

Swift Reads

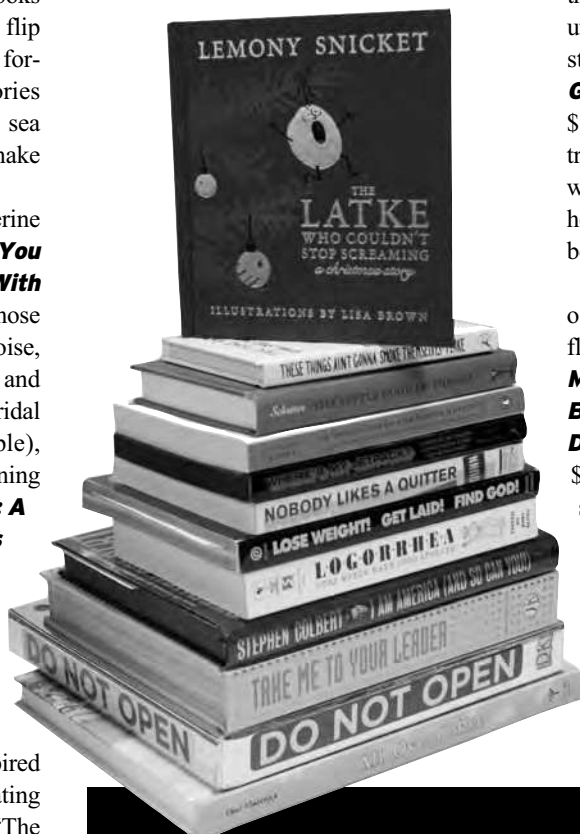
Cute, weird, funny gift books

You might think that after last week's Winter Reading issue, I'd be done with books for a while. But you'd be wrong: After a week spent reading novels that weren't published in 2007 (a Winter Reading requirement), here I am with more books! These, though, are a little different. These are the sort of books that don't lend quite themselves to straightforward reviews, exactly. They're the books you pick up and put down again, or flip through in all directions — backwards, forwards, sideways, upside down. Stories about words and latkes, rehab and sea cucumbers. In other words? They make really good presents.

For your word nerds, there's Katherine Baker's charmingly titled **Six Words You Never Knew Had Something to Do With Pigs** (Penguin, \$13). For the record, those words are porcelain, screw, soil, porpoise, root and swain. Organized by seasons and then by somewhat related categories (bridal words in the summer, for example), Baker's little book is endlessly entertaining — as is the very concept of **Logorrhea: A Spellbinding Collection of Tales from Twenty-one of Today's Most Imaginative Storytellers** (Bantam Dell, \$13). The gimmick? The writers — who include Elizabeth Hand, Portlander Jay Lake, Jeff VanderMeer and Michael Moorcock — each contribute "an original tale inspired by one of dozens of obscure and fascinating [spelling bee] championship words." "The Smaragdine Knot," anyone?

Does someone you know need a good laugh? There's the awesome **I Am America (And So Can You!)** from Stephen Colbert (Grand Central, \$26.99), which includes such gems as "Endangered Animals, and Why They Are Unloved By God" (in chart form) and "The Kraft Seven Seas Creamy Italian Sports Chapter." If Colbert is a bit too obvious, perhaps this gem from 2006 is in order: **Lose Weight! Get Laid! Find God! The All-in-One Life Planner from Benrik** (Plume, \$16). From "Age 0: Make Your Birth Unforgettable" through "Age 24: Waste This Year" and "Age 58: Turn Into Your Parents" all the way to "Age 100: Undergo Cryogenic Freezing," the duo that

goes by Benrik has helpful suggestions for every step of life. And worksheets, too. If that's too complicated, take the simple and hysterical tack: **The Latke Who Couldn't Stop Screaming** (McSweeney's, \$9.95) from the ever-brilliant Lemony Snicket, with screaming latke illustrations by Lisa Brown.



If getting through the holiday season drives your friends or family to drink, perhaps you know someone who might enjoy (deep breath; this title is long) **Nobody Likes a Quitter (And Other Reasons to Avoid Rehab): The Loaded Life of an Outlaw Booze Writer** by Dan Dunn (Thunder's Mouth Press, \$14.95). Dunn, who writes a column called "The Imbiber," peppers his book ("a mosh-up of fact and well-oiled flights of fancy," says the back cover) with factoids, an open letter to the chairman of Starbucks, footnotes, recipes and more. (But honestly, just the title had us in stitches.) For those who excuse themselves every 20 minutes to shiver outside with their nicotine sticks, perhaps **These Things Aren't Gonna Smoke Themselves** (Bloomsbury, \$12.95), Emily Flake's pocket-sized, illustrated love/hate letter to cigarettes. Anyone who's ever enjoyed something bad for their health should get a giggle from this little book — and that's all of us, right? Right?

Moving along, then. Two hefty tomes full o' quirk have been sitting on my floor (yes, floor) waiting to be perused at length: **Take Me to Your Leader: Weird Facts, Bizarre Stories, and Life's Oddities** and **Do Not Open** (both DK Publishing, \$25 and \$24.99 respectively). Ian Harrison's *Leader* sports a dog dressed as Yoda on the cover, which is frankly enough to convince me it's entertaining. Acts of god, conspiracy theories, national customs and foods, karaoke, dating ... there's a little bit of everything in this densely illustrated book, which is sort of like a book of facts crossed with everything on the magazine stand. I

think. It's rather hard to classify. John Fardon's **Do Not Open** — technically a children's book, but who's counting? — is a little more specific; it "blows the lid off the world's biggest secrets, conspiracy theories, obscurities and ambiguities." It also comes in a neat shiny box that makes it look like it's behind bars. *Do Not Open* is as dense with tidbits and pix as *Leader*, but it includes a lot of cartoony little drawings, collages, a fold-out page, lift-the-flap pages and more, which might make it even better for those with short attention spans.

Alas, not all of my gifty books can come in pairs, for I've got nothing to match up with Lorenz Schröter's **The Little Book of the Sea** (MacAdam Cage, \$15), which is like one of those Schott's Miscellany books, only blue, oceanic and less beautifully designed (but still full of all sorts of wonderful information, like a list of mistakes made in the film *Titanic*), or Daniel H. Wilson's **Where's My Jetpack? A Guide to the Amazing Science Fiction Future That Never Arrived** (Bloomsbury, \$14.95), a companion tome to the entertaining *How to Survive a Robot Uprising* (which, somewhat confusingly, is reportedly being made into a movie). And few things would properly pair with **All Over Coffee** (City Lights, \$24.95), Paul Madonna's beautiful collection of the titular comic strip, which runs in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Short on words but long on feeling, these city scenes and lone-some visions seem to illustrate tiny moments of overhead conversation, imaginative day-dreaming, chance encounters and brief visions. — Molly Templeton

COOKBOOKS

are among the hardest thing to have pile up in my office, since they make me hungrier every time I look at them (which is often). Two of the year's densest, most fascinating tomes include **Cooking**, a gargantuan work by James Peterson, and **The River Cottage Meat Book** by Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall (both from Ten Speed Press, each \$40). *Cooking*, which is subtitled *600 recipes, 1500 photographs, one kitchen education*, caught my eye largely because it illustrates everything. Sometimes, for newbie cooks, instructions can be dizzying: Do what to the what now? This patient volume will show you, using a series of tiny photographs, things like how to cut up a raw chicken, how to make straw mat potato pancakes and how to roll flaky dough. Beyond the specific bits, Peterson's book is impressively exhaustive. It would take months to get through the whole thing — making it a worthwhile kitchen investment for sure. *The River Cottage Meat Book* is similarly thorough about its somewhat more specific topic. This is a book that has distracted me at parties and made my mouth water at work. It's not just about the pretty pictures of delicious food, though; Fearnley-Whittingstall begins, "I believe that the way we produce and use meat requires radical reform." He wants carnivores to think about their meat consumption in philosophical and environmental ways — and he's concerned with how meat, once a person has decided to eat it, is cooked. This is a book both to read through and reference later.



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