

Books

Michael Dirda's wondrous holiday book recommendations

By Michael Dirda December 11 at 8:00 AM

It's that time of year again: You need presents — and quickly. May I suggest, to paraphrase Walt Disney's Pinocchio, that there's nothing like “a real book”?

Start with mysteries. If you thought Agatha Christie's **Murder on the Orient Express** was dazzling, wait till you read her masterpiece, **And Then There Were None**. The Folio Society offers to-die-for illustrated editions of both.

Readers who prefer short, sharp shocks will want **In the Shadow of Agatha Christie**, edited by Leslie S. Klinger (Pegasus), which collects “classic crime fiction by forgotten female writers: 1850-1917,” and **The Realm of the Impossible**, a hefty anthology of ultra-clever howdunits compiled by John Pugmire and Brian Skupin (Locked Room International). Comparably essential is **All But Impossible** (Crippen & Landru), the fourth collection of Edward D. Hoch's Sam Hawthorne stories — as devious as John Dickson Carr, as cozy as “Murder, She Wrote.”

Of course, you can't go wrong with any of the **British Library Crime Classics** (Poisoned Pen), most of them introduced by Martin Edwards, president of Britain's Detection Club. For Coachwhip Publications, Curtis Evans — the leading American scholar of the fair-play detective story — has recently rediscovered **The Roger Scarlett Mysteries**, novel-length puzzlers written under this penname by Dorothy Blair and Evelyn Page (the latter a late 1930s book columnist for The Washington Post). Sourcebooks, in its turn, has just reissued Francis Duncan's seasonally appropriate **Murder for Christmas** and two other 1940s mysteries featuring Mordecai Tremaine, a tobacconist (!) turned amateur sleuth. And certainly Trump-era Washingtonians will be drawn to **The Big Book of Rogues and Villains** (Vintage), in which Otto Penzler gathers tales of Raffles, Fu Manchu and scores of other charming or heartless master criminals.

Three current mystery novels should particularly appeal to those of a bookish or historical turn of mind: Con Lehane's witty **Murder in the Manuscript Room** is his latest 42nd Street Library Mystery (Minotaur), and Bonnie MacBird's second Sherlock Holmes adventure, **Unquiet Spirits** (HarperCollins) smoothly blends “whisky, ghosts and murder.” Not least, Peter Lovesey — the dean of English mystery novelists — remains as ingenious as ever in **Beau Death** (Soho), wherein Detective Peter Diamond discovers what may be the murdered remains of the 18th-century rake Beau Nash. Or are they?