

Check It Out!

A Riddle of Books*

*Welcome to an entire issue of book reviews,
starting with one particularly powerful book*

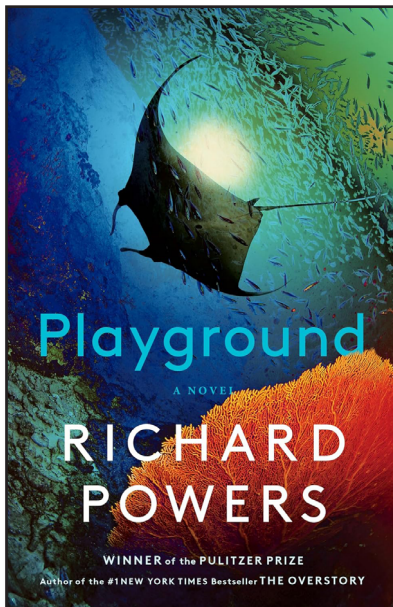
Calling the novels of Richard Powers multilayered or complex is a vast understatement. Every one I have read is as braided and polyphonic as a Bach sonata, as lyrical as a Wordsworth poem—even those full of science and technology. Reviewer Wendy Smith, writing in the *National Book Review*, nails it: “Soaringly imaginative yet firmly grounded in the real world, unabashedly intellectual but deeply felt, Richard Powers’[s] fiction deals with the most pressing issues of our time in the most wrenchingly human terms.”

Playground (2024) epitomizes all of the above, weaving together the lives of an artist, a marine scientist, a poet, and a computer genius. No less central are Earth’s oceans and the tiny Pacific atoll where the protagonists’ destinies converge. Themes of play and playing glide throughout the novel like the most graceful of sea creatures.

Ina Aroita is a half-Polynesian artist whom we first meet on Makatea atoll in French Polynesia, where intensive phosphate mining fed the world in the first half of the twentieth century. That enterprise died in 1966, and six decades later the 80-odd remaining residents face a vote: whether to permit another outside consortium to use the island for launching autonomous floating cities onto the open ocean (a libertarian conceit known as seasteading).

Much earlier, in 1947 Montreal, diver–marine scientist Evelyne (Evie) Beaulieu (drawn from the life of real-world marine scientist Sylvia Earle) discovers who she is when, at age twelve, she is tossed by her father into the deep end of a swimming pool with a prototype aqualung strapped to her back. As she stares upward, panicked, her father mouths, “All you need to do is breathe,” and breathe she does.

In a high school for gifted kids, later at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (Powers’s alma mater), Rafi Young,



who is Black, and Todd Keane, who is White, escape their dysfunctional families and bond over strategy games, including chess and Go. Rafi eventually finds his calling as a book- and library-loving poet; Todd as a pioneer of AI, including the social media platform Playground, which makes him insanely wealthy. Todd’s first-person account, told to a mysterious “you” when he is fifty-seven years old and suffering from Lewy body dementia, binds the book together until its convulsing final chapters.

My favorite parts of *Playground* are Powers’s depictions of ocean life, much of it written in the anthropomorphic language Evie and all scientists, including me, are warned never to use. Readers will find the walls between human and nonhuman life dissolved, human exceptionalism demolished in factual evocative passages.

Describing an active cleaning station in the reef off Makatea, for example, Powers writes,

... Makatea Spa teemed with more workers and clients than most successful businesses. Cleaner shrimp and wrasses removed the parasites, while dozens of customers waited patiently in the lobby of this combined surgery, dental office, and health resort. ... [Evie] could see the subtle acts of retaliation and self-policing that stabilized the rules of the win-win game. ... the honor system worked. ... To Evelyne’s eyes, the safe boundaries of this neutral DMZ resembled the magic circle of children’s play.

Whether for Powers’s propulsive plotlines and poetic prose, his insights into both human and nonhuman life, or the shocking reveal at the end of the book, I urge you to read *Playground*. Like Powers’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Overstory*, it could well widen your view of the planet we live on and the way we deploy our most exciting inventions.

—Ellen W. Chu

◆ *No Two Persons*

Erica Bauermeister (2023)

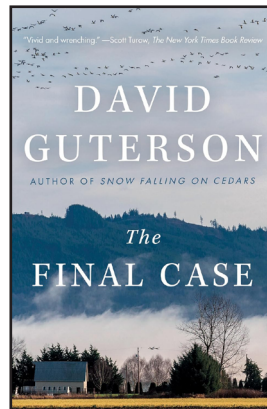
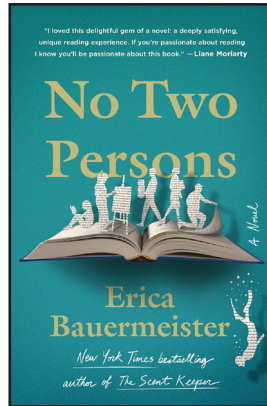
With *No Two Persons*, Port Townsend author Erica Bauermeister has written another compelling book, very different from her previous novels or her memoir *House Lessons*, which was our 2021 Community Read [see [story March 2021](#)]. As she explains in an author's note, her title came from the words of one Madame Swetchine, a well-educated Russian writer of the early nineteenth century, which are often misattributed to the considerably younger Edmund Wilson: "No two persons ever read the same book or saw the same picture." In this book, Bauermeister explores how the lives of ten seemingly unrelated characters are changed by reading a book titled *Theo*, written by one of these ten characters.

Although Bauermeister drops only a few hints about *Theo*, we learn a great deal about each of the book's ten characters. We enter the lives of *Theo*'s author; of the literary assistant who flags the book as one worthy of attention; of the renowned literary agent who gets *Theo* published; of the beautiful actor who escapes to a remote local island and discovers audiobooks; of the brilliant homeless teen who reads *Theo* in the damp garden shed where she's been hiding; of the free diver who holds his breath and plunges unbelievably deep; of the artist-sculptor whose mother drives her crazy; and others.

Not only are these readers linked by their relationship to the same book, but each one also has some connection to at least one other character, including the writer. Part of the fun of reading this novel is figuring out these connections. If you read a print copy and not an e-book or audiobook (all available through the library), pay attention to the faint Venn diagrams at the beginning of each chapter for clues about these connections. Warning: you might not have all the necessary clues until the final chapters.

This is a perfect book for lively book club discussions. Some local places might also be recognizable; my favorite description is of older women at a community pool. You'll also enjoy learning about some distant places. As one of the characters says, "[T]hat was the beauty of books, wasn't it? They took you places you didn't know you needed to go."

—Linda Rhines



◆ *The Final Case*

David Guterson (2022)

It was time to either read *The Final Case* or give it away. Books get only so long in my house before the unread ones move out to make room for others. I'd bought *The Final Case* out of loyalty to a beloved author, but frankly, I had some ambivalence. While I loved *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1995), I found the last book I'd read by Guterson not to my liking. As it turns out, though, reading this one was the right decision.

The plot revolves around the dynamics of two distinctly different families. The first comprises an aging father and his middle-aged son. The father is an octogenarian defense attorney who has had a long career defending criminal cases. He is still in practice but hasn't taken any cases for some time. As we begin to know him, we recognize that he is sharp and wise, and Guterson's book is worth reading just to meet him. At the time the story takes place, however, the attorney has lost his driver's license, so his middle-aged son, who is an author experiencing a profound dry spell, becomes his chauffeur. The son observes firsthand this last case and his father's handling of it. As our chauffeur-narrator, he shares his observations and leads us deeply into both families' backstories.

The court case involves the second family, who hold highly conservative religious beliefs and have adopted a teenage daughter from Ethiopia. The child dies of horrific abuse and neglect, and the adoptive mother is arrested and accused of murder. As we follow the octogenarian defense lawyer's investigation into the case, the details become increasingly disturbing. We are forced to examine society's beliefs about race, religious extremism, and the rights of children. The story takes place in western Washington, so local readers will be able to visualize the roads, neighborhoods, and perspectives the characters inhabit. For me, this geographic proximity heightened my response to the overwhelming details as I read.

Despite the appalling nature of the criminal case, this book's simultaneous exploration of the attorney's and his son's lives somehow manages to be uplifting. Guterson's storytelling is exquisite and insightful. I found the book to be both life affirming and culturally relevant—one I would definitely consider rereading.

—Margaret Peterson

◆ ***The Spy Who Came in from the Cold***

John le Carré (1963, several subsequent editions)

◆ ***The Russia House***

John le Carré (1989, several subsequent editions)

◆ ***Karla's Choice: A John le Carré Novel***

Nick Harkaway (2024)

The ends don't always justify the means,
but they are the only things that can.

—Reverend William Sloan Coffin, Jr.

The Spy Who Came in from the Cold and *The Russia House* (both still in print) bookend the formulaic phase of the Cold War. This is the period when the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation passed from horrifying to routine, on the way to the final phase of communism's slapstick collapse. The first novel offers fear; the second, hope. Sadly, the first seems more relevant today.

In *Spy*, an MI6 operative named Alec Leamas is charged with capturing a Stasi officer responsible for the deaths of numerous British agents in East Germany. Leamas fakes an existence of alcoholic destitution to entice the East Germans to recruit him as a turncoat. The scheme's success lands him in the middle of a bitter power struggle within the East German security services under the fevered atmosphere that prevailed in the wake of Khrushchev's hastily ordered construction of the Berlin Wall. It is easy to imagine Gary Oldman playing this character, as Leamas bears more than a passing resemblance to Jackson Lamb in the series *Slow Horses*. (Richard Burton played Leamas in the original 1965 British film.)

In *Russia House*, Barley Blair is a British book dealer navigating the partial opening of the (doomed, as we now know) Soviet Union to Western culture. MI6 presses him into service as a contact with a beautiful Russian woman named Katya, who has accidental access to an enormously important nuclear secret. They fall in love of course, but Katya is more than the stereotyped female character that le Carré has sometimes been accused of creating. He paints a vivid picture of her life as a single mother and dissident at a time when both those things were still dangerous in Russia.

The ending of *Spy* is bleak: a reminder that the strong do what they will, and the weak suffer what they must—very much the ethos of both the current American and Russian administrations. The ending of *Russia House* is both ambiguous and extremely moving. At the time, it was possible



for le Carré and his characters to imagine, however tentatively, a happy ending to the Cold War. That's much harder now.

—Rich Johnson

FOR BOTH longtime and late-to-the-party admirers of novelist John le Carré (as two of this newsletter's regular contributors are, judging from the number of le Carré novels reviewed here since 2017), *Karla's Choice* is a must. Written by le Carré's youngest son, Nick Harkaway, a novelist in his own right, this book is a new George Smiley story, one that takes place immediately after the events of *Spy* and well before those of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (first published in 1974).

As the book begins, Smiley has retired—living “between libraries and love, and [coming] as close to contentment as a man of his peculiar constitution is able.” Needless to say, this peace doesn't last, and the story that unfolds with pitch-perfect characters and events put me back into the familiar world of the Cold War MI6 (a.k.a. the Circus) and left me eager for more. After all, there are ten more years before *Tinker, Tailor* and plenty more before Smiley and his Russian counterpart, Karla, ostensibly conclude their battles. Even le Carré himself could not entirely let go of the morally ambivalent Cold War era, publishing *A Legacy of Spies* in 2017, which stars an aging Peter Guillam, Smiley's closest protégé. Stay tuned . . . —EWC

One Editor's Riddle

While mulling over what to do in this newsletter issue, I learned a new word—actually, a new meaning of a familiar word. The word is *riddle*, and the source is *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (translated by Andrew George, 2010). As children, we probably all learned this one: Q: What's black and white and red all over? A: A newspaper! {*Ahem.*}

In the epic poem, however—dating from cuneiform tablets written well before 3,000 BC—the Mesopotamian Noah, Uta-napishti, paints a lush picture of abundance that, the god Ea tells him, should reassure the people before other gods drown them all:

... and he will send you a rain of plenty:
an abundance of birds, a riddle of fishes,
he will provide a harvest of riches.
In the morning he will send you a shower of
bread-cakes,
and in the evening a torrent of wheat.

—Tablet XI, lines 43–47

Wondering if a riddle of fishes was anything like a pride of lions or a murmuration of starlings, I squinted through the magnifying glass that comes with every bound copy of the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary* and discovered that the second main definition of *riddle*, the noun, is a coarse-meshed sieve for separating corn from chaff and, I inferred, potentially fillable with fish. Perfect! I thought, what an apt description of this newsletter's collection of books—and of the editorial conundrum of if or how to link them.

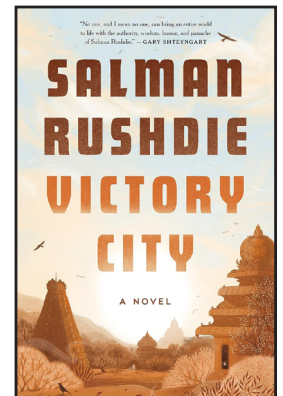
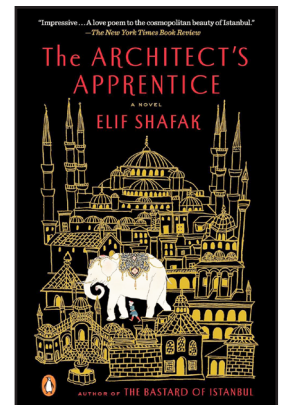
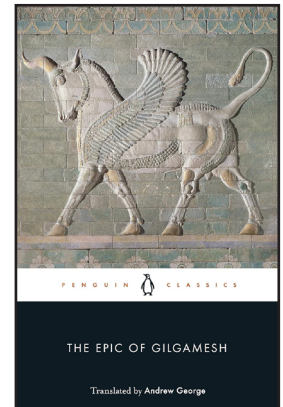
BACK IN FALL 2018, just over a year after I began my stint as this newsletter's editor, I wrote a [piece](#) titled, "In Praise of Mindless Reading." Of the nearly twenty books I mentioned in that piece, maybe only four could be labeled meaty (e.g., Charles Mann's *1491* (2005), Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012); the rest were satisfying distractions for me during trying times. Knowing I would need further distraction in the foreseeable future, I figured I may as well begin

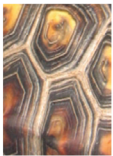
filling in some of the gaps in my literary and historical education.

Captivated by Kristine Kaufman's [review](#) this spring of *There Are Rivers in the Sky* by Turkish British writer Elif Shafak (2024), I began by reading (and listening to) Shafak's *The Architect's Apprentice* (2014). Starting in 1540, this story spans nearly a century of the Ottoman Empire, following the strangely long life of Jahan, who arrives in Istanbul at age twelve as a mahout, or caretaker, of a magnificent white elephant and is lucky enough to become one of four apprentices to the chief royal architect, Mimar Sinan. The novel opens a near-magical door into the Middle East, the magnificent real-world structures built centuries ago under Sinan's guidance, brutal wars and the chasms between classes, palace intrigue, love, loss, and heartbreak. Reading these two novels introduced me to Shafak, one of the finest writers of our time, reviled and prosecuted in Turkey, and an eloquent advocate for fiction as "the antidote to our extremely polarized and fractured times" (Shafak, quoted in the *Guardian* shortly before publication of *Rivers*). I now have a stack of her books to look forward to this winter.

Next it was time to tackle classic books or authors I hadn't yet read (shhh, don't tell): *Middlemarch* (1871–72) by George Eliot (born Mary Ann Evans) about nineteenth-century provincial life in England—but equally about navigating social mores and one's emotions in a culture very much less talkative than ours. To accompany it, I also read *My Life in Middlemarch* by Rebecca Mead (2014), a bibliomemoir in which the author retraces Eliot's places and times while recollecting core stages in her own life, through which she read and reread Eliot's masterwork. Having not read *Middlemarch* in my youth, I found this second book most helpful in plumbing the richness of the first.

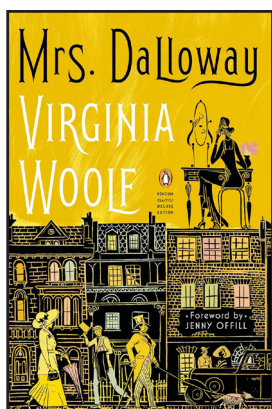
On to Salman Rushdie and Virginia Woolf. Rushdie's incredibly imaginative and playful *Victory City* (2023) felt almost like a continuation



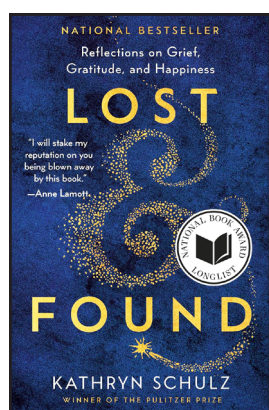


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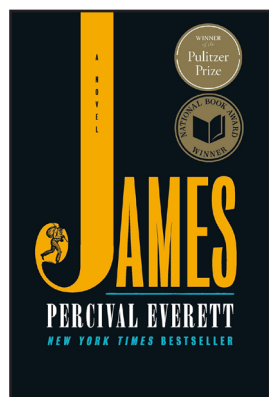
Richard Berg, Principal Architect
Amy I. Dahlberg and Tamara Halligan, Associates



of the periods and preoccupations I encountered in *Architect's Apprentice*, *Rivers*, and *Gilgamesh*, only farther east. Beginning in fourteenth-century southern India, it is an epic tale of a woman—a goddess or mere namesake?—who literally breathes an empire into existence from the sowing of seemingly ordinary seeds and lives for 250 years. It is a thoroughly enjoyable mélange of history and politics disguised as fantasy—or maybe the other way around—all leavened with Rushdie's trademark wit. As in Shafak's work, stories are the people; people are their stories, and the eternal human struggle between hubris and humility drives everything. Guess what wins.



Virginia Woolf, of course, has nothing to do with ancient history, at least not yet. But 2025 is the one-hundredth anniversary of her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), written when the author was entering her early forties and in a period of enormous energy and productivity. Once again, the emotions of several characters lie at the core of the book: the protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, her grace and elegance laced with hints of waywardness and regret; indecisive Peter Walsh, Clarissa's former suitor; and Septimus Warren Smith, shell-shocked veteran of World War I, who has no place in the society in which Clarissa is at home but whose thoughts in many ways mirror Clarissa's internal monologue. Beyond the story itself, however, I most enjoyed Woolf's stream-of-consciousness style, seen as experimental at the time. I perhaps too easily recognized the oscillating way her characters thought, shifting as I do from one topic to another without pause. I found myself rereading sentence after sentence, finding the grammatical subject, then searching for the verb accompanying that subject, then rereading the subject + verb for meaning, then the whole sentence once more. Phew! But I loved it; it mattered to me not at all whether the story took place in London (which it does) or somewhere imaginary (which it doesn't).



Then a friend handed me a copy of Erica Bauermeister's *No Two Persons* (2023), which I devoured and loved (*reviewed p. 2*). The same friend also shared a copy of *James* (2024) by Percival Everett, a reimagining of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* told from the enslaved Jim's viewpoint. Humorous, terrifying, and filled with wordplay—Everett is a master of argot, slipping easily between ordinary nineteenth-century Southern dialects and what James calls his “slave filter” to make himself sound ridiculous and therefore unthreatening to White folk—it planted the life of a slave in front of my eyes and ears and introduced me to another literary icon whose work I now want to read.

Finally, there's *Lost & Found* (2022) by *New Yorker* writer Kathryn Schulz. I had heard a radio interview with her and put the book on hold at the library without even remembering why. A couple of pages in, I rediscovered exactly why and immediately bought my own copy because I needed to write in it (something I don't typically do anymore because it makes books harder to donate!). Growing out of Schulz's *New Yorker* essay “Losing Streak,” published in 2017, the book recounts Schulz's finding the love of her life even while her father was dying; it also brings into sharp relief what *and* really means: the ampersand, &—now a mere punctuation mark we editors tend to avoid—was once the twenty-seventh letter of the Latin alphabet. *And* is not simply a grammatical conjunction or even the feeling of conjunction; it is continuation, of today's lost and found items, of tomorrow's vast onward: there is always something more, even if we ourselves are not here to know it. Alternately hilarious, uplifting, thought-provoking, and sob-inducing, *Lost & Found* is now number two of my top-five G.O.A.T. books; Shafak's *Rivers* is number one. For now. 📖



... Every Story a Voice

◆ *By Any Other Name*

Jodi Picoult (2024)

Four hundred nine years after the death of William Shakespeare, controversy still swirls around the question of who, exactly, wrote those plays. Was it the actor turned theater owner named Shakespeare, or was it any one of the numerous candidates put forth over the centuries by scholars, historians, actors, and zealous royalists?

Add to that mix the rather persuasive case made by bestselling author Jodi Picoult in this novel. Picoult tells the parallel stories of sixteenth-century Englishwoman Emilia Bassano and twenty-first-century American Melina Green—two women with a shared passion for writing, especially playwriting—both facing restrictions and prejudices that prevent them from presenting their work on stage, at least under their own names.

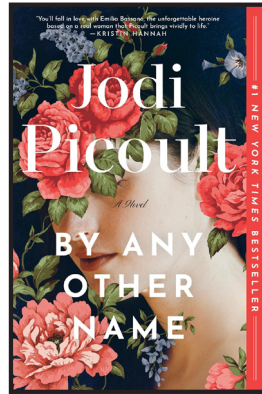
I found myself more interested in Emilia's story, which Picoult based on the barely known life of the real Emilia Bassano, a converso (Jew who converted to Catholicism, particularly during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries under the Spanish Inquisition) who became the first woman to publish a book of poetry in English. Although educated in language, music, history, and writing, Emilia was expected

only to serve and amuse the men she would be attached to. She is made the mistress of the Lord Chamberlain and is thus exposed to the world of the theater. Picoult lays out a plausible course explaining how a woman like Emilia could go from writing in secret to penning the exquisite works we know as Shakespeare's and why she would allow the actor to produce them under his own name, leaving her in obscurity.

Melina's story is not unlike her distant relative Emilia's. She, too, wants to break into the male-dominated world of the stage, and she has the talent to do so. But a series of roadblocks and misunderstandings leads to her submitting a play for a festival under a male pseudonym: the play's success is attributed to someone else, thereby testing the limits of friendship and her desire to be seen and heard as a creative person.

Whether or not you find yourself persuaded that Emilia held the pen behind some of the greatest plays ever written, *By Any Other Name* is not only a great read full of historical texture and interesting characters but also a thought-provoking examination of the difficulties women, past and present, have had in making their voices heard.

—Kristine Kaufman

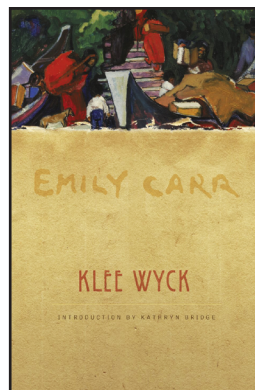


◆ *Klee Wyck*

Emily Carr (1941, 2003)

Best known as a painter of British Columbia landscapes and of totem poles and carved statues crafted by First Nations people, Canadian Emily Carr (1871–1945) also left a number of significant writings, including her first book, *Klee Wyck*, a memoir of time she spent as a girl in the province; the title means Laughing One, the nickname she was given by her First Nations friends. Originally published in 1941, the book won the Governor General's Award for Nonfiction and has been in print ever since.

To help her remember details, the fifteen-year-old Carr made notes during her sketching and painting visits to abandoned and occupied First Nations villages and their environs. Some five decades later, an ailing Carr meticulously edited the twenty-one sketches collected in this book. In the introduction to the 2003 edition, Kathryn



Bridges explains that Carr had a mission: not only to “bring life and dignity to these people, to give them individuality and voice,” but also to reveal the wrongs inflicted upon them by the era's Christian missionaries. Seeing her writing as a complement to her painting, Carr remarked, “I did not know book rules. I made two for myself. They were about the same as the principles I use in painting—get to the point as directly as you can; never use a big word if a little one will do.”

This book of vignettes gives a moving peek into the life and culture of First Nations peoples, even as their cultures were being violated by European settlers and missionaries. A bonus for Port Townsend library visitors: Next time you go upstairs to the Carnegie Room, stop at the landing, and you will find a bronze sculpture of Emily Carr donated by a generous patron.

—Geraldynn Rackowski

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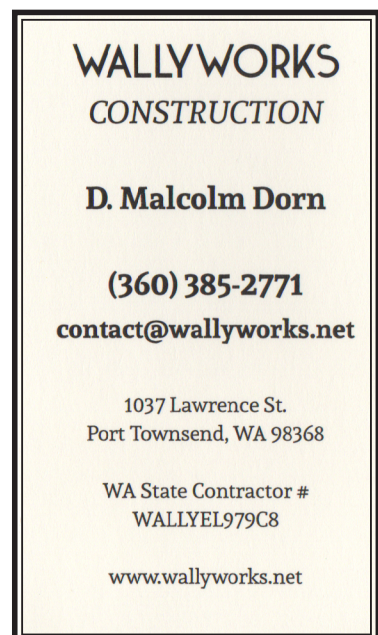
As holidays approach, remember that the **Friends' bookshelves in the library foyer are open** whenever the library is open and offer an ever-changing selection of the best of the best books donated to us. Unfortunately, our **Bookshop** is closed pending structural repairs to the Charles Pink House. Thank you for continuing to support us, and watch for pop-ups!

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THE PORT TOWNSEND PUBLIC LIBRARY was founded in 1898 by volunteers and, thanks to continuing community support, has remained an active Carnegie library since its present doors opened in 1913.

The Friends of the Port Townsend Library, established in 1978, supports programs, services, materials, and projects beyond what the city's library budget covers. Every year we fund reading programs, events, and activities for all ages; we also hold book sales and publish newsletters. Newsletters are available in the library, around town, and at friendsofptlibrary.org.

Our funding comes primarily from supporters, donations, and book sales. We invite anyone to become a Friend and attend our board meetings, which take place on the second Wednesday of each month, at 3:30 PM. For the remainder of 2025, meetings will be held at the Rosewind Common House, 3131 Haines St., instead of the Library Learning Center (a.k.a. Charles Pink House). Please email friendsofptlibrary@gmail.com for updates.

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