

In the air

Christmas books

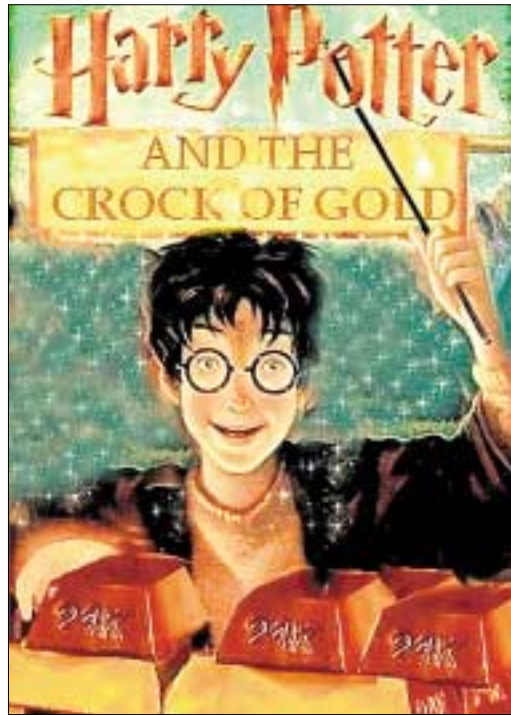
Ariel Wagner-Parker

I have decided to give everyone books for Christmas this year. The difficult thing of course is choosing the right book for the right person. I've given the matter a lot of thought and am generously prepared to share with you a few items from my list which may spare you hours of fruitless torturing of the old grey cells.

For my niece D, who is interested in literature and also likes animals: „The Role of Dogs in the Early Novels of Iris Murdoch“ by B.T. Wyatt. It's a fascinating subject. The ageing film star, Mr Mars, in *Under the Net*, Liffey, the animal helper, in *The Sandcastle*, Murphy in *The Bell* and the golden dog Tadg in the Unicorn, who provides the book's one transcendent moment when he is seen „streaking upward in pursuit of the man until both were lost to view in the saffron yellow haze near the skyline.“ The monograph demonstrates how each dog functions both on a realistic and a symbolic level, deepening our understanding of the state of mind and philosophical significance of the main characters. Prof. Zak Armbender wrote: „This penetrating study explores the hitherto underestimated canine dimension in her early writing. A must for Murdoch scholars. And dog-lovers.“

I was planning to give Auntie B, an unswerving devotee of the House of Windsor, bless her, a book hyped as the „sensational and controversial“ memoirs of a former Mistress of the Royal Wardrobe. I say was because as I write, the likelihood of its coming out as planned on 4th December seems increasingly remote. It's a pity, as „The Emperor's New Clothes“ by Lady Helen Farthingale supposedly reveals a scandalous incident involving a senior member of the royal family that allegedly shows him or her behaving in an inappropriate manner in his or her dressing room. Both the nature of the alleged incident and the identity of the royal allegedly involved remain shrouded in mystery, as the book's contents are subject to several injunctions and the tabloids haven't yet got the details off the Internet. But hope springs eternal and anyway, I can always fall back on that hagiography of the Queen Mum that got such rave reviews

Old Uncle T was easy. He divides his time between going on anti-war demos, making passionate speeches at Hyde Park Corner and staying in bed getting over the resulting colds and flu. „Forgive Me For I Have Sinned“ by George W.



Montage: Guy Wagner

Bush is unique in political writings for its devastating honesty. In it, the American president admits to having made disastrous errors of judgment with catastrophic consequences for his country and the world at large. Bush apparently conceived the idea for the book during a flight to Damascus. He „fesses up“ in that inimitable prose we have grown to know and love („I am a person who recognizes the fallacy of humans“) and throws himself on the mercy of his fellow Americans, pleading with them to let bygones be bygones („I think we agree the past is over“) and vowing to be a better man in the future. The book is already into its forty-third edition and readings from it have largely replaced sermons in churches across the US.

I'm fond of Uncle T, so maybe I'll also get him „I Told You So“, in which ex-Foreign Minister Robin Cook examines at great length and with thinly disguised glee the moral predicament Tony Blair finds himself in following the publication of the Bush book.

Cousin H was more difficult because he'd sooner watch soccer on the telly than read a book. But I think he'll enjoy Q.E. Charles' new whodunit „Half Time“, a tale of cross-dressing, blackmail and murder centred on a fashionable football club. Lees, the club secretary, receives an anonymous tip-off that the celebrated centre-half they are about to purchase in a multi-million pound transfer deal leads a double life as Fifi la Féline in a strip-club. Soon afterwards, Lees is found dead, naked save for his club strip and a green feather stuck in his left ear. Inspector Mountebank investigates and is swiftly entangled in a web of intrigue and corruption stretching from San Tropez to Soho. Unusually for this author, there's lots of sex and everyone wears designer clothes. But

the Mountie gets his man in just under 200 pages, so young Coz won't be kept from his favourite sport for too long.

Nephew E is an intelligent child who goes to a stupid school, where peer pressure forces him to like what his classmates like. He is a Harry Potter fan. Reluctantly, I have consented to buy him the latest in the series called „Harry Potter and the Crock of Gold“. In this adventure, Harry is growing up and beginning to realize that the only way to achieve real power in the world of adults is to earn vast sums of money. He therefore orders Hermione to think up the plot of a bestseller and Ron to sit down and write it. Harry will then publish it in his own name and earn a fortune, of which he will generously give his loyal friends a modest percentage. This dastardly plot is foiled in extremis by Voldemort, who reveals he is Harry's real father, causing the publisher, for reasons that remain unclear, to abandon the publication. I hope E will be put off Our Hero for life.

My sister C's present was the most difficult. She is a very busy woman and if the first three paragraphs of a book don't capture her, she abandons it. Anyway, after hours of research, I have come up with "Poetry Written by Cats" by Chloe Danvers. In simple moving language, Chloe describes how having to take care of a sick stray cat as a child brought into her life the affection and emotional responsibility she had never known. As an adult, she takes her feline family round visiting children's homes and lonely old people and their furry warmth works wonders. I started crying halfway down page seven, but I think my sister has stronger nerves.

If you would like more information about these books, please write. If not, I wish you a very happy Christmas.