

Set for the dark weeks still ahead

I hope you got a book for Christmas. True, seed catalogs will get you through January, but books are even better.

If you lived in Iceland, you would almost certainly have received books as a gift. Julabokafloð, they call it — the “Christmas Book Flood.” In late September the Iceland Publishers Association puts a free catalog of that year’s books — the Bokafloð — in every mailbox, and the buying rush is on. Icelanders open their gifts on Christmas Eve and then everyone tucks into bed with a new book.

They’ve been doing this since World War II, when currency restrictions on imports were more lenient for paper than for other gift items. And Icelanders recognize a good thing when they see one. Their horses, for example. Progress toward equality for women, sparked by the annual October 24 “Women’s Day Off” tradition that began in 1975. They even open their doors to refugees.

Luckily, I did get books for Christmas. A lovely two-volume set of Ursula K. Le Guin’s favorite short stories and novels, and on the lighter side, Carl Hiassen’s “Razor Girl.” So along with books from the library and books shared by friends, I’m set for the dark weeks still ahead.

The front page of “Razor Girl” — the one where the author insists, “This is a work of fiction” — has already made me laugh out loud. “However,” Hiassen continues, “true events in South Florida provided the lurid material for certain strands of this novel, beginning with the opening scene. The author also wishes he’d dreamed up the part about the giant Gambian pouched rats, but he didn’t. Those suckers are real.”

But it’s Ursula’s words I’m looking forward to the most. My bookshelves already hold many volumes of her essays and poems, her translation of Lao Tsu’s “Tao Te Ching,” and her blog posts collected in “No Time to Spare.” But unlike the entire rest of the reading world, it seems, I came late to her fantasy and science fiction. There’s no excuse for this: I had already shared “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” with students and showed them the film made from “The Lathe of Heaven.” Finally I opened “The Left Hand of Darkness” and then “Always Coming Home” ... and, well, I should have known her sci-fi wouldn’t be about robots and laser guns.

The good news is, I get to hear her voice again in these collected works. Now, when I miss that voice so much. And one more confession: yesterday I ordered the new “Earthsea Collection.” All five books

in one volume. With lovely illustrations.

Even if you didn’t get a book for Christmas, you can do this too. Start your own Book Flood! Who knows where this could end?

One place to find good books is at Pendleton Center for the Arts First Draft Writers’ Series, where you hear the writers read and then decide which book you can’t go home without. Kisha Lewellyn Schlegel, who teaches creative writing at Whitman, will be the featured writer next week — Thursday, January 17 at 7 p.m. She’ll bring her prize-winning essay collection “Fear Icons.”

The third Thursday in February will bring us a mother-daughter duo, Barbara and Monica Drake. Barbara’s new poetry collection “The Road to Lilac Hill: Poems of Time, Place, and Memory” is inspired by her life on a small farm in Yamhill County; Monica, who teaches at Northwest College of Art, will bring novels, the award-winning “Clown Girl” and “The Stud Book.” In March, Peter Walker, who teaches geography at the University of Oregon, will be here with his “Sagebrush Collaboration: How Harney County Defeated the Takeover of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge.”

And I’m hoping we can bring back Molly Gloss soon. She’s much-loved for her novels set here in Eastern Oregon — “The Jump-Off Creek,” “The Hearts of Horses,” and “Falling From Horses” — but she’s also an award-winning science fiction / fantasy writer, and three books

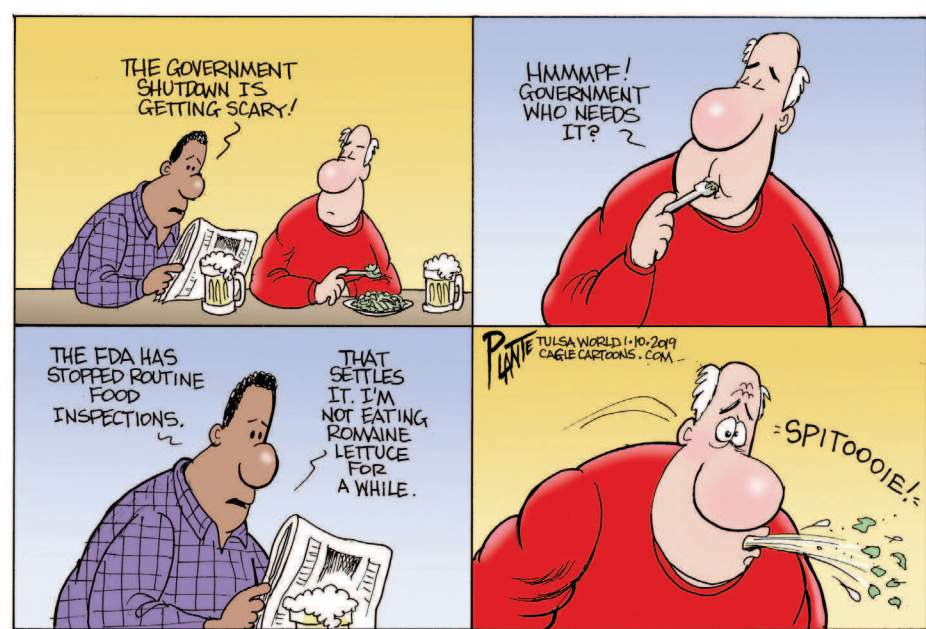


BETTE HUSTED
FROM HERE TO ANYWHERE

that fit into that category are being re-issued by Simon & Schuster’s Saga Press. “Outside the Gates,” “The Dazzle of Day,” “Wild Life.” And most exciting to me, a new book: “Unforeseen,” a collection of short fiction.

So: Christmas all year round? You decide.

Bette Husted is a writer and a student of Tai Chi and the natural world. She lives in Pendleton.



Behold, the gadfly

A gadfly is a persistent irritating critic, a provocative stimulus, a goad, a blighter, a pesterer and resident irritant. Or, as Robb Corbett, Pendleton’s city manager once said, “Tom, you’re a both lightning rod and a civic treasure.”

We gadflies are outliers, self-appointed, carry a license to offend, and we don’t go away until our work is done. In my friend Ron Gross’ book, “Socrates’ Way,” (Putnam, 2002) he tells how Socrates used the metaphor of the gadfly to dramatize the need for truth telling. Only the constant bites of the gadfly keeps the state alert enough to avoid disastrous mistakes by those in power. Socrates wrote:

“If you kill me you will not easily find a successor to me, who, if I may use a figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God. The state is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state and all day long and

in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. You will not easily find another like me, and therefore I would advise you to spare me.”

They didn’t, he took the hemlock, and Athens soon completed its descent into ruin.

Examples of this gadfly at work: First, I came to Pendleton at the request of the CTUIR government to establish a tribal horse program for young Indians. I failed.

For 20 years I have worked diligently to bring cowgirls back to the Pendleton Round-Up in rough stock, riding saddle broncs. Failed so far.

I worked hard to get a cowgirl rodeo movie made here in Pendleton. Failed.

I also failed at helping to establish a permanent tribal cattle operation, Indian Country Livestock, LLC. It was too fragile to last. It collapsed in 2010.

One day I realized that the Rivoli Theatre was a potential boon to downtown Pendleton. After putting it on Pendleton’s to-do list, with good leadership it has taken off and will be open fairly soon.

Another initiative I kick-started in 2015 was an outside professional assessment of several local museums that have almost zero door counts. If they attracted visitors — were a marketable whole — our fair city would be stronger. But as of now, visitors learn virtually nothing in our museums. Which is why they fail. Failed again.

In these troubled times there are plenty of reasons to worry today about the state of the American mind, as well as the state of the nation. Speech is not as free; gadflies are not as welcome; inquiry is dictated as much by the availability of funding as it is by the instincts of curiosity, and funding itself is often short. But let’s start 2019 on a happier note.

Remember this from Dave Tovey, as I quoted in a July 2012 *Confederated Umatilla Journal* column? “Tom, you are a valued community member and achieved ‘institution’ status! I was taught early on that show me someone in Indian Country that no one hates and I’ll show you someone that hasn’t accomplished or tried anything.”

Of course, beyond a similar healthy dose of skepticism about my own fault-filled character, any kinship to Socrates is absurd. This is demonstrated by my ignorance of the Socratic Method, “To solve a problem, it would be broken down into a series of questions, the answers to which gradually distill the answer a person would seek.”

When’s the last time Hebert solved a problem with questions? He’s too busy talking.

Tom Hebert is a writer, public policy consultant and East Oregonian columnist.

Give meditation a chance

By FARHAD MANJOO
New York Times

Because I live in Northern California, where this sort of thing is required by local ordinance, I spent New Year’s Day at a meditation center, surrounded by hundreds of wealthy, well-meaning, Patagonia-clad white people seeking to restore order and balance to their tech-besotted lives.

In the past, I might have mocked such proceedings, but lately I’ve grown fond of performative sincerity in the service of digital balance. It’s the people who haven’t resigned themselves to meditation retreats who now make me most nervous, actually.

Which brings me to my point: It’s 2019. Why haven’t you started meditating, already? Why hasn’t everyone?

I’ve been a technology journalist for nearly 20 years and a tech devotee even longer. Over that time, I’ve been obsessed with how the digital experience scrambles how we make sense of the real world.

Technology may have liberated us from the old gatekeepers, but it also created a culture of choose-your-own-fact niches, elevated conspiracy thinking to the center of public consciousness and brought the incessant nightmare of high-school-clique drama to every human endeavor.

It also skewed our experience of daily reality. Objectively, the world today is better than ever, but the digital world inevitably makes everyone feel worse. It isn’t just the substance of daily news that unmoors you, but also the speed and volume and oversaturated fakery of it all.

A few years ago, I began to fear that the caustic mechanisms of the internet were eating away at my brain, turning me into an embittered, distracted, reflexively cynical churl. Since then, I’ve done everything I can to detox. I consulted app blockers and screen-time monitors to keep me offline. I even got my news from print newspapers to experience a slower, more deliberate presentation of media.

But there are limits to the supposedly life-changing magic of going offline. Smartphones are as central to the economy as cars and credit cards, and a lot of people have little meaningful opportunity to quit.



EO Media Group, File

Yoga instructor Tania Wildbill demonstrates a yoga pose called thread the needle to a 2009 class in Pendleton.

And the “offline” world is now ruled by what happens online. Escape is impossible. Quips on Twitter are indirectly programming cable news, and whatever lengths you might go to to shield your kid from the dark powers of phones, her social life will still rise and fall according to the inscrutable dynamics of Instagram and Fortnite.

And so, to survive the brain-dissolving internet, I turned to meditation.

Don’t roll your eyes. You’ve heard about the benefits of mindfulness before. Meditation has been rising up the ladder of West Coast wellness fads for several years and is now firmly in the zeitgeist.

It’s the subject of countless books, podcasts, conferences, a million-dollar app war. It’s extolled by CEOs and entertainers and even taught in my kids’ elementary school (again, it’s Northern California). The fad is backed by reams of scientific research showing the benefits of mindfulness for your physical and mental health — how even short-term stints improve your attention span and your ability to focus, your memory and other cognitive functions.

I knew all of this when I first began meditating a year ago, but I was still surprised at how the practice altered my relationship with the digital world. At first, it wasn’t easy: After decades of swimming in the frenetic digital waters, I found that my mind was often too scrambled to accommodate much focus. Sitting calmly, quietly and attempting to sharpen my thoughts on the present moment was excruciating. For a while, I flitted among several

meditation books and apps, trying different ways to be mindful without pain.

Then, about four months ago, I brute-forced it: I made meditation part of my morning routine and made myself stick with it. I started with 10 minutes a day, then built up to 15, 20, then 30. Eventually, something clicked, and the benefits became noticeable, and then remarkable.

The best way I can describe the effect is to liken it to a software upgrade for my brain — an update designed to guard against the terrible way the online world takes over your time and your mind.

Now, even without app blockers, I can stay away from mindless online haunts without worrying that I’m missing out. I can better distinguish what’s important from what’s trivial, and I’m more gracious and empathetic with others online. As far as I know, people are still wrong on the internet, but, amazingly, I don’t really care anymore.

I can anticipate your excuses. First, this is all very old news: As Buddhists have known forever, meditation is really good for you, and *The New York Times’* new op-ed columnist is on it. And second, it’s all a bit too woo-woo — it sounds promising, but you’re not one to go full Goop.

Still, I hope you give it a try. I hope everyone does. I’m not promising meditation will fix everything about how the internet has ruined you.

But what if it does?

Farhad Manjoo became a columnist for the *New York Times* in 2018.