

Captivating collection

There's nothing better than curling up with a good book in the chilly depths of winter. **Keiron Pim** asks a selection of our locally based authors to recommend a favourite read for Christmas.



Science writer **Hugh Aldersey-Williams**, who lives near Aylsham, celebrates the work of a famous philosopher and writer who lived in 17th century Norwich.

"While researching my next book I found someone who, for the Christmas season, makes gold, frankincense and myrrh chocolate. You can buy it and see if it has any medicinal benefits – I think you probably just get an endorphin rush from the cocoa solids! But it made me think of Sir Thomas Browne. One of the myths that he looked at in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* was whether gold in solution was a useful medicine, which was a belief at the time. As so often, he could see both sides of the argument very clearly. Because gold doesn't react with anything very much the chances of it doing something medicinal weren't great, but – and this is the brilliant part – he

understood that magnets worked their power without undergoing change, so he couldn't rule out gold as a medicine because it might work in some mysterious way. It was quite prescient of him because nowadays cobalt radioisotopes are used to treat cancer." *Hugh Aldersey-Williams is the author of Panicology (Penguin paperback, £8.99).*



Children's author **Sheridan Winn** loves a vintage Dickensian tale with an east coast flavour.

"I like long novels that keep me involved with a cast of characters for some while. Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* is a perfect book with which to curl up by the fireside. From page one, when David is 'born with a caul' – an omen of good luck – I am hooked. Here are some of Dickens' most memorable characters: Loyal Peggotty, Barkis who was 'willin', the ever-optimistic Mr Micawber, bossy Miss Trotwood, headstrong Steerforth and the egregious Uriah Heep.

"Dickens is a master at cliffhangers and keeps the story racing along through David's life. A key – and tragic – part of the novel is set in Great Yarmouth. Dickens researched the Norfolk dialect and uses words such as 'dodman' (snail), 'mawther' (mother) and 'clicketen' (gossip), which bring the character of the county alive." *Sheridan Winn, who lives in Norwich, is author of the Sprite Sisters books for girls aged seven to 11 years. The Ghost in the Tower is available now (Piccadilly Press, £5.99).*



Children's author **Joyce Dunbar** goes for a couple of books celebrating the beauty of a winter wonderland.

"I picked up *Snow* by Uri Shulevitz, a beautiful picture book, in Singapore of all places. The simple text and delicious pictures convey all the magic and

mystery of snow, the hushed breathlessness, the silent transformation. The grown-ups are dismissive: 'It's nothing,' said the man with the hat,' but 'all snowflakes know is snow, snow, snow,' and they keep on coming.

"There must be lots of books like this that we never get to see in the limited range of the book chain stores. A treasure to delight any child – or adult – at Christmas. I also love Paul Theroux's book *London Snow*. As the character Mrs Mutterance says, 'The most beautiful thing is that London snow is like every other kind of snow.' That goes for snow in Norfolk."

Norwich-based writer Joyce Dunbar's picture book The Monster Who Ate Darkness, listed fourth in the Independent's Best 50 Summer Reads, is out now in paperback (Walker Books, £6.99).



Writer and broadcaster **Keith Skipper** finds proper Norfolk perspective in his favourite festive fare.

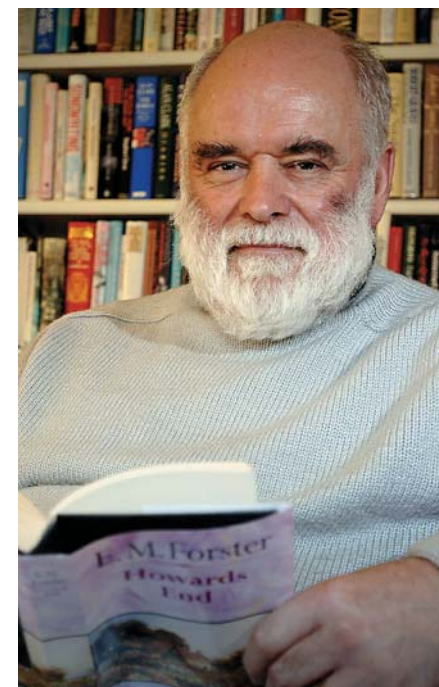
"My seasonal stroll along the local bookshelves invariably stops for extra time with a collection of the *Boy John Letters*, those evergreen dialect delights sent to the *Eastern Daily Press* between 1946 and 1958 by Norfolk comedian Sidney Grapes.

"They all ended with a philosophical gem from Aunt Agatha. I recall her Christmas Eve offering for 1946: 'If you don't git orl you want, think of the things you don't want – and don't git'.

"Then there was the famous notice Sidney put up in his garage window at Potter Heigham: 'A werry merry Christmas to orl my customers what hev paid their bills... and a werry prosperous new year to them what hent!'

"Priceless Norfolk humour at any time of the year – but especially warming at Christmas."

Keith Skipper, who lives in Cromer, has just published Rumoledew: Telling Tales in a Norfolk Village (Halsgrove hardback, £12.99), available in local bookshops.



West Norfolk-based biographer and editor **Ion Trewin** likes stories that send a shiver down the spine.

"M R James' ghost stories somehow go with Christmas. I think he ranks as one of the greats. He wrote some of them for Christmas Eve gatherings, which is very Victorian. I have a book on my shelf called *Suffolk and Norfolk*, which is him pottering about churches and looking at old engravings, but as for his ghost stories, the one that always sticks in my mind is called *Number Thirteen*. The thing that appeals to me in particular is that the stories are not gothic: they start off with a sense of security and the characters are real people who could be your neighbours – and then strange things start happening to them, which is what makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck.

"The stories are all in print and they never disappoint. I think I'll pull a volume off the shelf this Christmas and

read them with family and friends, just as he intended."

Alan Clark, by Ion Trewin, is out now in hardback, published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson at £25.



Novelist and critic **D J Taylor**, whose home is in Norwich, enjoys a countryman's memoir that complements the work of *Mary Mann*, one of his favourite Norfolk writers.

"Published in 1939 when its author was an elderly man, *The Rabbit Skin Cap* is George Baldry's memoir of rural life around the Bungay and Ditchingham area. It was produced by Lilia Rider Haggard, Henry Rider Haggard's daughter. What I love about it is that it is a first-hand testimony of a disappearing rural world, the equivalent of the world that *Mary Mann* writes about in her stories."

D J Taylor's most recent novel, Ask Alice, is published by Chatto & Windus at £16.99.

books and book tokens great gifts for Christmas

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