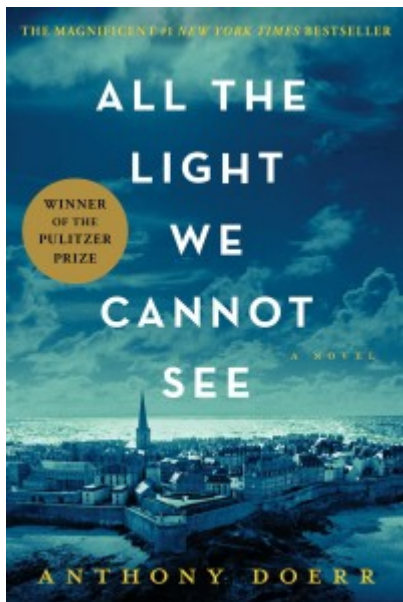


2 books that would be wonderful to unwrap

By Kim Wyatt

I've read that in Iceland on Christmas Eve, people often exchange books and spend the evening reading. In the spirit of this, I offer a review of two books that recently captivated me and would make fine gifts for the fiction and nonfiction readers in your life. For busy readers, I've boiled it down to one line.



“All the Light We Cannot See”

By Anthony Doerr

Scribner, 531 pages, \$27 hardcover

One line review: I called in sick to finish this book.

“I avoided this book for months, and was finally pressed to read it for a book club. A story of World War II and a pair of plucky children? Perhaps I thought I'd read enough war novels, and I wasn't in the mood to see young ones forced to be

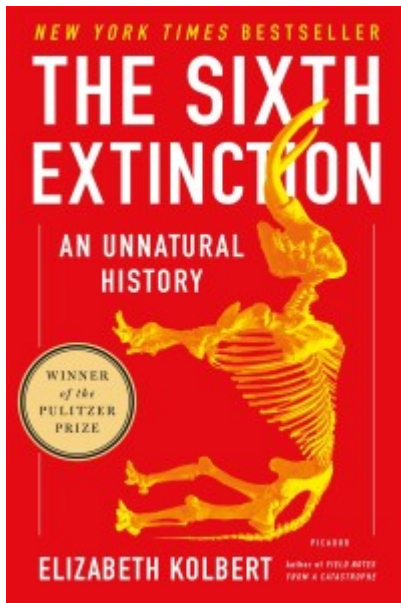
resilient. But the looming book club deadline forced me to read, and about 20 pages in I acquiesced, fluffing my pillow and sinking deeper under the covers. And there I stayed.

Plot, character, setting, beautiful language, this book has it all. There is a reason "All the Light We Cannot See" won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The novel's inventive father-daughter relationship charmed me, and the language is stunning. It took author Anthony Doerr 10 years to write this book, and it shows. Although it took a while to get into it, by the time "The war dropped its question mark," I was in love.

Set in Germany and France at the dawn of World War II, the story centers on Marie Laure, a blind French girl who flees when her locksmith father disappears from Nazi-occupied Paris. I won't give away the creative lengths her father goes to ensure her skills and safety, but it's a heart-tugging tour de force. Werner is a tech-savvy German orphan who is claimed by the Hitler Youth for his radio skills; he doesn't mind having a full belly. The youth eventually end up in the coastal village of Saint-Malo, where the tides masterfully turn.

Survival and morality are themes, of course, but so skillfully woven is this tale that you connect with the characters and read on, hoping for the best. There is a subplot about a dangerous jewel, but it was Doerr's language and characters that cast the spell I'm still under.

If you've got a reader in your life, you could do far worse than put this book in his or her stocking. Be warned, they may not come up until they are done.



“The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History”

By Elizabeth Kolbert

Picador, 336 pages, \$16 paperback

One line review: A pleasant, engrossing way to learn about our imminent extinction.

There was no better place to read “The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History,” than Death Valley; the geologic time in evidence make concerns about humanity seem like folly. It didn’t hurt that the Las Vegas Astronomical Society was there for the annual Winter Star Party. Each night, we’d look through monster telescopes at whorls of colorful galaxies and remark on how small we are.

In Elizabeth Kolbert’s latest book, we don’t seem small at all—in fact, humans seem quite powerful, and wired to destroy everything we touch. (This is weirdly comforting, given the state of our environment. *We can’t help it, see?*) Whether you believe in climate change or not, things aren’t like they used to be, and the rate of change is unprecedented. While some plants and animals adapt, more and more do not. This book is a compelling documentation of the Anthropocene, the epoch currently influenced by *Homo sapiens*, and for anyone

interested in science, history and our relationship with the environment, it's a great read.

Kolbert, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, has an interesting beat. In this book, which won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction, she lays out the history of extinctions on earth in a way that is accessible, and strangely not depressing. Fascinating case studies build—mastodons, the auk, innumerable insects, dinosaurs and meteors, too—and the reader is left to connect the dots. By the end of the book, there aren't many ways out. But Kolbert has a light touch, good humor and smarts; she takes us to noteworthy places, where we meet scientists who are paying attention.

Some claim that the flaw in this book is that Kolbert offers no prescription. But we already know what we could and should do. We already understand the end result of unchecked capitalism on our environment, on the disappearance of our very own habitat. Yet we choose to act against the greater good of all creatures, including ourselves, as if fossil fuels aren't a dead end, as if our actions have no consequences.

“Right now,” Kolbert writes, “we are deciding, without quite meaning to, which evolutionary pathways will remain open and which will forever be closed ... it will, unfortunately, be our most enduring legacy.”

*Kim Wyatt is the owner of the independent press **Bona Fide Books**.*