

Holiday books offer novel story lines

BOOK BREAK



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Ever enter a bookstore for some holiday shopping and feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of books you have to choose from? If so, perhaps you could use a few suggestions, just to get you started in the right direction.

Here's a list of some very special books available to holiday shoppers this season:

■ **"Nothing But Blue Skies,"** by Thomas McGuane (*Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, \$21.95*). Poor, befuddled, middle-aged Frank Copenhaver. He thought he was adjusting to change as the 21st Century bore down upon him. But as this story opens, his wife of many years is leaving him and he is going downhill fast. His love of fishing and the great Montana outdoors seem the only saving grace available as he loses friends, fortune and self-respect.

"Nothing But Blue Skies" is a sometimes sad, sometimes hilarious story sure to please all those on your list who enjoy a well-told, earthy tale enlivened by colorful characters.

Part of the pleasure here is finding yourself via McGuane's highly evocative prose in the midst of beautiful Big Sky Country.

■ **"Dying For Chocolate,"** by Diane Mott Davidson (*Bantam, \$19.50*). This whodunit should come with a high-calorie, high-cholesterol warning printed on its luscious, glossy cover. Its appealing heroine, Goldy Bear, makes her living as a caterer and, scattered throughout this fast-moving mystery, you'll find several recipes for the delectable dishes she whips up for clients.

While Goldy creates in the kitchen, she also copes with a teenager, hides from a violent ex-husband, tries to figure out who's writing excoriating reviews of her cuisine in the local newspaper, works on her love life and solves this murder mystery.

■ With the world of Colorado's nouveau riche as its backdrop, "Dying For Chocolate" will satisfy all readers hungry for a healthy dollop of armchair adventure. To double the fun of the gift, you could always include a batch of those oh-so-chocolatey Letha Layers. The recipe's on Page 30.

■ **"The Bridges of Madison County,"** by Robert James Waller (*Warner Books, \$14.95*). "The watermelon was perfect. The beer was cold. The evening was blue. Francesca Johnson was 45 years old and Hank Snow sang a train song on KMA, Shenandoah, Iowa."

Welcome to Madison County, where a man who has lost his way stops to ask for help from an Iowa farm woman and an unforgettable experience ensues.

This brief, elegantly simple novel by writer-photographer Waller should be placed in a museum somewhere with a sign underneath that reads "Rare Literary Accomplishment."

To begin with, it's a bestseller that, in places, reads like heartstopping poetry. Second, it's a story about two people who fall head-over-heels in love at first sight for all eternity. And — imagine — both are over 40! Finally, the whole mystical, magical affair takes place not in some exotic faraway, never-never land, but in the heart of Iowa farm country.

Though Waller is just a bit unconvincing at times, his ability to paint pictures with a few simple but glorious words is what most readers will long remember. This is an outstanding book.

■ **"JFK: Reckless Youth,"** by Nigel Hamilton (*976 pp., Random, \$30*). Significant in size, quality and readability, this first volume in a planned trilogy of the former president's life may be the most thorough of the many biographies on the subject.

Readers who see JFK as a great and tragic figure, and readers who see him merely as a well-connected, charismatic philanderer, will probably find themselves closer to the heart of the man after reading this book.

Ending in 1946, as Kennedy embarks on what would prove to be a historical political career, Hamilton's biography takes us through the earliest years, and on to JFK's wartime naval career, his affair with the suspected Nazi spy, Inga Arvad, his first campaigns and ultimately his election to Congress. Health problems apparently affected Kennedy much more than most of us know, as did a rather unfortunate luck of the draw when it came to parents. Photos.

■ **"A Day in the Night of America,"** by Kevin Coyne (*Random, \$22*). It's about time somebody paid proper attention to one of the most ignored groups around: the people who work the night shift in this country.

In this, his first book — and what an impressive debut it is — Coyne examines American nightsiders from sea to shining sea and many points in between. He begins with Gloucester fishermen and concludes in Alaska on the shortest night of the year. Bakers, foundry workers, tugboaters and others seem to walk right off these pages.

You'll also meet some people you may not have ever thought about: the traders on Wall Street, for instance, whose job it is to keep up with markets on the other side of the planet while the rest of us dream on.

■ **"Public Appearances 1987-1991,"** Lord Snowdon (*Vendome, \$40*). For the photographer on your list, you can't go wrong with this, the 14th collection of pictures by one of Britain's most gifted photographers.

Snowdon has gathered together 90 celebrities along with some rather unconventional props — a toilet seat, a ragged lampshade, a banana, a motorcycle, some hair curlers — and put them together with a touch of wit and lots of style. This book is the delightful result.

Featured subjects include Prime Minister John Major, author Graham Greene, conductor Zubin Mehta (barefoot), actress Joan Collins (in shocking pink), TV's John Goodman and musi-

cian Yehudi Menuhin (in undershirt). How's that for eclecticism? All photos are in color.

■ **"Nowhere is a Place: Travels in Patagonia,"** by Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux; photos by Jeff Gnass (*Sierra Club, \$25*). When Magellan discovered it in 1520, "Patagonia was . . . a country of black fogs and whirlwinds at the end of the inhabited world."

So writes the late Bruce Chatwin in this travel book co-authored by fellow travel writer Theroux. Originating as a lecture, the two of them put together for London's Royal Geographic Society, "Nowhere is a Place" is not just a memoir of their travels in this mysterious region at the southernmost tip of South America.

It is also a commentary on how its desolate mountains, looming icebergs and lonely pampas have long enchanted the literary imagination. You'll find references to it in the works of Shakespeare, Conan Doyle, Poe, Melville, Coleridge and many others. Gnass, whose haunting photographs capture considerable enchantment here, calls Patagonia a place "where man is forever a visitor."

Other holiday goodies: Betty Palmer Nelson's quiet novel of Tennessee country folk, "Pursuit of Bliss"; Gay Rubin's captivating short story collection, "On A Good Day"; Janet Lembke's unusual "Dangerous Birds:



Good read: Thomas McGuane's "Nothing But Blue Skies" is a sometimes sad, sometimes hilarious tale (\$21.95)

A Naturalist's Aviary"; actor Yves Montand's entertaining autobiography, "You See, I Haven't Forgotten"; and Gloria Naylor's lively bestseller, "Bailey's Cafe."

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