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Christmas gifts 2012: the best stocking-filler books

Steven Poole looks for more or less serious forms of fun



Steven Poole
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Gift this! John Betjeman recalls a vanished age of prose civility. Photograph: Jane Bown

First, classify your giftee. Is he or she the sort of person who complains about the word "gifting", taking it as yet another signal that civilisation is crumbling around our ears? You could put a gentle reminder in your card that "gift" has been used as a verb since the 16th century, and gift a book about language. [Just My Typo](#), compiled by Drummond Moir (Sceptre), for example, is a collection of more or less amusing typos, from a mention of the "Large Hardon Collider" to the sad story of the director of the Chilean mint who had to resign in 2010 having allowed coins to be produced spelling the country's name "CHIIE".

A more serious kind of fun can be had with [Idiomantics: The Weird World of Popular Phrases](#), by Philip Gooden and Peter Lewis (Bloomsbury), "a rag-bag of items beachcombed from the stranger shores of language". What are the origins of throwing your hat in the ring, passing the buck, eating crow, or stealing someone's thunder? As well as British and American idioms, the authors consider some colourful examples from other languages, such as to have the cockroach (French). In German, they inform us, to "get yourself Franzed", deriving from the generic name for a navigator in the imperial German flying corps during the first world war, means to become hopelessly lost. I suggest "to get yourself Franzened" as a useful new way to describe the sinking feeling attendant on receiving a fat American novel of sentimental neo-realism on Christmas day.

Some might feel luckier to be gifted the New Yorker belletrist Adam Gopnik's [Winter: Five Windows on the Season](#) (Quercus), a sequence of themed chapters on winter that encompasses his thoughts on polar expeditions ("existential pointlessness"), his love of Christmas lights and carols, the invention of deep winter as an object of aesthetic experience by the romantics, and a lot about ice-hockey, leavened with

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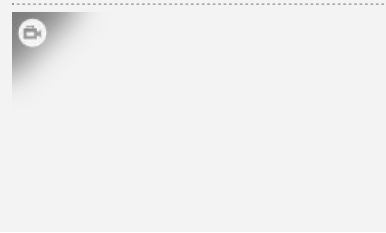
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visions of the "openly erotic" pastime of skating in the 19th century. Gopnik laments, at last, the fact that urbanites have been "cut off" from winter by decent heating, though it still seems possible for most of us to go outside.

If your giftee is prone to staying inside and indulging in some festive literary schadenfreude, one might try [Orwell's Cough](#), by the doctor-author John Ross (Oneworld), a collection of fireside medical detective stories. In chatty, speculative style, Ross wonders whether Shakespeare had syphilis (as a result, perhaps, of shaking his spear too far and wide), and diagnoses Jonathan Swift, who went on improbable apple-eating binges and suffered from tinnitus, as a likely sufferer of Ménière's disease. Poor old Herman Melville, meanwhile, allegedly had PTSD, bipolar disorder and rheumatism, on top of being an alcoholic – whatever that term might mean when applied to bygone eras.

Maybe one should ask those who have, over the centuries, haunted the London pub that Pete Brown celebrates as Shakespeare's Local (Macmillan), the George Inn near London Bridge. Its patrons have included Chaucer and Shakespeare (probably), Dickens (definitely), as well as all manner of other more-or-less dissolute littérateurs, robbers, johns and pilgrims. Beer-lover Brown is charmingly modest about the tenuous nature of some of his evidence, but he spins a stoutly colourful yarn, and ends with some bracing scepticism about the modern "heritage industry".

Heritage is hardly to be scorned, though, if John Betjeman (*pictured*) is your guide, as he is in a collection of his Telegraph columns, on which editor Gavin Fuller has bestowed the splendid title [Lovely Bits of Old England](#) (Aurum). Betjeman discovers Huddersfield ("much beautiful and unregarded architecture"), eulogises country houses, muses on "the neglected and interesting subject of British hotel architecture" and deplores overhead electrical lines on railways and needlessly ugly bridges. Here too are collected some book reviews and occasional pieces on Max Beerbohm and kangaroos, recalling a vanished age of prose civility.

Finally, if your target is a person with a more modern sense of humour, untickable by gentle Betjemanisms, a positive response might be elicited by a modern humorous book. [Superlatives](#) (Short Books) sees aptly named pseudonymous author the Superlatist wandering up and down the country with a camraphone and writing deadpan captions to pictures of silly things, in a laconic satire of our age of marketing exaggeration. Here you will find the "World's least troubled dog", the "World's sneakiest mannequin", and the "World's most perverted commuter". Much funnier than most "humour" books, *Superlatives* began life as a blog, as did many giftable tomes this season. You could always present your most special person of all with an iPad mini, the equivalent of gifting every blog in the world.

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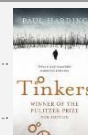
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