

Read alert

**Great gift books
beyond the best sellers**

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Books are a perfect holiday gift — a present that anyone can afford to give more pleasure than a dozen dollars.

There are clever choices beyond the best sellers — books, that is, every taste from history to art to fiction, books that are simply a pleasure to look at, and books they'll never know they wanted until you surprise them with just the right one.

The most stirring pick-the-seller is "New York Vertical" (Crown, \$39.95), a portable photo collection of the city's famous buildings. A well-comprehensive book, it's Gotham's "History of New York As Illustrated" by Michael Morris and James Sanders, with Lisa Koenig (Knopf, \$25), the companion to the PBS documentary.

Moved by the support of our beloved friends across the pond? Honor them by giving "London: The Biography" by Peter Ackroyd (Macmillan, \$40), a blockbuster in the UK that is largely entertaining. More whimsical and endearing is Simon Schama's "A History of Britain Vol. II" (Harcourt, \$40), the companion piece to his fine History Channel series. It covers from 1603 right up to the limits off in 1776.

Less demanding in time and money is the world-of-fiction best seller (and Giuliano favorite) "Five Days in London, May 1940" by Joan Lark (Yale University Press, \$19.95), the gripping story of how Churchill called the British army crucially.

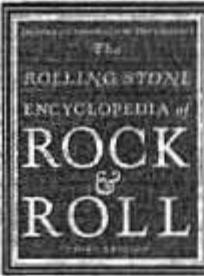
Cookbooks are always a great choice, besides, you can usually count.

Aficionados of home-cooked meal say thanks. Opera pianist Paul Konstantis has just the ticket for those cooks with "Back to the Table: The Return of Food and Family" (Hyperion, \$29.95).

Cooking pros, paleoists, should tackle the 40th-anniversary edition of Julia Child's groundbreaking work "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" (Knopf, \$40). If that's too daunting, keep it simple with "The Naked Chef Takes



Clockwise from above: "The Great American Paperback"; "The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll"; "The Tale of Genji"; "London: The Biography"; and "New York Vertical".



book and lyrics, you can stage the show yourself. Who needs Nathan Lane?

If your friends insist the more serious of "The Prodigies" is funny, they must be dimwits. They'd probably prefer a book on that other great writer (Doris, not Gene). So get them "Conversations With Wilder" by Geraldine (Crowe Wilder, \$22.95), a rare in-depth look at the life and career of the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Books in "The Prodigies" was a good idea. You had you couldn't get good seats until 2004. There's no waiting for it. "The Prodigies: How We Did It" by Mel Brooks and Tim Moore (Ballantine, \$40), it's great fun and shows it contains the complete

script, along with a foreword by Bill Murray, whom "New York: An Illustrated History" is a companion book to his documentary on Gotham, made at Liberty Park in front of a changed New York skyline.

And with the great British

Cheese cake works, too. Since we're talking about cheese, "The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll" (Hyperion, \$27), Michael Musto's new book, is almost. Experts will rave in its succinct entries and authoritative judgment.

If their taste runs more to rock'n'roll, get them the handsome, comprehensive collection "The Complete Lyrics of Irving Berlin" (Knopf, \$25), a book as square and sturdy as Berlin's best-loved minuets.

And include friends who have time to be karmic — or have their opportunity for any reason whatsoever — if you give them "Sports Illustrated Knockout: Five Decades of Sports Photography" (Sports Illustrated, \$20), just as interesting as "The National Enquirer: Thirty Years of Unforgettable Images" (Vicki Mizrahi, \$40), a hirsute, patriotic peek into the greatest and sweetest images from the scandalous.

For more history, "Response to Place" (University, \$35), another star book at number 10, the university book published by the National Council on the Humanities, includes Anne Leibovitz, and Mann and William Whitman.

The most surreal and laudable book among us, "Churches" by Julian Davies (Hyperion), offers a striking look at houses of worship around the world, with a memorable oddball cover.

But the few best photo books of the year are Robert Polidori's hauntingly gorgeous "Havana" (Steidl, \$75), which captures the fading glory of Cuba, and Elliott Erwitt's "Seas" (Upsilon, \$60), an exceptional, narrow-perspective retrospective that reveals a world's unassuming, yet brilliant, freedom and diversity.

Atmospheric, too, are three "Hip Hotel Budget" (by Michael Vranic, The Book House, \$20), the fourth in a great series looking at the absolute finest, most interesting hotels around the world.

Finally, and finally, get off those dull should esthetic "The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior" (Knopf, \$25), great excuse to hang out in Central Park or head to the boundary

of the land of kitsch, "The Great American Paperback" (Collectors' Press, \$20), an off-the-popular-reading-of-pulp-fiction cover art. If you're looking for gifts for oldsters that discovered yet turn to the adult, inimitable "An Ideal Boy: Charts From India" (Dewi Lewis, £20), a whimsical, informative collection of educational charts — posters listing in English what animals eat, live where, provide useful information about animals.



ROBERT POLIDORI: HAVANA

Robert Polidori's "Havana" (left) is the faded glory of the Cuban city; actress Cameron Crowe's "Conversations With Wilder" (below) goes in-depth with legendary director.



CONVERSATIONS WITH WILDER

BY MICHAEL GILTZ
CAMERON CROWE