

Best books of the year: Don't let these books be bygones

By [TERRI SCHLICHENMEYER](#)

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OK. So you got a pile of bookstore gift certificates for the holidays this year and they're burning a hole in your pocket.

I can identify with that.

But you don't want to waste those precious EGCs on just any old book, do you? No, you don't, because you never know what you might get.

That's OK. I did all the dirty work for you. I slogged through just over 200 books this year and while I read some not-so-stellar books, I also read some that I raved about for months. Here, in no certain order, are those can't-miss titles.

Top-Five Fiction

Chasing the Wolf by Nathan Singer — This quick-to-read novel is fast and furious, involving racism, time travel and a bunch of quirky twists. You can read this book in less than three hours, but why would you? It's meant to savor.

Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen — Part love story, part circus history, this novel is the story of a former elephant worker who revisits his memories in the twilight of his life. Beautiful, wonderfully written, this story will yank you in on Page One.

Rusty Nail by J.A. Konrath — Jack is back in this third Jack Daniels novel. A killer is on the loose and Jacklyn is on the trail. That's the good news. The bad news is, the killer knows where Jack lives. If you love a mystery that turns you upside down so many times you get whiplash, this one is it. I think this one is Konrath's best work so far.

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Smunk by Tom Franklin — A dark and nasty Western with a syphilitic alcoholic one-eyed hero and a 15-year-old prostitute at its heart. Not a book for Grandpa, but very, very enjoyable if you're tired of the same old shoot-em-up.

She Ain't the One by Carl Weber and Mary B. Morrison — Fatal Attraction, urban-style, this is the story of a man who falls in love with the wrong woman and pays for it. Written alternately by the authors, this book showcases the talents of both.

Top-Five Nonfiction

Answering 911 by Caroline Burau — Burau, a veteran of a Minnesota 911 call center, writes about her experiences working in the hot seat — the calls she'd just as soon forget and the ones she'll always remember. This is another of those books you really don't want to end.

Final Exits by Michael Largo — A quirky, fun (but never morbid) look at the ways we die. This book is a trivia buff's paradise and something you can buy for the person who claims he "never reads," because he'll read this.

High School Confidential by Jeremy Iversen — Iversen went undercover at a high school, masquerading as a teenager even though he was an adult and a college graduate. Appalling and uplifting, this book will make you look at teenagers in a whole new light.

Kicked, Bitten & Scratched by Amy Sutherland — In this book, Sutherland follows students through two years at a premiere California zookeeper's school. Not just another "animal" book, this will appeal to every pet lover and zoo-goer.

Every Contact Leaves a Trace by Connie Fletcher — True crime, oral-history style. Fletcher interviewed dozens of forensic scientists about their favorite cases, the unsolved mysteries and the strange things that happened on the way to the morgue. This book is not for the faint of heart, but it's un-put-down-able if you're a true crime fan.

Truck: A Love Story by Michael Perry — Yes, I can count. I know this makes six books on my "Best of Five," but I couldn't resist adding this book to my list. It's a sweet, introspective book about a man, a woman and a truck. And it's a must-read.

Top-Three Kids Books

The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane by Kate DiCamillo — A sweet, "Velveteen Rabbit" kind of story with a heartwarming twist. I loved this book because it made me nostalgic in the way that well-loved teddy bears and stuffed kitties do. A perfect book for 8- to 12-year-old girls or little kids who need a read-aloud story at bedtime.

Escape from the Carnivale by Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson, performed by Jim Dale — Peter Pan's friends are in trouble. One of them has been captured by bumbling pirates and she needs the Lost Boys' help. I listened to this book in audio form and found myself sitting in my car while the track ran out. Exciting adventure for 6- to 10-year-olds, but a great listen for parents, too.

Here, There Be Dragons by James A. Owen — Another exciting adventure that mixes

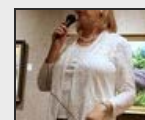
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JUN

JUN

JUN

BROWSE

15

16

17



WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

FRIDAY

MORE

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Caloosahatchee Forestry Center

Traveling Exhibit: Sharkabet 9 a.m.
Rookery Bay Environmental Learning Center

Free courses offered for Community Association Managers 9 a.m.
Edison State College - Fort Myers Campus

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The von Liebig Art Center

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literature, history, mythology and fantasy into a story that I couldn't put down. Meant for 12 and up, this one will appeal to grown-ups who love Sherlock Holmes, Harry Potter, Zeus and Tolkien.


So, there you are. A pile of the Best of the Year, perfect for reading in the waning days of winter, tucking in your suitcase for vacation, or enjoying — just because. Now, if you still have gift certificate money left, ask your local bookseller for his or her suggestions and you'll be directed to some great new books, too.


Happy New (Reading) Year!

Terri Schlichenmeyer has been reading since she was 3 years old and never goes anywhere without a book. She lives in LaCrosse, Wis., with her two dogs and 9,800 books.

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