

# Children's Holiday Gift Books BY CATHERINE HONG

## LITTLE WOMEN

**The Complete Novel, Featuring the Characters' Letters and Manuscripts, Written and Folded by Hand**

**By Louisa May Alcott**

Curated by Barbara Heller

360 pp. Chronicle Books. \$40. (Ages 8 and up)

Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy might seem too modest, earnest and marriage-minded to appeal to the youth of 2021, and yet the March girls' fandom is strong. Love, rivalry, independence, ambition, artistic creation, sisterhood — Alcott's novel explores it all, leaving an irresistibly cozy afterglow to boot. While there's no shortage of print editions of "Little Women," this latest offers a gimmick that may be more compelling than color photos of Timothée Chalamet (heartthrob Laurie in the latest film adaptation). Heller, a set decorator for film and television, has peppered it with 17 fac-



From "Little Women."

similes of letters and other paper ephemera from the book, tucked into satisfyingly crinkly vellum envelopes. There's Mr. Laurence's letter to Beth (on monogrammed stationery) thanking her for the pair of slippers; Marmee's note to Jo commending her daughter's efforts to control her temper; Laurie's missive inviting Jo to join him for "all sorts of larks." We even get a foldout replica of The Pickwick Portfolio, the March girls' self-published newspaper. Deciphering the loopy 19th-century handwriting takes some effort, but readers raised in the age of email and texting will be charmed by the novelty of the (extremely low-tech) interactive experience.

## AFRICAN PROVERBS FOR ALL AGES

**Collected by Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Nelda LaTeef**

**Illustrated by Nelda LaTeef**

40 pp. Roaring Brook Press. \$19.99.

(Ages 4 to 8)

A book devoted to wise old sayings and aphorisms sounds lecturey, but fear not! This ingeniously designed volume is as engaging as a game, one that becomes more rewarding with each round of play. Here's

**CATHERINE HONG** blogs about classic children's books @mrslittlebooks.



From "African Proverbs for All Ages."

the setup: Each spread shows a scene of daily life in Africa, from a boy chasing antelope by a river to a nest of hatching ostrich chicks. The authors provide four traditional proverbs labeled A, B, C and D, and it's up to readers to pick which one they think best narrates the illustration. The scene of the antelope, for instance, could be depicting any of these sayings: "Hurry, hurry has no blessings"; "You can't chase two antelopes at once"; "Dance in the sun, but turn your back to the clouds"; "A roaring lion kills no game." Clearly there are no "right" answers — a concept that may itself be eye-opening for children. This is a book that sparks conversation. The proverbs were drawn from more than 25 African countries by Cole, a noted anthropologist and former director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, and LaTeef, who also provides the bright, textured collagelike illustrations. As Cole puts it, "A proverb is a short sentence based on long experience. Whether you are young or old, proverbs can open your mind to a whole new way of seeing the world."



From "Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright!"

## TIGER, TIGER, BURNING BRIGHT!

**An Animal Poem for Each Day of the Year Selected by Fiona Waters**

**Illustrated by Britta Teckentrup**

328 pp. Nosy Crow/Candlewick. \$40.

(Ages 3 to 7)

Attention parents and caregivers: You might have a new bedtime routine for 2022. This colossal illustrated anthology contains 366 poems about animals — one for each day of the year. The poets include names both widely familiar and less so, from Christina Rossetti, Carl Sandburg and Jack Prelutsky to the late-19th-century Japanese haiku master Masaoka Shiki and the contemporary Guyanese poet Grace Nichols. None of these poems are longer than a page, and many are just a few lines (ideal for tuck-in time). Waters has unearthed poems about an astounding range of creatures beyond William Blake's famous tiger: Grasshoppers, platypuses, hippos, snakes, a mole and even jellyfish get star turns. Teckentrup's luminous illustrations, which recall Eric Carle collages,

will coax children to gaze, linger and let the lovely sound of the poetry sink in.

## THE ULTIMATE ART MUSEUM

**By Ferren Gipson**

232 pp. Phaidon. \$39.95. (Ages 8 to 12)

It's the lucky few who can waltz their kids into the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Louvre for a dose of art history whenever they feel like it. While technology has gone a long way toward sharing masterworks beyond museum walls, let's not forget the power of good old-fashioned books. This luxuriously large-scale encyclopedic survey (based on "The Art Museum," a best-selling book Phaidon published for a general adult audience a decade ago) echoes the experience of walking through "the most magnificent museum in the world." There's even a "cafe" with food-related art. Ranging across continents and artistic approaches, it runs the gamut from pre-history (the Lascaux caves) to modern day (Amy Sherald's portrait of Michelle Obama). The curation is thankfully broad and inclusive, giving due real estate to non-Western and women artists. The Ishtar Gate of Babylonia, Choson dynasty scholar paintings, Mughal Empire miniatures, Chartres Cathedral, Cubism and conceptual art . . . it's all here. Like a tour guide who knows how to hold the attention of a gaggle of distracted school kids, Gipson, an art historian, does a fine job keeping the text fun, digestible and mercifully brief. She



From "The Ultimate Art Museum."

asks questions, points out cool details and shares entertaining anecdotes. Did you know that Indian miniature artists used brushes made with the fine hair of squirrels? Now you do.

## INSIDE THE SUITCASE

**By Clotilde Perrin**

**Translated by Daniel Hahn**

20 pp. Gecko Press. \$21.99. (Ages 4 to 8)

The French author/illustrator Perrin makes moody, intimate lift-the-flap books full of hidden surprises. In this one, a boy packs a little red suitcase and sets off alone on a mysterious journey. Traveling across the ocean and over mountains, he uses the contents of his valise to feed himself, stay warm, unlock a cage, pacify a sharp-



toothed ogre and find valuable treasure. For young readers, part of the fun lies in the challenge of remembering what's inside the boy's luggage. But most of the delight owes to Perrin's canny use of paper flaps. Little fingers will be itching to touch her tempting cut-outs of storybook A-frame houses, a faceted diamond and a towering mousse cake. And Perrin's technique of embedding these paper flaps within flaps within yet more flaps creates an Alice in Wonderland sensation of journeying deep into a secret place.



From "Inside the Suitcase."

#### CHANGE SINGS

A Children's Anthem

By Amanda Gorman

Illustrated by Loren Long

32 pp. Viking. \$18.99. (Ages 4 to 8)

Lyricism, inspiration and glowing greatness was expected — nay, demanded — when the country's youngest-ever presidential inaugural poet announced she was writing a children's book. But guess what? The book is indeed a marvel. In rhythmic, rhyming words simple enough for very young children to understand, Gorman's stirring poem reminds us that anything is possible when individual voices join together: "I'm a chant that rises and rings. There is hope where my change sings." What makes this single poem a fully-fledged book are the warm, radiant illustrations by Long, who also illustrated former President Barack Obama's "Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters" and the now-classic 2005 version of "The Little Engine That Could." Reminiscent of the 1930s Works Progress Administration murals that imbued everyday laborers with heroic stature, Long's acrylic and pencil images create a narrative about a steadfast young girl with an acoustic guitar who gathers children one by one to form a ragtag band in their urban neighborhood. Along the way, they become a grass-roots coalition of community-minded citizens. Cynics beware, this inspiring book truly sings.



From "Change Sings."

#### THE ROALD DAHL COLLECTION (SET 1) James and the Giant Peach, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and The Twits

By Roald Dahl

Illustrated by Quentin Blake

Introduced by Donald Sturrock

Vol. 1 (James): 168 pp.; Vol. 2 (Charlie): 192 pp.;

Vol. 3 (Twits): 96 pp. The Folio Society. \$115. (Ages 7 and up)

The London-based Folio Society, known for its heirloom-quality editions of classics such as "Anna Karenina" and "To the Lighthouse," has added to its children's list a set of three of Roald Dahl's best-loved works, beautifully bound with cloth covers and printed on luxuriously thick cream-colored paper. These delightfully dark and subversive tales featuring feisty children, nasty-smelling adults, bizarre goings-on and sweet revenge are just as humorous and thrilling as you remember. "James and the Giant Peach" relates the adventures of a mistreated orphan who escapes his awful aunts with the help of magically overgrown insects inside a gargantuan peach.

"Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" is the story of a downtrodden lad who wins a tour of the world's most mysterious chocolate factory. "The Twits," the shortest of the three, is the story of a despicable husband and wife who trap birds in glue and make life miserable for a family of monkeys. (Its diatribe against "hairy-faced men" is extra funny in this era of bushy beards.) The illustrations are all by Quentin Blake, whose wispy, madcap black-and-white drawings have become the definitive visual partner to Dahl. This fancy collection will set you back a pretty penny. But oh what a scum-diddlyumptious gift it would make for a child as good as Charlie, as brave as James or unfortunate enough to have Twits for parents.

#### THE DOG WALK

By Sven Nordqvist

32 pp. Floris Books. \$19.95. (Ages 3 to 7)

This wordless book is so lavishly detailed, so exuberantly trippy, a kid can spend hours getting lost in its pages. The Swedish



From "The Dog Walk."

author/illustrator Nordqvist's narrative follows a boy taking his grandmother's shaggy white dog out for a walk. But this is no ordinary stroll around the block: The twosome travel through fantastical landscapes and interiors that feel straight out of a Hayao Miyazaki film or a G-rated Hieronymus Bosch painting. There's a garden where goats pull 18th-century aristocrats on dollies, and a town square where gnomes drink beer and a ginormous rat plays the accordion. There's an over-the-top antique shop stacked with weaponry and taxidermy, and a looping, Escheresque train line. It's the kind of densely illustrated book (like one of Mitsumasa Anno's classic "Journey" books) where you can always find a new mischievously hidden detail. Kids will love using the spreads to play "I Spy." (Find the car shaped like a baguette! Find the man eating the plate!) Grown-ups will appreciate Nordqvist's sly visual jokes, like the stick figures who seem to have wandered in from another book entirely and the regular appearance of cranky businessmen — a reminder that wonder is where you find it. □



From "The Roald Dahl Collection (Set 1)."