



WEEKENDER

CHRISTMAS

GUIDE

2010

Welcome

Admit it, the thought of Christmas gives you an eye twitch.

Then dear reader, meet your *Crikey* elves. Yes, elves. Just go with it.

We've hand selected some of our brightest and most informed contributors to stuff your stocking for you.

Stop sniggering.

Ignore the inner Grinch struggling under the weight of tinsel and Bing Crosby tunes as you peruse the following wealth of yuletide inspiration.

The elves have made a list, and they've checked it twice.

So save your sanity this summer and steal it.

Pretend you were the well informed and thoughtful bookworm who came up with the genius idea of buying nanna a copy of *How to Make Gravy* (it was, in fact, *Literary Minded's* Angela Meyer but nanna doesn't need to know that.)

Fake it with the help of *Cinetology's* Luke Buckmaster and let him pick the best movies of 2010 for your DVD collection -- pretending of course they're for your deserving partner. *White Noise* blogger Dan Barrett covers the best DVDs from the small screen.

Foil your smug children with your tech know-how with Stilgherrian at your side and his comprehensive run-down of the best and worse gadgets from the year.

Let *Curtain Call's* Jason Whitaker help you impress your snobby friend with a diary decked out with the best theatre productions slated for 2011 -- and invite her if you're feeling generous.

And, after all that exhausting channelling of the true spirit of Christmas, promise to take yourself on a holiday to one of the exotic far off locales that team *Back in A Bit* have pulled together in a series of postcards from around the world.

Ho ho ho. Ho.



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Theatre

Curtain Call



Something old, borrowed and blue on stage in 2011

Australia's theatre companies are aggressively spruiking their 2011 season tickets for Christmas. If you think too much theatre is never enough, **Jason Whittaker** previews the best of the stage

The whole world's a stage, and there's a whole world of entertainment on stages across the country in 2011. Give the gift that keeps on giving: season tickets to your local theatre company. The new season holds much promise, with new artistic directors in place at some of the country's top companies delivering an eclectic mix of shows.

Sydney Theatre Company delivers plenty of glamour -- 'Our' Cate Blanchett and hubby Andrew Upton are the creative force behind the company -- and substance with its mix of classics, contemporary drama and comedy, dance and musicals. It opens with a play about the invention of the vibrator -- *In The Next Room (Or The Vibrator Play)* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, believe it or not, and made writer Sarah Ruhl the darling of Broadway. (It's a co-production with the Melbourne Theatre Company, so you'll see it down south, too.) Purists should be satisfied with Harold Pinter (*No Man's Land*, a co-production with the Queensland Theatre Company), Bertolt Brecht (*Baal*) and German playwright Botho Strauss (*Gross und Klein*, with Cate on stage). And there's a whole host of Australian talent on stage, from Bryan Brown and Colin Friels (*Zebra!*), Miranda Otto (*The White Guard*), Leah Purcell (*Blood Wedding*) and Eddie Perfect (a restaging of Melbourne company Malthouse's *The Threepenny Opera*). Also in Sydney, Ralph Myers marks his first season as **Belvoir Street Theatre** artist director (stepping into Neil Armfield's clown-like shoes) with an exciting program of all-Aussie works, new and old.



Simon Phillips has programmed his final season at the **Melbourne Theatre Company**, with bankable crowd-pleasers (perennial playwright Joanna Murray-Smith delivers another in *The Gift*; David Williamson returns with a long-awaited sequel to his 70s classic in *Don Parties On* and more challenging works. *Next To Normal* is an extraordinary new musical from New York, a contemporary warts-and-all portrait of a woman battling bi-polar disorder. The show has a Pulitzer, Tonys and a long Broadway run under its belt, with Kate Kendall in the demanding lead role. After the wildly critical and popular success of *Richard III* this year, Phillips teams up again with his Shakespearean muse Ewen Leslie to present a retelling of *Hamlet*. Even those who don't care for William's work will be clamouring to see this. And to round off the season? Geoffrey Rush in a dress, of course -- he'll play Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's timeless *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

At the **Malthouse Theatre** new artistic boss Marion Potts has served up an intriguing half-year program of dance and drama in 2011 that will enrage and entertain as only the city's biggest independent outfit can.

Change at the top in Queensland, too, with QTC director Michael Gow making way for Wesley Enoch. But Gow lingers to direct three works, including the retelling of a classic story in *Faustus* in partnership with the Bell Shakespeare group (and starring John Bell). There's French farce in a back-to-back bill of *The Coal Seller Affair* and *A Murderous Affair*, Tennessee Williams' celebrated *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (also playing Perth), George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and new Australian play *Water Falling Down*, which will see QTC acting regular Andrea Moor in the director's chair for the first time.

Adelaide theatre-goers will be treated to a David Mamet (*November*, starring Garry McDonald), an Anton Chekhov (*Three Sisters*), Andrew Bovell's twisted *Speaking In Tongues* and the award-winning gay drama *Holding The Man* courtesy of the **State Theatre Company of South Australia**. While in Perth, the flagship **Black Swan Theatre Company** will open its brand-new Heath Ledger Theatre with a seven-play season featuring Tim Winton's first stage work (*Rising Water*, a co-pro with the MTC), Murray-Smith's contemporary romance *Ninety* and Bovell's latest, *When The Rain Stops Falling*, also makes it west.

Opera more your thing? In Sydney and Melbourne **Opera Australia** debuts brand-new productions of *La boheme* and *The Merry Widow* and an Australian premiere of Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*. Not to mention the old favourites, from *Madama Butterfly*, *Don Giovanni*, *La traviata* and *The Mikado*. Something for everyone, really...



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TV & DVD's

White Noise



Small screen Christmas joy

Habitual TV watcher and *Crikey's White Noise* blogger **Dan Barrett** does little else but watch telly. So he's across the best DVDs and books to stuff stockings this Christmas season.

Buying a gift for the TV aficionado is getting increasingly more difficult. After a few years of the DVD format being available, the obvious DVD box sets of television shows have already been gifted. Is there anyone at this point who doesn't own *The Wire*, *Black Books* and *Arrested Development* on DVD?

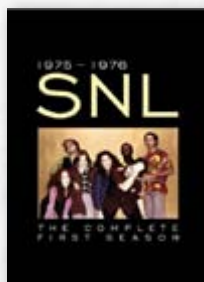
Despair not. There are a few interesting options on the shelf that are unlikely to already be owned by your loved one.

For that friend who still won't shut up about *The Wire*, have they checked out the HBO mini-series ***Generation Kill***? Co-written by David Simon and Ed Burns, who worked on *The Wire* together, *Generation Kill* is a seven-episode series about an embedded reporter in Iraq. It's as tight, gritty, and richly textual as *The Wire*.



Who, *Press Gang* may be a little more popular than usual this Christmas.

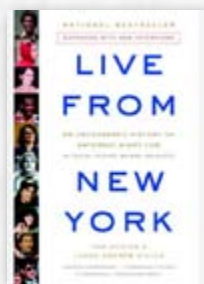
The first five years worth of ***Saturday Night Live*** have been released on DVD and are seen as the high point of the show's run. The first season is of particular interest. The show was less sketch-dominated and was instead more balanced as a variety show with alternative



musical acts. The first season's cast included Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi, Gilda Radner, and Chevy Chase. Guests include Paul Simon, Andy Kaufman, Candice Bergen and Buck Henry. Dripping with TV history it stands as an achievement in late-night US television.

Of course, a gift of a DVD can be more than a little bit easy. If you really want to impress, you might be well served in giving the gift of a book about television. Each year there are always a number of annuals on offer, but there are also some really great books about TV and the industry.

While the aforementioned season one DVD box set is a great gift, even more interesting is this book on the US TV institution: ***Live from New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live***. Written by Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller, this book offers an oral history of the first 25 years of the comedy series and offers frank memories of that time by the show's cast and writing staff. Drugs, booze, sex and comedy all play a big role in the show and all of it is laid bare for the reader.



The War on Late Night is a quasi-sequel to *The Late Shift*, with TV writer Bill Carter offering a detailed insight into the decision to reinstate Jay Leno as the host of *The Tonight Show*, replacing new host *Conan O'Brien*. While this book certainly isn't as fun as *The Late Shift*, it does provide a great insight into the fading value of a late night TV institution.

The TV-related gift is almost always a winner. Even if the recipient isn't wildly enamored with their present it always provides a very welcome respite from spending time with the family on Christmas Day. It's nothing but win.

THE BEST GIFTS CAN'T BE WRAPPED.



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Gadgets

A geek's Christmas



For geeks Christmas is about one thing – gadgets. **Stilgherrian** reviews the best, the worst, and how your e-device connects to the online world.

Never before has the array of mobile computing gadgets on offer demonstrated technological convergence. The choice is as much about lifestyle, branding and tribal loyalty as price, feature lists and logic. Choose your gift wisely. Tablet computers, smartphones and e-book readers now represent points in a multi-dimensional continuum whose axes include size, computing power, battery life, text readability and cool factor. Oh, and price. They're all computers in a flat case, but emphasise different priorities.

If it's bigger than about five inches -- yes, in 2010 computer screens are one of two things still measured in inches -- and can do general computer



Some will balk at being locked into Apple's vision for the world. But the alternatives are also integrated visions.

Google's Android operating system works most cleanly when integrated with their cloud-based Gmail, Google Docs, Google Calendar and Google Contacts services, and with software from the Android Market. Microsoft's Windows 7 (for tablets) and Windows Phone 7 (for smartphones) integrate with Windows Live, Office Live, Xbox Live and their Marketplace.



stuff, then it's a tablet. If it fits in your pocket and can make phone calls then it's a smartphone. But the boundaries blur: some tablets can make voice calls.

Apple's iPad is the tablet of desire, of course, and their iPhone the smartphone. The iPod Touch is pretty much an iPhone without the phone -- a pocket iPad. Slick hardware and well-integrated software stuck together with Steve Job's personal brain juices. Plus Apple's insanely-successful vertically integrated business, from iPad / iPhone / iPod through the iTunes software to the iTunes Store with Apple-approved products and Apple's not-as-successful MobileMe cloud services.



Gadgets

Apple stuff comes only from Apple, but there's a huge range of Windows 7 and Android devices from most of the major manufacturers. Deals with telcos mean they can often be bought on subsidized contracts. There's plenty of buzz about Android devices like Samsung's Galaxy Tab, HTC's Desire HD and the Dell Streak; rather less about Telstra's \$299 T-Touch Tab, which has received poor reviews.

In the Windows world it's all HTC 7 Mozart, Samsung Omnia 7 and LG Optimus 7, at least here in Australia.

E-book readers remain a separate category, at least until chemistry catches up with the power demands of tablets and smartphones. They trade off general computing grunt and moving images to concentrate on readable back-and-white text and long battery life. Amazon's Kindle is the best-known, with six-inch display versions priced under \$200 and the 9.7-inch Kindle DX at \$379. Cheaper no-name e-book readers can be found.

E-books -- books without an actual book -- are just one path books are taking. Mongoliad is another. Science-fiction writers Neal Stephenson and Greg Bear are delivering this community-driven novel in weekly installments, in collaboration with artists, film-makers and game designers. As the authors explained in an awkward interview for ABC Radio's *The Book Show*, it could run forever -- though for now subscriptions start from \$5.99 for six months.



Meanwhile Blurb changes the economics of the physical book. It combines design-it-yourself software with a print-on-demand service for production runs as small as a single unit. Books become a personal or family memento. Or Blurb can just be a place to buy

A geek's Christmas



books well outside the mainstream.

For other unusual gifts, try the websites that have created a global marketplace for small-scale craft. Red Bubble for wall art, t-shirts and other clothing. Or Etsy for everything from banksia nut coasters to a blue-ringed octopus vase.

If all that fails, and you're more the practical socks-and-underwear kind of gift-giver, consider that few people



have their data backed up properly. External hard drives and USB flash drives might be boring, but they're useful. And flash drives come in novelty forms. Check Japanese online stores for the weirdest.



Travel

Back in a bit



Around the world in five odd stops

Crikey has spent a lot of time this year poking around the odd places, from countries tourists rarely visit to being hassled by officials and finding somewhere new in the classics.

Paris, London, Tokyo, New York. Sure, great cities, but let's face it, there's more to travelling than luxury hotels and watching the set of your favourite film come to life. Instead, *Crikey* has spent a lot of time this year poking around the odd places, from countries tourists rarely visit to being hassled by officials and finding somewhere new in the classics. Whether you'd ever visit in real life or just in day dreams, strap yourself in to the Back in a Bit jet as it zips around the weirdest and most wonderful destinations of the year.

A pheasant spot of hunting in England

Rafiq Copeland writes: Recently I was invited pheasant hunting by Bill, a former South West chairman of the National Farmers Union. Bill is a six foot four gangly baritone, a sort of West Country Ian McKellen, and when he invites you pheasant hunting you say yes. I said yes.



Bill picked me up on Monday morning of what turned out to be the last day of hunting season. As I had never been shooting before it was agreed that I would be a 'beater' for the day. 'To be a really effective beater,' I was told, 'you have to think like a pheasant.' This didn't, I assume, mean emptying my mind into a kind of Zen like pheasant stupidity. Bill assured me that the game-keeper would give me very clear instructions and there was absolutely no chance at all of me being shot. So that was encouraging.

When we arrived at 'the hunt' I very quickly realised two things. I was about thirty years younger than anyone else, and I was extremely underdressed. The standard kit consisted of khaki wellingtons, long green socks tied up with red tassels worn outside of the boots, tweed plus fours, a tweed hunting jacket, a tweed vest, tweed tie and a tweed flat cap. There was a lot of tweed.

Finding the hidden side of Syria

David Blair writes: Syria — a small country near Iraq and Israel, a totalitarian rogue state, member of the axis of evil along with North Korea and Iran. That summarises what many of us know about Syria.



I wanted to know more and spent a month travelling this ancient Biblical land. My first impressions were of thriving vibrant cities, vast barren landscapes, valiant efforts at reaf-forestation, struggling plantations of olives and pomegranates carved out of the desert, and astonishing, fabulous ruins of ancient civilisations. Friendliness, kindness and hospitality are overwhelming. Time after time people smile and say "welcome to Syria". They really make you feel welcome with innumerable invitations, gifts and smiles. Australians seem to be especially welcome.

But aspects of Syria are disturbing. The first is the desperate state of the environment. Roadsides are mulched with deep drifts of plastic bags. Building rubble and other debris covers the landscape. Rivers are clogged with plastic floating on stagnant ponds. You wonder if anyone cares for this country. Looking up from this ugliness, often what you see is a grand presidential portrait. The face of President Assad is everywhere. The presidential portraits often appear as threesomes. In the centre, Assad senior, a benign looking fellow who ruled with an iron fist and Soviet support until his death in 2000. On his right Basil al-Assad, the fast living gangster-looking son in dark glasses, who was groomed for his father's job until he was killed in a car crash in 1994. Opposite him the present president Bashar al-Assad, who was brought back from his ophthalmology career in London once the number one son had died. Bashar looks modest, earnest and somewhat bewildered, staring out from portrait after portrait.



Water is life

Clean water is essential for life, but more than 70% of people living in rural East Timor have to walk for hours every day to access it.

Carrying heavy water containers is an exhausting task, which takes up valuable time and energy. It prevents women from doing vital domestic or income generating work and stops children from going to school.

This, and a lack of safe sanitation, means that thousands are suffering from easily preventable diseases such as diarrhoea and cholera. Children are particularly affected.

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Travel

Back in a bit



Another peaceful day in Kashmir with 200 soldiers in riot gear

Nick Johns-Wickberg writes: It's a typically freezing day in Kashmir's capital city Srinagar and my travelling companion Mike and I are having a nice afternoon stroll. We're probably on the main street of the city but, like everywhere else in India, the grid looks like something designed by a drunk five year-old, so it's hard to be sure.

As we walk we discuss all the issues of importance in our life at the moment: how much we'd have to pay for a shisha pipe (\$3, as it turns out –bargain!) and where we have to turn off to get to the Jama Masjid (main mosque).



The street is peaceful and, save for the occasional "where you from my friend?" coming from shopkeepers on the side of the road, everyone seems content going about their own business and leaving the two white boys to meander undisturbed.

After a few false turns and a few cheekily misleading directions from bored locals, the tip of what must surely be the mosque pokes itself above the canopy of roofs to our left. Excited, I whip my camera out, eager to put it to use on something big and historical. The road curves to the left, and, hoping for some kind of inspirational shot to jump out at me, I turn the corner with camera held up in dumb tourist position: at head height and about a foot away from me face.

Shanghai is for jerks

Kevin O'Faircheallaigh writes: Shanghai has been one of the destinations I've been most looking forward to on our Asia itinerary. It's supposed to be the more modern and progressive of the Chinese mega cities, and I was eager to get a glimpse of the country which, according to many, owns the next century. Couple this with the fact that almost everyone we've met has told us we HAVE to go to Shanghai, including the manager of our hostel in Kuala Lumpur who said "what are you still doing in this shit hole if you could be in Shanghai?!" (those weren't his words obviously, but I'm an excellent reader of subtext), and we boarded the train in Hong Kong giddy with excitement.



The train ride itself was far more enjoyable than usual, with the cabins being embarrassingly nicer than some of the hotels we've stayed in. The landscape can be a little depressing, but having made the drive through the anti-abortion sign minefield that is the road between Brisbane and Toowoomba, I was disinclined to start judging.

Things got a little hairy when we arrived. Firstly, they didn't open the train doors for about half an hour after we pulled in, and the mother and son team who shared the cabin next to us began screaming at each other so loud I thought we'd see a rare case of full grown filicide. Then came the walk to the customs desk, where we first became aware of the Chinese habit of creating bottle necks in public transport hubs. What seems to have been a one off was the fact that all the lights were out so the walk was made with a horrible sort of Flight from Terror vibe...

Hand signals and Nobel Prize winners: Soweto by foot

Rebecca Arnold writes: Avoiding the bus tours full of gawking tourists, we'd opted to gawk at the South African township of Soweto in a different way: on an eight hour walking tour.

The first adventure was figuring out how to use the minibus taxis that black South Africans use (white South Africans very rarely — if ever — use this method of transport, and we received looks of horror whenever we told people we'd ridden on them). Our guide Ntombi was with us but it still took a while to get our heads around the complicated hand signals that passengers use to indicate to the driver which direction they're going in, and the incredibly honest payment system which sees people passing their taxi fare from person to person to the front of the bus and change passed dutifully back.

Travel

Back in a bit



In the enormous taxi rank we swapped from one minibus taxi to another, and received the first of several marriage proposals of the day. We felt quite safe there — save for the hundreds of buses driving haphazardly around, often without care for pedestrians — but knew that the taxi ranks are the scene of several violent muggings (and often murders) each year, so were on guard.

Driving past the now silent Soccer City on the outskirts of Johannesburg, where it sat like a giant red and beige mushroom cap on the barren landscape, we headed toward the bustle of Soweto. As we drew closer and entered the fringes of the township, houses past made of all types of materials: shacks thrown together with scavenged pieces of wood and cardboard, lean-tos hastily built with sheets of tin, bleak government houses of concrete and brick.

Breaking the fast

Scott Bridges writes: Ramadan is a time for religious reflection and men can frequently be seen sitting by the side of the road, or on a chair inside their darkened shops, quietly reading the Quran to themselves. Others listen to radio broadcasts of verses chanted rhythmically which seems to have a meditative effect. Everyone has their own strategy for surviving the daylight hours but in this 40-degree-plus heat it usually involves shade and rest wherever possible.

About half an hour before sunset I went for a stroll around downtown Cairo, Egypt. The sun was already long gone but it was still extremely hot and the air felt uncomfortably close. Even so, it was a relief to be out of the direct sun that earlier in the day had soaked my clothes with sweat within minutes of leaving the hotel. Everywhere on the street there was frenetic activity as people prepared to break their fast, and there was a building sense of anticipation with all ears strained, waiting to hear the sunset call-to-prayer drift through the heavy air from nearby minarets. On the footpath and in courtyards outside shops, long plastic tables and large tablecloths laid on the ground were being set with rows of plates holding salad and bread, plastic bottles were being filled from battered stainless steel communal water coolers, and children were returning from errands to collect hot food such as roast chicken, shawarma and kofta from nearby food stands.

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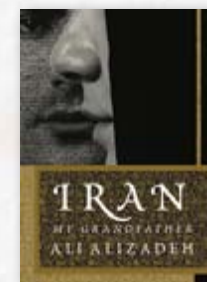
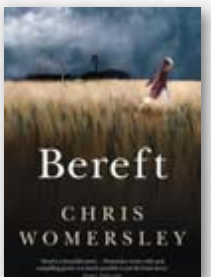
Literary Minded



Christmas for the literary-minded

Crikey's resident bookworm **Angela Meyer** has rifled through her bookshelves to find the best books of 2010 — and the new releases for the best summer reading

The Penguin Book of the Ocean, edited by author and critic James Bradley (Hamish Hamilton) offers tales and poems about and inspired by the deep and majestic ocean. The pieces are a combination of classic and contemporary, fiction and nonfiction, from Coleridge and Shackleton through to Nam Le and Tim Winton. And sitting by that ocean, a smart, fun and satisfying book to enjoy is Toni Jordan's **Fall Girl** (Text), where lady drifter meets millionaire and has to hold the guise together for the sake of family. Other books for the banana-lounge might be the new Paul Auster novel **Sunset Park**, Annie Proulx's nonfiction book **Bird Cloud**, actor Steve Martin's new book set in the New York art world **An Object of Beauty**, or Lloyd Jones' new novel **Hand Me Down World**.



Every year Black Inc. releases its **Best Australian Stories, Essays and Poems**.

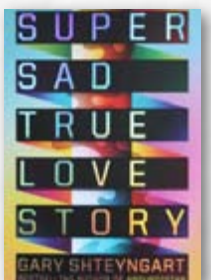
These collections are always a great gift, especially for someone who likes to read but can't keep up with what's happening in magazines and journals throughout the year, from *Meanjin* to *The Monthly*. The essays are always a delight -- encompassing a wide range of subjects and styles. This year's contributors to the **Best Australian Essays** edited by Robert Drewe include Tim Flannery, Carmel Bird, David Malouf, Guy Rundle and Nicholas Rothwell.

There are a gazillion more books being released this summer but keep an eye out for Gideon Haigh's **Spheres of Influence** (for the cricket lover), **The Gruen Transfer** tie-in book, singer/songwriter Paul Kelly's **How to Make Gravy**; and the charming Stephen Fry's bio of his formative years

The Fry Chronicles (Michael Joseph). The kids might like **Zog**, by *Gruffalo* author Julia Donaldson; and in the young adult realm I've head good things about spec fic/romance **Matched** by Allie Condie and fantasy **Pegasus** by Robyn McKinley.

The best Christmas present for a serious book lover this Christmas might not be a book itself, but an e-reader. Check out my review of the Sony Reader Pocket Edition, which also discusses what's happening in the world of e-books and e-reading in Australia.

My most adored book of 2010 is Chris Womersley's **Bereft**. In *Bookseller+Publisher* I called it "a rich, gripping tale of love, loss, conflict and salvation..." The writing is gorgeous and the plot wholly satisfying. It's about a man who returns to the small town he fled as a boy after being accused committing a terrible crime. In the vein of crime-not-crime books, Peter Temple's **Truth** has won a shitload of awards by now, and will probably go down well as a Christmas present for anyone who enjoys well-written books 'about crime'.



Some gorgeous novels to fill moments with joy or sadness include Lisa Lang's **Utopian Man** (Allen & Unwin) about the eccentric early-Melbourne bookseller and forward-thinking man Edward Cole (he owned monkeys), Gary Shteyngart's sa(d)tyrical dystopian **Super Sad True Love Story**, and Jonathan Franzen's much-hyped but worth reading 'novel of our times' **Freedom**. And the paperback is out now of Alex Miller's very enjoyable **Lovesong** (A&U).

My favourite non-fiction book of the year was Ali Alizadeh's **Iran: My Grandfather** (Transit Lounge) -- a rich, moving and fascinating portrait of a person (Alizadeh's grandfather) and his country.

And if I'd gotten to it yet I'm sure the collection of the late Janet Frame's short stories, **The Daylight and the Dust** would be on this favourites list.

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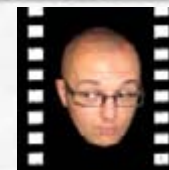
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Luke Buckmaster



Blockbuster Christmas entertainment

What to buy for the teenage boy who hates everything? The claims-he's-cool uncle? The tweens who don't know any better? A good film, of course, says *Cinetology's* **Luke Buckmaster**.

Just about everybody likes to sit back and watch a movie from time to time, right? DVDs can make great gifts but selecting which one to gift-wrap for your fun-loving uncle or your 'I hate everything' son is a task fraught with danger.

Here are five DVDs available to buy in time for Christmas and who they might be suitable for. But buyer beware: we cannot guarantee the recipients will actually like them. After all, you can choose your friends but...

Inception Writer/director Christopher Nolan's brainy blockbuster starring Leo 'boy face' DiCaprio and Ellen 'Juno' Page presents a gutsy sci-fi slant on Edgar Allan Poe's timeless existential question: 'is all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream?' The audience discovers the answer is a resounding YES after being hurled hither and thither by Nolan's onion-like plot, which unravels layers of universes wrapped around each other and centres on a team of mind-penetrating mercenaries (led by Leo, natch) whose mission is to extract information from a powerful CEO by visiting and toying with his dreams. There hasn't been a more intellectually stimulating blockbuster all year, and while -- in the land of *Shrek 4* and *Harry Potter Thank God It's Finally Going to End: Part 1* -- this may not be saying a great deal, it nevertheless stands for something.

Ideal for: the teenage boy who hates everything except really cool like totally badass movies and stuff.

Toy Story 3 The whiz kids at Pixar Studios maintain a stellar strike record (13 good movies, no bad) with *Toy Story 3*, the third and final instalment in a trilogy that takes the concept of personification to delightfully literal extremes, capturing the life, personalities and even politics of toys that come alive when humans aren't watching. Woody, Buzz and their motley gang of tender-hearted thingamajigs are relocated to the Sundale Daycare Centre, a place that seems at first like a toy utopia of smiles, rainbows and cuddles but turns out to be a hellish haven for rambunctious little shits. It's hard to impress audiences with animation these days -- we've come to expect eye boggling feats of wizardry and our aesthetic standards have been raised to the point at which it's become almost redundant for a film reviewer to point out that *Toy Story 3* looks, well, great. But we've never come to expect such a rich emotional core from mainstream animation or mainstream movies in general, and this is where this wonderful stocking filler truly delivers.

Ideal for: it's a cliché but it's true -- the whole family.

Salt Released just in the (Saint) nick of time for Christmas, the latest action vehicle from chunky lipped 'very cool five years ago' star Angelina Jolie is an arduous quasi-spy caper that seems to have been inspired by a late-night drunken challenge to fashion an entire theatrical experience around close shaves and daring escapes. Super spy (OR IS SHE?) protagon Evelyn Salt's (Jolie) on-the-run workout sees her escaping from high security institutions, a police car, an apartment block, an elevator shaft, a North Korean torture chamber and -- for a touch of vertiginous class -- an in-flight helicopter. But Aussie expat director Phillip Noyce just can't make any of it interesting and Jolie -- not a pensioner by anyone's standards -- already seems too old for this sort of nonsense.

Ideal for: the balding fun-loving 'look at me I'm still cool I swear' brother/uncle/father.

The Karate Kid Veteran Hollywood director Harold Zwart's remake of the dodgy 1985 cult classic turfs out the window the original setting, the characters, the dialogue and makes any number of other changes too -- as if the movie had some legitimate stake to originality and wasn't simply another transparent attempt to repackage a dusty old franchise with new wrapping for a younger, presumably dumber generation.

Ideal for: tweens and young'un who don't know any better.

Let the Right One In Forget the sorry display of pop culture moosh on show in the latest *Twilight* movie (also available to buy for Chrissy and gaze in dumb-struck awe at the impressive feats of 'I want to sark your blood' artistry accomplished in director Tomas Alfredson's terrifically eerie Swedish vampire thriller. A scene in which two children lying next to each other in bed converse, one asking the blood-gummed other if she wants to "go steady", is beautiful in its emotional rawness and disquieting in ways that are challenging to articulate, just like the film itself. Available on Blu-Ray, *Let the Right One In* is something spesh.

Ideal for: the cinematic connoisseur.



If you're having trouble finding the perfect Christmas present, consider a gift that never stops giving. A donation on behalf of your loved one to Children's Medical Research Institute, to help unlock the mysteries of children's diseases is thoughtful, surprising and truly from the heart. And they won't be the only one thanking you. Simply call 1800 436 437 or visit www.cmri.org.au/donation.php



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