

# Christmas books

Tim Cribb looks at the best Christmas book buys for under \$100

There's something compulsive about Christmas gift giving – so many people to buy for, but only so far the budget will stretch. What's needed is something to pad the books.

For a close friend or colleague with whom you may have given vent to frustration – careful about the signal being sent here – is *The Lexicon of Stupidity* (\$70), by Ross and Kathryn Petras. Within lie all those quotes from the likes of George W. Bush. The wit of the witless, it's been called.

Sport is a relatively easy area to get right, particularly for football fans, and Rough Guide 11s (\$72) from those industrious people at Rough Guide, are a new pocket-sized series about the best football teams in Britain. In these little books are all you could want to know about, say, Manchester United, and much else besides – 11 of everything Red, from the 11 greatest players to the 11 finest haircuts.

Hong Kong is often said to be expensive for books, largely due to the cost of air freighting new titles to meet release dates in London or New York.

There are, however, a handful of good novels that have already made it to relatively inexpensive

paperbacks just months after their hardcover release.

Among them is *The Sea* (\$96), which won this year's Booker Prize for John Banville. Ageing art historian Max Morden looks back on his life.

Banville's skilful use of the English language has won him excellent reviews.

A newcomer to catch is Tash Aw. His *Harmony Silk Factory* (\$96), a story about a Malaysian-Chinese merchant of dubious reputation told from three perspectives, is the work of a writer with promise.

Jane Gardham's *Old Filth* (\$80) seems to have been overlooked when it came out in hardcover this year. It was a nominee for the Orange Prize and tells the story of a curmudgeonly barrister retired to rural England from the hot, swirling mists of The Peak. A Raj orphan, few still remember the QC's nickname meant "Failed in London Try Hong Kong". Splendid.

Deserving of attention is *Zoom Out* (\$72) by Peter Maize, from the local Chameleon Press. A journey through "Asia, addiction and occasional absurdity", its Hong Kong setting and the people who live here are accurately portrayed, though not as Hong Kong's tourism officials might wish and it's worth sending to friends who can't grasp the realities of living here. In the

struggle to be polite in a city where cross-cultural offence is a daily and almost always unconscious occurrence, Raelene Tan's *Chinese Etiquette* and *Western Etiquette* (\$55 each) go a long way to explaining what to do and when to do it, but more importantly how something seemingly innocuous can put a huge barrier between you and those you are trying to reach.

From the sublime to the faintly ridiculous, *Dog-Gone Cat Case*, by Lamma resident Jay Scott Kanes (\$78), follows the feline tails of Dot, Not and Pause, and the people who share their life around Yung Shue Wan, as they try to stop the poisoning of their canine companions. A delightful story of life on Lamma Island its reclusive residents wish were not told so engagingly well.

A must-read or reread for any age is C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (\$86), certainly before the movie ruins this most imaginative of tales that has been a part of childhoods for generations. This is about the world of make-believe before

the advent of even radio, and it doesn't speak down to children. Nor does Darren Shan, though he's probably best approached with a PG rating for the darker worlds of his various series, 12 titles so far from *Cirque du Freak* to *Lord of the Shadows* and *Sons of Destiny* (all \$65). Here be monsters, and blood and guts and horror and clever plot twists to catch out the young minds who think they've worked out all the clues.

The Penguin 20 Great Ideas series (\$49 each), which has been around for a while, offers handsome paperbacks of the classic works of great writers and thinkers, with something worthwhile on every page. Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Lucius Annaeus Seneca's *On the Shortness of Life* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* are just some of the titles. Simple and understated, these are a compliment to the giver and receiver.

For those who have been left sitting by someone obsessing through a daily dose of Sudoku, revenge is at hand. *Sudoku Genius* (\$78), by Tom Sheldon,

is a one-way ticket to the "Nine Circles of Sudoku Hell". From daunting through harrowing and maddening to the final level or deadly, here are 144 "of the hardest puzzles in the world". There's some helpful instruction, but this is not for the amateur.

And for the restless, indulge them with the latest Luxe (\$70) guide to their favourite city. Luxe is a Hong Kong product that came about after its "hang the expense" founder asked a friend what to see and do in a city she was visiting.

What came back was page after passionate page of the latest must-see, must-do, must-try. Updated twice a year, with 15 cities so far, this is "stylish, brutally frank, and sometimes, frankly, brutal" advice on shopping, dining and lifestyle. Don't leave home without it.

Life in Hong Kong moves fast and there's not always the time to keep abreast of events, particularly in politics. Cartoonist Harry Harrison skewers the city in *Harry's View 2005* (\$99), a collection of his daily drawings in the *South China Morning Post*.

