

# Holiday Book Recommendations

With the holidays approaching, we asked a few colleagues to recommend books that might make good gifts. We hope that you or your loved ones will find some of these ideas appealing.

**KHRISTINE BROOKES**  
VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNICATIONS

*The Wright Brothers*  
by David McCullough

**T**hat Orville and Wilbur Wright were able to build, test, and pilot the first airplanes was an amazing feat in the early 1900s. That they did it with their own money—earned mostly in their small bicycle repair shop—is astonishing. McCullough details, through his usual careful research of personal letters and news reports, how the brothers designed their

first glider, researched the best place to test it, then methodically improved the design after each test flight—all while being largely ignored by both the media and the U.S. government (the latter of which did fund the aerial failures of many of the Wrights' competitors.) When the world did finally learn of the Wrights' accomplishments, it was completely on the brothers' terms. McCullough's telling is a tribute to the spirit of self-reliance and how human beings are far more innovative on their own, without government help.

**TREVOR BURRUS**  
RESEARCH FELLOW AND MANAGING EDITOR  
OF THE *CATO SUPREME COURT REVIEW*

*Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson

**S**tevenson is a Harvard law grad who has dedicated his life to defending the unjustly accused. This quasi-memoir describes some of his most memorable and tragic cases. Stevenson is the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, headquartered in Montgomery, Alabama. Most of his work is centered in the South, so race unfortunately plays a significant role in many of his cases. The book also recounts important cases he has won at the Supreme Court, including *Miller v. Alabama*, which established that the Constitution's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment forbids the mandatory sentencing of life in prison without the possibility of parole for juvenile homicide offenders. On top of being a riveting read, *Just Mercy* is another reminder that our justice system is severely broken. Actor Michael B. Jordan is now attached to the forthcoming movie, which will hopefully bring more attention to Stevenson's incredible work.

*Confessions of a Tax Collector: One Man's Tour of Duty inside the IRS*  
by Richard Yancey

**N**ow a successful writer of popular young adult fiction, Yancey was once a tax collector at the IRS. He had the worst job of all: to actually seize the assets of those deficient in their taxes. Yancey humorously, if not somewhat disturbingly, describes the soullessness of the life of a bureaucrat with the job of "feeding the beast," in the words of Culpepper, Yancey's colorful if slightly deranged training officer. Culpepper tells Yancey that his government-granted power makes him a



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“f\*\*\*ing demigod,” and Yancey starts to believe it. A very entertaining read for anyone, but particularly for those interested in the sociology and psychology of the state.

The Red Rising Trilogy by Pierce Brown

**I** predict that the Red Rising Trilogy, like *The Hunger Games* or *The Martian* before it, is on the verge of exploding in popularity. That’s fitting, since the trilogy is a little bit of both, with a hefty dose of *Game of Thrones* added in. It begins as a familiar, class-based dystopian science fiction, with the main character starting off as a lowly worker at the bottom of the Martian society’s hierarchy. A revolution starts, but that’s just the beginning. The subsequent twists and turns will keep any reader entranced, and the author’s *Game of Thrones*-esque willingness to kill off beloved characters will keep the reader guessing.

JASON KUZNICKI

RESEARCH FELLOW AND EDITOR,  
*CATO UNBOUND*

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*Prison Break: Why Conservatives Turned against Mass Incarceration*

by David Dagan and Steven M. Teles

**I**t’s far from clear to me that conservatives have decisively abandoned mass incarceration, but if they ever do, this book gives a convincing explanation for why they will: Law and order may be well and good, but moderation too is a conservative virtue. Public policy can change, and it does, and sometimes it changes for the better. Dagan and Teles offer a fascinating anatomy of one such change and perhaps a blueprint for others as well.

JOHN SAMPLES

VICE PRESIDENT AND PUBLISHER

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*Good Calories, Bad Calories*

by Gary Taubes

**I** generally do not go around forcing books I have read onto friends and

acquaintances, but people who wander across my path these days get an earful about this work. Gary Taubes tells a story of scientists utterly failing to practice a science of nutrition, a failure fostered in part by government funding and aggravated by federal dietary advice foisted on a gullible public. Read his detailed and disturbing story, consider how much harm was done by bad science and government dietary advice, and wonder what else taken for fact will turn out to be prejudice and blind faith.

TIMOTHY SANDEFUR

ADJUNCT SCHOLAR

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*Arguing about Slavery*

by William Lee Miller

**O**ne of the most moving books I’ve ever read, *Arguing about Slavery* covers John Quincy Adams’s often lonely battle for freedom in his days as a member of Congress in the 1830s and ’40s. For eight years, Adams opposed the “Gag Rule” that forbade Congress from even receiving petitions opposing slavery—in direct violation of the First Amendment. The crisis reached its climax when he introduced a petition calling for secession—which so scandalized southern congressmen that they tried unsuccessfully to expel him. His bold defense of freedom inspired younger politicians like Charles Sumner, William Seward, and others who led the abolition movement to triumph. Miller tells the story with all the drama and passion it deserves.

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*The Time It Never Rained*

by Elmer Kelton

**K**elton isn’t much known outside the Western genre, but his novels transcend that niche and qualify as genuine literature—literature that exalts the virtues of independence and hard work in a way endearing to libertarians. Set in a Texas border town during the awful drought of 1949–57, *The Time It Never Rained* tells the story of

rancher Charlie Flagg’s one-man battle to resist federal agriculture bureaucrats, overzealous Border Patrol agents, and the pressure to compromise his principles. And Kelton tells the story in the taught, evocative style that makes the great Westerns great.

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*The New Trail of Tears: How Washington Is Destroying American Indians*

by Naomi Schaefer Riley

**T**his isn’t a cheerful book—the crisis on America’s Indian reservations is horrific—but it’s an important one, and one of the few books to explain how the poverty, addiction, and despair so rampant in Indian country result from federal restrictions on private property rights and economic liberty. As Riley notes, land on reservations is owned by the government “in trust” for tribes, meaning that individuals can’t own it—or use it to generate capital, start businesses, or create wealth. American Indians are all citizens of the United States, with the same rights to opportunity and equal treatment all other Americans enjoy—yet for over a century, federal bureaucracy has closed those doors and helped reduce an entire ethnic group to poverty. Riley’s profile of the many brave Native Americans working to change things leaves the reader with the message that there is hope—if only we will pay attention.

SALLIE JAMES

DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT

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The Campus Trilogy by David Lodge

**I**f you have never read any novels by academic-turned-novelist David Lodge, you need to do so. His best-known work, and the one I would recommend for those new to the author, is his so-called “Campus Trilogy” of novels parodying academe, and they are brilliantly funny. The final of the series, *Nice Work*, was the first book of Lodge’s that I ever read and I am eternally grateful to the friend who recommended it to me, because I’ve been a devotee of Lodge ever since. ■