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Last-minute gift book ideas

Sharon Abercrombie | Dec. 21, 2011 NCR Today

This week, my son and I will indulge in a gift ritual that began when I was living in California. It evolved in 1993 with these questions: "What to get Mom when she comes home to Ohio for Christmas?" "What to get for Alan when I visit Ohio for Christmas?"

"Books and more books" was our mutual choice that year. It worked so well, we've continued the custom. First we have lunch at our favorite restaurant, then off we go to the big book store. "Meet you back at the checkout counter in 45 minutes," we agree. Right down to the minute, we return, each carrying three or four treasures we have picked out for ourselves. Gift-wise, what could be better than this?

Now that I'm living back in Columbus, our holiday custom continues.

Needless to say, I love giving books to friends, too -- both old and new titles. Here are some at the top of my gift list which might spark your interest, as well.

For the environmentalist

One of my best women friends, an ardent environmentalist, will be receiving paperback copies of "Summer's Child" [1] and its sequel, "Summer of Roses." [2]

After discovering "Summer's Child" in 2005, I became a devoted follower of novelist Luanne Rice. This novel features an old white beluga whale named Nanny who swims away from her home migratory route around Nova Scotia and ventures down the Atlantic coast to keep a protective vigil over her longtime onshore admirer, 8-year-old Rose. Rose faces serious surgery to repair a heart valve defect she has suffered from since birth.

"Whales are the most gentle animals in the ocean," says Liam Neill, Rose's favorite male grown-up. He is tracking Nanny's journey on his computer and he is amazed by what is happening.

Neill is a marine biologist who runs a catch-and-release program to research migratory and predatory patterns of sharks. As a kid he lost an arm to a shark.

"How can you dedicate your life to studying something so evil as sharks?" Rose's mother, Lily, asks him.

"They're not evil, Lily. ... They kill to eat. It's just their instinct -- the way they stay alive. I had to learn that about them so I could stop hating them," he tells her.

Lily, who is trying hard to come to terms with an abusive husband, "a human shark" who drove her from her home, asks, "How can you stop hating something that did such damage?"

"You have to," Liam said, "Or it will kill you too."

"Summer of Roses" re-emerged as a gift prospect last week after Avaaz.org, a petition site, said Japan is using

disaster money to fund a whale slaughter while thousands of people remain stranded in radioactive areas without the government support they need to escape.

Avaaz reports: "Tens of thousands of families are struggling to rebuild their lives, trapped in radiation hotspots. Children are still forbidden from playing in parks nine months after the disaster, and many exhibit persistent symptoms consistent with radiation exposure -- which will take a terrible toll in cancers and other illness over the coming years. Few families are receiving any support, with those entitled to compensation pocketing a pitiful $1,000, while the government squanders up to $35,000 to kill a single whale. "

This is an insane situation. Japan has been stockpiling whale meat because so few people are inclined to eat it. The new disaster relief money isn't supporting the industry, Avaaz states, but is paying for security that accompanies whale slaughterers "to make sure they're not bothered by environmental activists trying to save the Planet's most majestic creatures."

For more information on how to take action against the whaling industry, go to Avaaz's website [3].

To console your spirit, check out Luann Rice's "Summer of Roses" and its sequel. Many of Rice's novels have an environmental angle to their plots, which is why I like her so much.

For the spirit-seeker

A new book idea for both women and men surfaced a couple of weeks ago during a visit to Cleveland. Charity Sr. Carol Kandiko, director of Centering Space, a house of prayer, recommended that I check out Jan Phillips' "No Ordinary Time: The Rise of Spiritual Intelligence and Evolutionary Creativity." [4]

Phillips, who spent two years in a convent before being dismissed for lack of a religious disposition, is known all over the world for her workshops and multimedia presentations. She has taught in more than 20 countries and her work has appeared in many publications, including *The New York Times*, *Ms.*, *People*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *New Age Journal* and *NCR*. Some of her books include "A Waist is a Terrible thing to Mind" and "Making Peace: One Woman's Journey Around the World."

Diarmuid O'Murchu, author of "Evolutionary Faith," describes Phillips' latest work as "a Book of Hours without a Monastery, ... synthesizing the wisdom embodied in an ancient tradition with a contemporary spiritual awakening, providing a creative synthesis from psalmody to poetry, from monastic time to the sacredness of every day and every hour. "

I'm only on the second chapter, but this book is a definite keeper, a precious treasure to accompany each day.

In her introduction, Phillips enjoins us to become today's mythmakers and co-creators of the 21st century.

"Growing up spiritually is a requirement of us this hour. There is no Geppetto God out there pulling strings. We are the vessels of the Divine, agents of Supreme Intelligence, neural cells of our home planet, and it is our job now to call God home to, to tend to the kingdom that is all around us and to create stories and cultures of hope and compassion."

Jan Phillips is a Sufi at heart whose writing bears the influence of the mystic poets Rumi and Hafiz. In one reflection, she writes: "There is nowhere else to find yourself, since all ground is sacred, nowhere to kneel that before you the Holy One is not in sight. ... The ground is holy wherever you stand. The Windmaker never moves out of sight. To find that One, turn just slightly the left, ready yourself for wonder, and open your eyes."

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Links:
[1] http://www.amazon.com/Summers-Child-Luanne-Rice/dp/0553587625/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1324490122&sr=1-1
[2] http://www.amazon.com/Summer-Roses-Luanne-Rice/dp/0553587668/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1324490122&sr=1-2
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