fooled: a "great" idea for a picture book is actually pretty darn easy. Actually creating a picture book with the perfect text and the ideal illustrations to bring them to life is pretty darn hard. They did it once and now Daywalt and Jeffers have done it again: this time, the crayons have written letters from their "vacation," whether it's a vacation hidden in the cushions of the couch or a vacation left by the pool outside or a vacation in the clutches of the family baby that scrawls and bites a crayon that would really, really like to come home.

Each letter is amusing and they build on each other wonderfully. A delight.



CARRYING ALBERT HOME By Homer Hickam

\$25.99; William Morrow

DEAR MR. YOU By Mary-Louise Parker

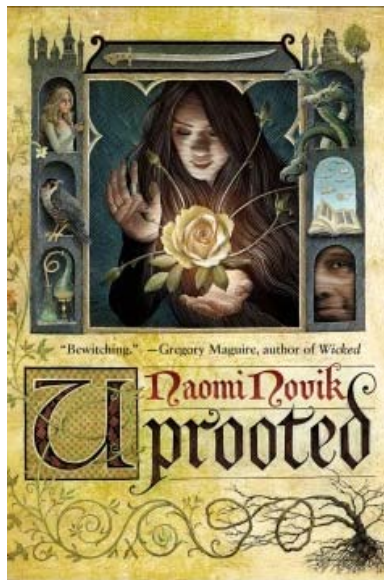
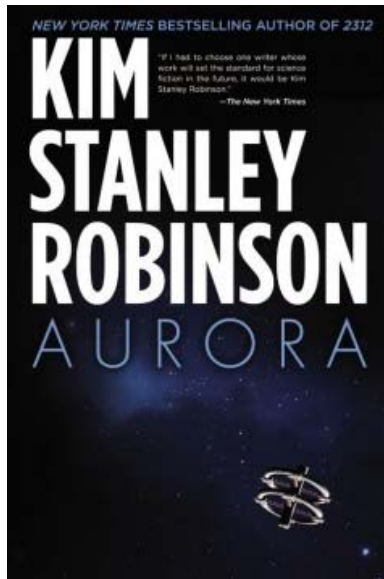
\$25; Scribner

Two very clever novels/memoirs that find just the right, unique way of telling their stories.

If I had a bookstore, I'm not sure where I'd stock this new book by Homer Hickam, the author of a string of memoirs and novels, namely "Rocket Boys" aka "October Sky" about his childhood in coal mining country. It's called "Carrying Albert Home" and since it's a sort-of true memoir about a road trip his parents took with their pet alligator down to Orlando,

Florida during the Great Depression, at first glance the Biography section makes sense. Then you keep reading and the stories get wilder and more improbable -- bootleggers, smugglers, bank robbers, union radicals, a Hollywood movie, a hurricane and both John Steinbeck AND Ernest Hemingway -- make appearances. Well, maybe fiction makes more sense. By the end, after the ghosts and the wild mountain man spouting poetry with his salacious Muslim wife and that dancing fool, actor Buddy Ebsen, I'd be looking for the Tall Tales section. In the end, I'll just stock it up front by the door, so everyone can see the great cover, recognize the name Hickam, glance at a summary, and maybe open a page or two and find themselves sucked in and bingo, you've got another sale. Sweet, funny, and somehow clear-eyed but romantic at the end. And sort-of true.

What a clever fox Mary-Louise Parker proves to be. She gets the best of both worlds by a single stroke of genius: this memoir-ish novel (or novelistic memoir) is structured as a series of letters from Parker to the men in her life. They range from a poetic salvo that opens the book addressing them one and all to a moving finale to the man she imagines gathering the oysters that made up one of the last good meals for her dying father. Parker delivers a short story with a letter addressed to the dogs in her life -- not the animals but the boyfriends who behaved like dogs, here transformed into actual dogs in a head-spinning allegory that is funny and caustic and utterly unanswerable. (What guy can complain about it, since if they see themselves in it they are damning their own doggy ways?) Truth and better-than-truth (i.e. fiction) merge here beautifully. Parker nails details of acting school with deadpan hilarity, skewers herself happily, celebrates her children and so much more. You won't find any dissection of her many theatrical triumphs or dishing of backstage dirt. Rather marvelously, "Dear Mr. You" is both disarmingly intimate (I feel like I know her) and a bravura performance that keeps us politely at arm's length with its talent. And isn't that what great acting (and great writing) are often about? This is her first book but surely not her last.



AURORA By Kim Stanley Robinson
\$26; Orbit

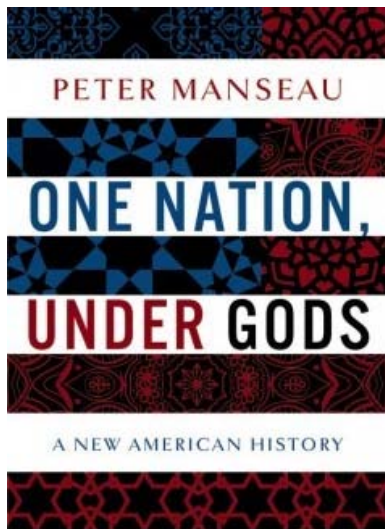
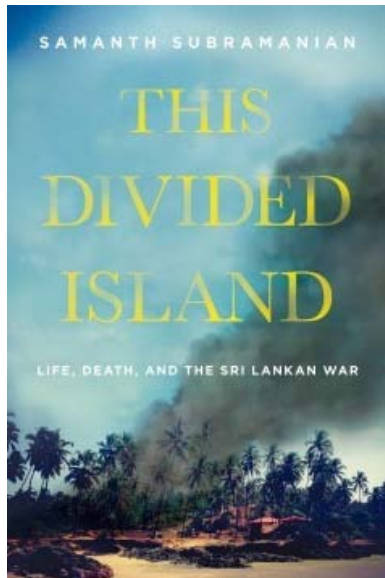
UPROOTED By Naomi Novik
\$25; Del Rey

Two of the best sci-fi and fantasy books of the year, ideal for fans of either or anyone who doesn't realize yet that they will be fans soon.

A brilliant stand-alone novel from one of our best writers. Kim Stanley Robinson's first bold gambit in this tale about colonizing the stars is to make the narrator an A.I. Early in the novel, we are on a ship that has been traveling for generations towards new worlds where humanity hopes to carve out new homes. In his *Mars* trilogy, Robinson built drama out of the practical and human challenges of terraforming Mars. Here he ponders the huge obstacles to simply making it intact to a planet light years away. When a key character orders her ship's artificial intelligence

to start telling the story of their journey, it's a master stroke. This solves a constant problem in science fiction: since the narrator is an A.I., its exposition of technical info can be explained away easily by a computer's preference for facts over story. We get the hard data and slowly, beautifully, we see the A.I. learn and become a better narrator and eventually -- perhaps -- gain self-awareness. For a while this seems the book's major accomplishment. But then Robinson pushes further and plot twists make this story even more riveting. Fundamentally, it's about our innate need to survive and explore. It's like the end of the film "Gravity" but without the faux overheated drama; here the moment is earned. "Aurora" becomes deeply moving, as well as entertaining and compelling and provoking. In short, everything one expects from Kim Stanley Robinson.

Like most fantasy fans, I'm eagerly awaiting the ninth and final volume in Naomi Novik's wonderful "Temeraire" series that cleverly and smartly imagines what would happen if there were dragons in the Napoleonic Era. But the muse can't be denied. For whatever reason, Novik felt compelled to write this stand-alone tale and it's a wholly satisfying gem. Based in fairy tale, it begins in classic fashion with a corker of an opening line: "Our Dragon doesn't eat the girls he takes, no matter what stories they tell outside our valley." Novik has you immediately and never falters. The novel begins with a ritual: the once-a-decade ceremony when the local wizard (nicknamed the "Dragon") chooses a young maid to take away to his tower, where she serves him in ways the locals can't imagine but spend an awful lot of time trying. From the fate of our heroine Agnieszka to the fate of her valley to the fate of the kingdom and indeed the world, the scope of this story slowly but inexorably expands. So does the magic, whether the highly detailed, scientific magic of the Dragon or the more creative, "instinctive" magic that Agnieszka soon proves adept at. The chapters fly by; in reading it, I kept thinking, "Ok, just one more, just one more" over the two days I gobbled it down. And the medieval world Novik creates is as rooted in reality as her Napoleonic one. But unlike most fantasy, what I remember best is not the world but the vivid and complex characters. In what is ultimately a rather remarkable novel, I realized there were no genuine villains. Oh there was danger and evil aplenty (as symbolized by the malignant Wood that encroaches on Agnieszka's valley); armies clash, people struggle for power and so on. But time and again Novik reveals characters driven not by a black heart but by sincere if sometimes misguided impulses: indeed, nothing is scarier than someone doing great evil for what they consider a higher purpose. The real triumph is at the end where Novik displays the ability to make understanding your enemy just as thrilling as destroying them. I love what Novik has done in the Temeraire series but this is the best single novel she's written. So far.



THIS DIVIDED ISLAND By Samantha Subramanian
\$27.99; Thomas Dunne Books

ONE NATION, UNDER GODS By Peter Manseau
\$28; Little Brown and Company

Religion -- or the excuse of religion -- is at the heart of these two nonfiction books, one a tragic history of Sri Lanka and the other an absorbing history of faith in the United States.

Journalist Samantha Subramanian tackles the longest war of the 20th century. (Perhaps -- sadly it's up for debate depending on how one categorizes various conflicts). But there's no debate that Sri Lanka's deadly internecine turmoil of 30+ years was especially virulent. It dragged on for decades and ended with the slaughter of men, women and children (mostly Tamil) that has been decried as a war crime.

Subramanian doesn't dive into an historical background or seem to address the broad sweep of the action. Instead, in what amounts to a travelogue of sorts, he goes to Sri Lanka and talks to anyone who will speak with him -- Tamil and Sinhalese, Buddhist and Hindu and Muslim, the bereft and the triumphant, the clear-eyed and the self-deluded. It's a remarkable, empathetic work of reporting. As an outsider, it's easy for me to say a pox on both houses: the Tamils had legitimate complaints but their rebellion/violence soon devolved into monstrous acts, while the Sinhalese have proven pitiless in victory. But the great gift here is not in just giving all sides a (morally complicated) voice. It's in bringing to life the tangled misery of so many people, from government officials to wives of rebels who still defend the indefensible like child soldiers to orphans and those who *may* be widowed or orphaned but just don't know. I won't soon forget a haunting passage where the author and others entered one battered area. A woman offhandedly asked him to write down the name and particulars of a missing relative. A villager overheard this and asked them to do the same and soon they were surrounded by desperate people yearning to give the particulars of their missing father/son/mother/daughter/brother/sister/neighbor. Never mind that the author isn't really in a position to help. They just want to be heard. Other vivid moments endure: a stolid mechanic who takes days of patient waiting before opening up, a pair of artificial legs waiting mournfully against a wall for the return of their presumably dead owner and on and on. Looming over it all is the inescapable sense that Sri Lanka's woes are far from over.

Call it "The People's Religious History Of The United States" and you'll capture the vividness and potential impact of "One Nation, Under Gods" by author Peter Manseau. He vividly captures the religious diversity that has defined the United States long before it even *was* the United States. This book journeys in time from a Muslim slave brought to the continent by the Spanish who ended up a god of sorts (trust me, it's not a happy ending for him) all the way to Barack Obama's inaugural address in which the President formally acknowledged the many faiths that make up our country. In between Manseau has you rethink everything from the Salem witch trials (not so crazy, actually) to the Great Awakening to that hippie happening where they hoped to levitate the Pentagon. Manseau shows slave owners who initially were vehemently opposed to converting their "property" into Christians become slave owners eager to do so. (The reason for both stances? Money.) From the role of women in seeding new ideas to the role of Jews in the American revolution to the role of Buddhists in WW II (their refusal to assimilate in terms of language and faith made them hugely helpful to the Allied cause), Manseau's book repeatedly casts our common history into a new light. His synthesis of well-established facts with original reporting make this Book One for

anyone who wants to be enlightened on the true story of religion in America.



KILLING AND DYING By Adrian Tomine
\$22.95; Drawn & Quarterly

Adrian Tomine's new collection of short stories is just 121 pages long. But it took me two weeks to read it and longer to think about it and be ready to write something. And of course, he writes comics (or graphic novels, or comix or whatever term is preferred this day) so I could have read it all in an hour. But that wouldn't have done justice to a series of tales that are so sad and lovely and human. First, the entire book published by Drawn & Quarterly is just a pleasure to hold in your hand. It's beautifully designed, from the translucent cover to the haunting image imprinted on the front itself, a picture of a suburban street with its Denny's restaurant and strip malls and cars seemingly frozen in place. It has no people and a Hopper-like aura of loneliness that captures well the tone of the stories within. Each story plays with form in subtle ways. While every story feels of a piece, capturing people struggling to connect or give their life some purpose or explain their inchoate desires and fears; they also are jazz-like in their low-key visual differences. "A Brief History Of The Art Form Known As 'Hortisculpture'" is an homage to comic strips down to the color Sunday edition and has a tale of frustrated creativity anyone in a relationship with a closeted musician/painter/writer/sculpture will identify with. "Translated, from the Japanese" leaves the absence of the characters being talked about while they fly from one city to another wonderfully resonant. "Intruders" and its sketch-like visuals add a noir-ish vibe to the story of a returning soldier trying to find something to moor him to the country he's returned to but can't connect with. The writing is taut and telling but of course it's the combination of writing and visuals that make these short stories and graphic novels in general so unique and

powerful. "Go Owls" shows the shock of physical abuse in a relationship in just a few brief panels. The title story "Killing And Dying" surprises us regularly with the journey of a stuttering, insecure daughter looking to stand-up for some confidence while her father undermines and awkwardly supports her at the same time. Yet it's the dad standing by while watching his wife through a window comfort their crying daughter that moved me more than any accusations, failed punchlines or heckles from hostile audiences. It's natural to compare Tomine to other graphic novelists but I kept thinking of William Trevor, an Irish specialist in short stories so heart-wrenchingly sad it could take me months to read any new collection he put out. One of the year's best books. Period.



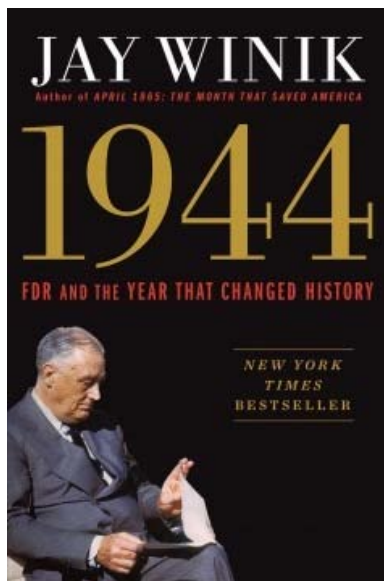
MISTER MAX: THE BOOK OF KINGS By Cynthia Voigt

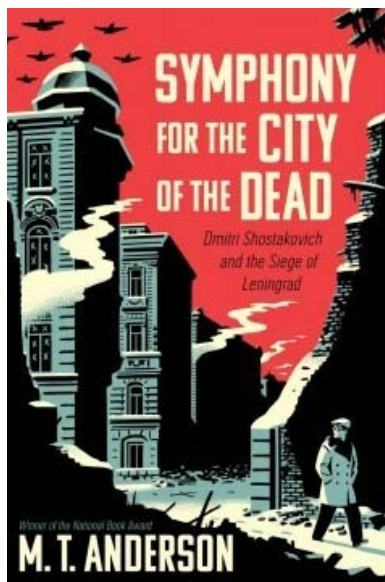
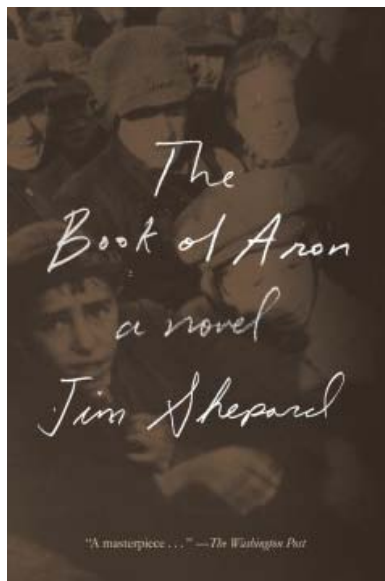
\$19.99; Knopf Books For Younger Readers

Perfect for middle grade readers, fans of theatrics, mysteries or anyone who loves a good tale.

Apparently, I need to catch up on my Cynthia Voigt. This excellent conclusion to her Mister Max trilogy has left me a little gobsmacked, if I'm honest. Did she plan the ramping up of the complexity and emotional depth the way it played out? I read all three books within a few weeks so perhaps that helped me appreciate the arc even more. Anyway, I suppose you could read the third book alone, but why would you? It's a trilogy and meant to be read that way. In Book One, Max lives in a quaint sort of turn of the century kingdom with his parents who run a theatrical troupe. Max loves them and the theater but it's not quite his thing. Exactly what his thing will be, this 12 year old boy isn't sure about. His parents are lured to a far-away country to establish a new national theater company and Max is accidentally left behind with his librarian grandmother. They realize the parents have been kidnapped and worry and worry and worry. To

maintain his independence, Max becomes sort of a detective, though he insists on calling himself The Solutioneer. (Why the books aren't called The Solutioneer remains a mystery to me.) There's also a girl that annoys Max with all her questions and a boarder in Max's home who has a mysterious past and other dangling threads. So there's the set up. At first, Max solves rather mundane or obvious problems like finding a lost dog. In Book Two, however, Voigt takes a quantum leap forward: Max is now solving problems of the human heart and showing a great deal of insight. In Book Three, Max and his friends head off to rescue the boy's parents. The final volume is especially good, with complex passages depicting that awkward moment when a child sees their parents as people, flaws and all, rather than "parents," not to mention some completely earned but still bravura changes that make clear the pattern Voigt was creating from the very start. Read Book One alone and -- like me -- you might consider it a pleasant diversion, with so-so mysteries but appealing characters. Book Two is much better and Book Three deepens the entire work. It's like a magic trick the way she suddenly reveals the life Max was intended for all along.





1944 By Jay Winik
\$35; Simon & Schuster

THE BOOK OF ARON By Jim Shepard
\$23.95; Knopf

SYMPHONY FOR THE CITY OF THE DEAD By M.T. Anderson
\$25.99; Candlewick

World War II is apparently an endless source of fascinating stories; we certainly won't run out of fresh approaches to that monumental event in our lifetime. Fans of history, great fiction and classical music will all be delighted by the following.

The title of Jay Winik's new work of history is a feint. While the book pivots on the year 1944, it's not really about that penultimate year of World War II, not really. Winik has a more devastating focus than that.

Many books have been written about WW II. Many more about the Holocaust. But few if any have told both stories in parallel to such dramatic and awful effect. Because of course they're not two stories; they are inextricably intertwined. So we have here Winik's assured overview of world war, deft portraits of FDR and Churchill and Stalin and Eisenhower and Hitler, battle plans, political machinations, Pearl Harbor, D-Day, the building of the atomic bomb, the imprisonment of Americans for the crime of being Japanese (while Americans of Italian and German descent remained unmolested) -- all in compelling detail and with a clear sense of how events seemed at the time. But again and again and again, Winik keeps alive the Holocaust. He shows what was happening, the build up of the death camps, the trickle of information and witnessing that turned into a flood and alongside that the moral failure of the free world. When tens of thousands of Jewish children might be rescued, excuses pour out. When tens of thousands of European children might be rescued, not a moment is lost. When prison camps can be bombed and war prisoners freed, no daring is too great. When death camps are bombed, it is only by accident because the bombs are meant for factories a few miles away. The US is not alone (though Churchill is the first to awake to the moral demands of this crime against humanity). Still, from 1942 on, we see a feckless State Department, foot-dragging bureaucrats and the tin-eared indifference of Franklin Delano Roosevelt who is given countless opportunities to act and fails to grasp them. The book is too nuanced to simply make a blistering case against FDR: his health was poor, the demands of war seemingly all consuming, etc. But no one can read this book and not agree with Winik that a great opportunity was lost. Lincoln transformed the Civil War into a war for freedom and against slavery. FDR might have made WWII about more than just winning; he might have transformed it into a war to defeat the Holocaust and similar crimes against humanity. Winik sees the decades since and their repeated timid failings in the face of genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda and elsewhere as the awful fruits of 1944, fruits that make the victory the West achieved a little more hollow.

It's funny! Yes, "The Book Of Aron" is a story about a little boy who becomes a scavenger in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. Yes, it's bleak and awful as we see his world slowly close in, the walls go up, the family members die off or disappear. But in his saddest, sharpest novel yet, author Jim Shepard captures the vein of black humor that runs through the despair of the Jewish people. The bickering of a husband and wife, the kvetching of the neighbors, the bleak wisdom of kids -- it's all here, all musical in the dialogue you can't help but speak out loud, all captivating and alive even as they slowly starve to death. Aron is, I suppose, a survivor, a boy who just tries to stay one step ahead of fate. (Good luck with that.) Morality doesn't come into it, but he steals and

scavenges and helps feed his family and gets by. Aron is almost deliriously unaware of any other way of existing; everyone is always saying "Aron only looks out for himself" but Shepard shows this boy in all his humanity, a kid wondering exactly what he was supposed to do when pushed by everyone into talking with the local collaborators or when he has a gun held to his head and is told to do this or that or the other. He had a choice? Shepard's tale is bristling with tragic details -- Aron is always crying, it seems -- but it's a joy to read. One of the Warsaw Ghetto's tragic figures -- the child advocate Janusz Korczak -- figures prominently and beautifully, but like everyone else he is fully complex and contradictory and alive. The tale builds and builds but this isn't a story about what happens to Aron. It's richer, more satisfying than that. You'll read it quickly and then want to read it again. Unforgettable.

No serious reader I know cares about genre: is it mystery, sci-fi, romance, literary fiction, graphic novel, young adult, a chapter book, a biography, a history, poetry, play? Who cares? Is it good? That's all that matters. The foolishness of labels has never been more apparent than in the astonishing career of M.T. Anderson, who has produced a string of sophisticated, witty works under the label of "young adult." That term has covered his dystopian sci-fi, horror, contemporary teen, historical fiction and now this work of biography. Since "young adult" also encompasses the masterpiece "Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn," as complex and involving a work as there is, he should happily embrace it. Essentially, "young adult" means there is (probably) a young adult at the heart of the story. And yet, "young adult" indicates one initial audience for this work and that may explain why it's so particularly good. Anderson has wowed with "Feed" and his landmark two volume work "The Astonishing Life Of Octavio Nothing," fiction that captures the Revolutionary Era, shines a fresh light on the horrors of slavery and presents our nation's founding from a novel perspective. It's intensely detailed and utterly convincing. So now we have a work of nonfiction about composer Dimitri Shostakovich and how he created his Seventh Symphony during the Siege of Leningrad. It's a delight; no surprise since Anderson has evinced an enthusiasm for music almost as joyful as Shostakovich's love of soccer. What makes this book so good is that Anderson doesn't simplify the tale for its presumed audience. But he does *clarify* the story in an elegant manner that any historian or biographer should envy. With seeming ease, Anderson tells of Shostakovich's life, the unceasing terror of Stalin's reign, the invasion by Germany, the horrors of the siege, cannibalism, despair and the role of music and why it mattered so much. He also deftly captures the moral complexity of Shostakovich's life, surrounded as he was by friends and family who were murdered by the state or turned against him to protect themselves or depended on him for their survival. A children's book? Hardly. And definitely. This isn't dumbed down history.

Indeed, more traditional doorstops about history might now seem clogged up, overstuffed as they are with unnecessary dates and detail when Anderson -- with a vivid image and pointed sentence -- can make his case with directness and verve. It leaves you with one exciting question: what will Anderson do next?

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