

# Gift giving made easy (no clicks allowed)

By David R. Altman

In dire straits for a Christmas gift?

Tired of empty shelves at Walmart or Target? Can't find that PS5 or Pikachu or Purrble?

How about gas prices? Are they making you think twice about heading to the mall?

Welcome to the club. But, don't distress, you have options.

The one gift that is often overlooked—and perhaps, in many ways, the most fun to give—has been around for thousands of years.

To paraphrase what Glinda the Good Witch told Dorothy at the end of Oz “...you've always had the power to go back”—but in our case it's not to Kansas, it's to one of our first gifts.

That gift is the gift of reading. Not on a tablet. But an actual book, you remember, right? With real paper and real illustrations and, most importantly, real joy.

Yes, I mean joy. It's a gift for ourselves (or for others) that keeps on giving.

It's been said that books serve as portals to newer worlds. They give us perspective and teach us and entertain us. But, they have a modern-day drawback: they take time.

When is the last time you really had time? Everything seems marginalized—so we default to a quick fix.

Look, I get that it's interesting when a neighbor posts a favorite recipe or you're Facetiming with the family out West or

when Matthew McConaughey tweets about his political ambition. And, we can't forget about brain-preserving Apps like Solitaire or Words With Friends (although I can't yet see the results).

Seriously, do you need a break from the nightly news? What about Facebook or TikTok? You Tube got you going? Just stop.

Try this: turn off the television and put down the devices (this could shatter marriages, I know).

What would it mean to spend a night without a Hallmark movie or Walking Dead or Ozark or Equalizer and yes, (forgive me, Lisa) even Yellowstone.

If you won't read for pleasure, read for your health.

An Emory University study found that reading increases “connectivity in parts of the brain that were related to language.” Another study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Psychiatry found that dementia is 2.5 times less likely to appear in elderly people who read regularly, while TV was presented as a risk factor.

Plus, there's this: research in the U.K. found that six minutes of reading can reduce stress levels by 68 percent (think you can get that sort of stress reduction by watching Hoarders?).

The television shows of our American upbringing are forever burned into our collective memory, including Ed Sullivan,

Bonanza, M.A.S.H., The Cosby Show, Seinfeld, The Wire, Lassie, The Sopranos, Family Ties, Monday Night Football, Cheers or, just choose your favorite.

As great as many of these shows were, and as influential as they have been on our American psyche (did they drive our culture or simply reflect it?), there has been no stronger influence on our evolution than books.

I won't go into detail here—but let's start with the biggest selling book of all time, The Bible. Civilization changer? I'd vote yes.

A few years ago, PBS did a poll that found To Kill a Mockingbird was America's all-time favorite novel. Think how that single book has contributed to the national consciousness about justice or race or family. Now, I'm not knocking those (few) television shows that have also contributed to societal good, shows like All in The Family and Modern Family or any Ken Burns documentary).

And to be sure, we can't leave newspapers and periodicals out of the mix. There is no comparison between reading a newspaper vs. watching the news. One makes life (and us) more interesting and one makes us (like Thanksgiving evening) more lethargic.

But if you are asked “what is your favorite book,” can you choose just one that you really loved and can vividly recall how you immersed yourself

into its pages, that created your own highly personalized experience? The intensity of that experience is something that is just not possible while watching a screen—which is so often interrupted by other screens.

Like television, you can choose your escape vehicle. Get the best-selling Ree Drummond 'Pioneer' cookbook (number one on the non-fiction best seller list) or read The Judge's List by John Grisham or curl up with the latest novel from Nicholas Sparks (it's okay, I won't judge).

Don't forget the classics. If you are a reader, my guess is that there is a copy of The Great Gatsby or A Farewell to Arms or Little Women or Slaughterhouse-Five or Gone with the Wind somewhere on your bookshelf. Do we really even look at our bookshelves anymore? Talk about a place of neglect.

Let's go back to what brought us to the (mostly) civilized nation that we have become (American Ninja Warrior, notwithstanding). Give yourself an early Christmas gift that isn't connected to a remote control—and isn't measured in clicks.

Start reading. Keep reading. Feel the joy.

*David R. Altman is a member of the National Books Critics Circle and the American Academy of Poets. His second poetry collection will be published in 2022. He and his wife Lisa live in Hoschton.*