The Most Eclectic Book Review of 2018

Last year, I completed 52 Books for 52 Weeks of 2017. For 2018, I far exceeded that goal, and challenged myself to read a wide variety. There’s just about everything on here: my favorite science fiction and fantasy, romance, historical fiction, contemporary, mystery—and also theology, sociology, self-help, a children’s picture book, poetry, a graphic novel, and more!

Here is my review of the 62 books I read in 2018. For a more detailed review, check out my Goodreads reviews.

1. *The Flourish Formula: An Overachievers Guide to Slowing Down and Achieving More* by Courtney Pinkerton

Nonfiction: Self-help/coaching

I really appreciated Courtney's book in that she has a good sense of humor and offers the reader the chance to opt out of things that seem silly or ridiculous. The voice is fun, upbeat, and she challenges people to get out of binary, either/or thinking, and I really appreciated that aspect. I tend to roll my eyes at a lot of self-help books; this is one that I highly recommend.

2. *Daughters of the Night Sky* by Aimie K. Runyan

Historical fiction

Taking place before and during WWII, Runyan tells the story of the all-women Soviet Air unit through the lens of her character Katya. Called the “Night Witches,” these women fought for their people while at the same time lived under the rule of Stalin. A great read.

3. *You’ll Miss Me When I’m Gone* by Rachel Lynn Solomon

Young Adult: Contemporary

Written by a local Seattle author, twin 18-year-olds wrestle with their identity, as teens readying themselves for college, fledgling relationship, and their Jewish identity, along with discovering if either of them have inherited their mother’s debilitating disease. This is a fantastic story that I could not put down as the two main characters struggle in their relationships with each other, significant others, and family, as well as figuring out who they are.

4. *Ancillary Sword* (Imperial Radch #2) by Ann Leckie

Science fiction

This is the sequel to *Ancillary Justice* which was the last book I read in 2017. I love Leckie’s world-building, in which feminine pronouns are the default pronouns used for the people, in which identity is questioned in a world of clones and ancillaries, and Breq’s resolve to uncover the truth about the empire. I couldn’t put this one down, and her worldbuilding is fantastic.

5. *Ancillary Mercy* (Imperial Radch #3) by Ann Leckie

Science fiction

The third in the Imperial Radch series, Breq’s journey concludes in uncovering the truth of Emperor Anaander and the history of the empire. I enjoyed this entire series, but the middle one was my favorite (as is often the case).

6. *Binti: The Night Masquerade* by Nnedi Okorafor

Science fiction: novella

The final installment in the Binti series, Binti returns home to try to stop a war and uncover the truth about her father’s family. I enjoyed this series overall, but was a bit disappointed that not all of the loose ends were tied up—I still had quite a few unanswered questions at the end. But the worldbuilding of this series is incredible and Binti is an incredible heroine.

7. *Deer Woman: An Anthology* by Elizabeth LaPensée, editor

Graphic Novel: Anthology

I backed this anthology on Kickstarter and it did not disappoint. Native women artists and authors contributed to this amazing collection of stories told of survival and resistance against violence. Some of these stories are incredibly hard to read/view, but these are stories of surviving settler colonialism and violence against indigenous women.

8. *Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America* by Jennifer Harvey

Nonfiction

(I received an advance reader copy for an honest review)

This is a much-needed resource, not only for parents but for anyone who works with white youth. Dr. Harvey begins with the myth of color-blindness and the fact that children see race. We may say race is a construct, but that doesn’t mean constructs aren’t real and don’t have real consequences. Dr. Harvey insists that we must start having conversations explicitly with our children about racism. No one wants to have an uncomfortable conversation, and no parent wants to have a conversation that their child isn’t ready for. However, Dr. Harvey rightly points out that children are already confronted by race and difference at an early age. As many of us know, we often think that things are over our kids heads when they are actually listening to much of what we say. This is a must read.

9. *Provenance* by Ann Leckie

Science fiction

Set in the same universe as the *Imperial Radch* series, I was expecting more fast-paced storytelling and fantastic worldbuilding. Instead, I felt bogged down in the numerous details, and the first two-thirds of the story was painfully slow. It took me a lot longer to read this and I wondered if it was worth it to continue. The last third was great, and while is was an interesting story, I have no desire to reread this, unlike the Imperial Radch series.

10. *Starfire: Memory’s Blade* by Spencer Ellsworth

Science fiction: novella

The final installment of Ellsworth’s *Starfire* trilogy, I enjoyed this entire series—and unlike other series, the third was my favorite. New points of view are added to this conclusion, and while the ending (spoiler alert) isn’t entirely happy ever after, I was satisfied with the ending. Jaqi is one of my favorite main characters ever.

11. *These Broken Stars* (Starbound #1) by Amie Kaufman and Meagan Spooner

Young Adult: science fiction

Very enjoyable, though much of it predictable. If you like the classic tough-guy-meets-princess, they like each other but hate each other, fall in love anyway, you'll like this one.

12. *The Power* by Naomi Alderman

Science fiction/women’s fiction

This book was recommended to me by a lot of people. It’s okay. I’m not sure its as ground-breaking as so many led me to believe. The premise is intriguing: that through some sort of biological change, all of a sudden young girls have a new power that they can use over men. This changes the course of humanity forever. The book begins and ends with letters in the future about this fictionalized history, discovering that once upon a time, patriarchy ran rampant across the earth and the characters in this fictionalized setup can’t believe it (which made it impossible for me to buy into this setup). Also, though there are attempts by the writer to address inequality, overall it still seems like white women are in power. In my opinion, it misses the mark.

13. *The Spinner Prince* (Pride Wars #1) by Matt Laney

Middle grade: fantasy

Two words: CAT PEOPLE! An incredible story! The unique race of feline-evolved people lends itself to fantastic characters in world rich in description. This is a great story for all ages and the weaving of mythology, both familiar and unfamiliar figures, creates an incredible backdrop for a wonderful coming-of-age story.

14. *Children of Blood and Bone* (Legacy of Orisha #1) by Tomi Adeyemi

Young adult: fantasy

Incredible. **THE book of 2018**. A fantasy with African roots that tells of oppression and hope, and heartbreak. Is it possible for an oppressor to change? Is there another way besides revenge? This is a must read, even though it's a hard read.

15. *A Nose For Trouble* by Jill Webb

Science fiction
Really fun! A good, quick read in the vein of X-men of people with superpowers called Amps, trying to stop rogue Amps, and a good love story in the mix.

16. *The Breaking Light* (Split City #1) by Heather Hansen

Young adult: science fiction

This was an okay read. There wasn’t much depth to it; by the first chapter, I’d figured out this was Romeo and Juliet in a dystopian future. Even down to a masquerade.

17. *The Armored Saint* (The Sacred Throne #1) by Myke Cole

Fantasy: novella

Oh wow. This broke my heart and made me want to read more. I think I finished it all in one night. Heloise is an amazing heroine, and this reminds me of a grown-up version of The Song of the Lioness quartet and Alanna. There was one element I found problematic (I wrote about it in my Goodreads review—there are spoilers there) but overall I’d still recommend it and I look forward to reading the sequel.

18. *Terms of Enlistment* (Frontlines #1) by Marko Kloos

Science fiction

This book sucked me right in. I love military sci-fi and I connected with the character immediately. However, **there is a problem**, and it’s on page 55. There is no excuse for using the r-word as a derogatory term. I don’t care if it’s an unlikeable character, there has been a lot of work done by the disabled community in advocacy, especially in the last twenty years, around not using that word. It gutted me because I liked the story so much, it tore me out of the story and made it hard to go on. There’s another phrase, used to describe a war-torn Detroit later on in the book as “Indian country.” I have friends and family in the military, and I know sometimes these terms and words are used, but for a book that is to take place in the future over a hundred years from now, this is unacceptable to me.

19. *Hate to Want You* (Forbidden Hearts #1) by Alisha Rai

Romance

A friend recommended this, and it didn’t disappoint. A sexy story about two lovers who broke up years before as their family’s business partnership failed, but how they continue to meetup once a year and can’t seem to stay away from each other. I enjoyed it.

20. *Transforming Communities* by Sandhya Rani Jha

Nonfiction
Fantastic resource for faith leaders, especially pastors and others who are seeking to get outside of the box on church and to partner with the community in transforming. In every chapter, what I learned is the importance of listening to the community's needs and to give up/share power in decision making. Each chapter is a different model of community transformation, and while not all are applicable to every church, there is something to learn in each model.

21. *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* by Jill Twiss, Author, and E.G. Keller, Illustrator (Presented by *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver)

Childrens: Picture Book

Made famous by John Oliver, this is a cute story of Marlon Bundo, a bunny who lives with VP Mike Pence and falls in love with another boy bunny. Fantastic fun fact: the pastor bunny who marries them is a woman married to another woman! I bought it for my son.

22. *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury Of Our Longest Wars* by David Wood

Nonfiction

This book was referenced in a footnote in Sandhya Jha’s *Transforming Communities,* so I went and checked it out from the library. Later, I bought it because I couldn’t stop thinking about it and needing to reread certain passages. I’ve long been interested in the concept of moral injury as opposed to PTSD, as I’ve had soldiers in my congregation in the past who have wrestled with these difficult questions. I also enjoy military sci-fi (and write some) and wanted to have this resource on my shelf. But this is a must-read because we are still at war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the devastating consequences this has on our soldiers and their families is ongoing. Most of us forget we’re at war and the cost, both in lives, and the injury to the soul in having to set aside our basic moral beliefs in order to follow orders.

23. *Skyfarer* (The Drifting Lands #1) by Joseph Brassey

Fantasy

Skyships, mages, evil knights—all the elements I love of a fantasy in a new exciting world. Strong female characters and unique worldbuilding, characters who struggle with figuring out who they are and finding their moral compass. I enjoyed this so much that I immediately bought the sequel, at 10pm on a Friday evening on my Kindle because I had to keep reading to find out what happened to Aimee and Elias.

24. *Dragon Road* (The Drifting Lands #2) by Joseph Brassey

Fantasy

The sequel to *Skyfarer*, where fantasy blends with science fiction and gigantic, living ships the size of cities floating in the air. New, mysterious characters with hidden pasts, and more depth to Aimee and Elias’ story. I couldn’t put it down. Hoping there is a third!

25. *The Wrong Stars (*Axiom #1) by Tim Pratt

Science fiction

I haven’t read an Angry Robots book I didn’t like. This was no exception. I’d put this among my favorites for the year. A traveler from Earth who has hibernated for five hundred years is woken up by scavengers—and she has news to tell them of first contact with aliens! But now it’s old news—the aliens are everywhere and they’re called Liars. But there’s more to the story of first contact that will change the course of the future.

26. *Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century* by Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon

Nonfiction

Absolutely a must read for anyone leading a church in the twenty-first century. The introduction gives a spectrum of colors as a guide for where people are today and how they are moving into other understandings of church--it's important to keep that section bookmarked as it is referred to. The first half of the book shows how we got to where we are now, and the death of Christendom. The second half goes over a variety of models of how the church is existing now, and where we might be headed.

27. *Denial is My Spiritual Practice (And Other Failures of Faith)* by Rachel Hackenberg and Martha Spong

(I received an Advanced Reader Copy in exchange for an honest review)

Nonfiction

Failure is a part of our spiritual life. We fall short, we fail to live up to the ideals of others, and frankly, some of those standards just don’t make sense. This book is the interwoven tales of two clergywomen and their failures. Through these stories, the authors reflect on grace and healing that they have found by acknowledging that sometimes what we have been taught, what works for other believers, just doesn’t work for us. Sometimes we hold ourselves to impossible standards, whether they be the lofty wedding vows we recite, or the b.s. assurances others tell us that God won’t give us more than we can handle. What *Denial* teaches us is that through our experiences—the bad, the ugly, the frustrating and the uncertainty—God’s grace is still abundant, and through Biblical reflection, we find the psalmists and the disciples were also much like us—attempting to believe, asking God to help in our unbelief.

28. *Jade City* (The Green Bone Saga #1) by Fonda Lee

Fantasy

It took me a little while to get into this, but once I was hooked, I couldn’t put it down. I think I read the last 2/3 in one day. Family loyalty, backstabbing, martial arts, gangster families, double-dealing—all the good twists and turns you’d hope for in a family drama, fueled by magic that comes from possession of jade. Highly recommend if you enjoy mafia-style family sagas.

29. *Blood Orbit* (Gattis File #1) by K.R. Richardson

Science Fiction/Mystery

A science fiction police procedural, I couldn’t put this down. Every time I wanted to read one chapter, I read five. It’s a thriller that keeps you on edge, and a lot of different twists that I didn’t expect. Gritty and gory at parts, but an excellent investigative story in a completely different world.

30. *All Systems Red* (The Murderbot Diaries #1) by Martha Wells

Science Fiction: Novella

This entire series is fantastic, funny, and can be read easily in one sitting. I think I read this first story in under two hours. This SecUnit security robot has hacked it’s governing module after a horrific incident in which it killed a lot of people. It’s way of dealing with this moral injury? Downloading every episode of its favorite drama Sanctuary Moon. It would rather bingewatch shows than deal with the real world, but it can’t help itself but save the humans it has been hired to protect, and along the way, develop some sort of bond with them that it struggles to understand. A great story in understanding what it means to be human, from the point of view of a Muderbot that just wants to be left alone.

31. *Artificial Condition* (The Murderbot Diaries #2) by Martha Wells

Science Fiction: Novella

Oh the dry humor in this one! Murderbot has taken on a new identity, trying both to stay away from those pesky humans that care about it, and at the same time, wanting to get revenge for what happened to them. In the same way, Murderbot struggles with its identity, no longer a SecUnit but not human, and not wanting to be human, but unable to go back to who they used to be.

32. *Upcycle Your Congregation* Edited by Sarah Lammert

Nonfiction

Written by Unitarian Universalist ministers, this is a good resource for those going through visioning or rethinking how and what it means to be church. I was able to translate a lot of the ideas into my setting on how to be a resource for the community.

33. *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made For Whiteness* by Austin Channing Brown

Nonfiction

Incredibly powerful book that I believe all white Americans, but especially white Christians need to read. As the author states, white America still refuses to tell the truth about our history, our commitment to exploiting black bodies, because then we would have to do something about it. She shares some of her personal experiences with well-intentioned white folks and the damage we still cause by not understanding or acknowledging our own participation in racism. Powerful book that would be an excellent group study.

34. *The Stars are Legion* by Kameron Hurley

Science Fiction

Amazing, unique world -building that is both grotesque and awe-inspiring. Similar to Leckie, the characters in Hurley’s world use all feminine pronouns. The worldbuilding uses organic materials for space flight and weapons. Membranes are torn open, women give birth to objects they need, including their food (and occasionally they have a human baby). I couldn't put it down, even when I was horrified and grossed out. An amazing story of survival and what it means to sacrifice for others.

35. *Outside the Lines: How Embracing Queerness Will Transform Your Faith* by Mihee Kim-Kort

(I received an Advanced Reader Copy in exchange for an honest review)

Nonfiction

This is an important book to read, as many of us struggle to find our place, to figure out who we are—whether it be our gender or sexuality, or our ethnic identity as more of us become descendants of mixed backgrounds. I suspect we can add our faith identity, as many of us as Christians relate to our siblings in Judaism and Islam, and our other cousins of Buddhism and other traditions. Embracing queerness means a both/and, and more, in all aspects of our identity, and in our understanding of God. This was an eye-opening read for me in embracing my own identity. Highly recommend.

36. Space Opera by Catherynne M. Valente

Science fiction: humor

I loved the first four chapters. Hilarious, upbeat, so many puns and so much dry humor! But then, I got bogged down. It got wordy. It went over the top. The middle section was a slog, and I almost didn't finish. But I talked with other friends who read it and told me to stick with it, and 2/3 of the way through, YES! It does pay off. The last third is hilarious and it's perfect. I literally laughed out loud in the beginning and the ending.

37. *Adam’s Grief* by Cathy Sovold Johnson

Nonfiction

For those who have little to no understanding of Islam, for those who might have heard misconceptions and stereotypes, this is an excellent first read to break those down and to open oneself to conversation and dialogue. I would use different terminology, and some of the conclusions and explanations may seem simplistic or skewed at times, but I would share this book with someone from an evangelical Christian background as their first introduction. This is the book to open the door with those who have no background with Islam or Muslims.

38. *Trail of Lightning* (The Sixth World #1) by Rebecca Roanhorse

Fantasy

Maggie, a Dinétah who hunts monsters, is the heroine we need, beat down but not broken by the world. It is bloody violent, set in a post-apocalyptic world on a former Navajo reservation. However, the worldbuilding is still tangible to the here and now, very much in the vein of Octavia Butler, of near-future science fiction.

39. *A Wind in the Door* (Time Quintet #2) by Madeleine L’Engle

Young Adult: Fantasy

For some reason, I never read these as a child. I read *A Wrinkle In Time* last year, and I loved A Wind In The Door even more. It’s still strange and beautiful, full of magic and wonder. The language is dated in places (there is an instance of the R-word appearing as a slur; although this was still acceptable in the time period L’Engle was writing in, I note it for warning) but Meg, Charles Wallace and Calvin are still incredible characters growing in their understanding of the world, good and evil, and the choices they make.

40. *The Poppy War* by R. F. Kuang

Fantasy

**This is my favorite book of 2018**. Warning for graphic violence. To me, this was Harry Potter meets The Song of the Lioness but where everything goes horribly wrong and when you think things can’t get worse, they do. Imagine if Dumbledore was just high all the time, and Cedric Diggory was the only one who could save the world but he was addicted to drugs. I absolutely loved this story. Even when Rin made terrible choices, I understood why she was making them and cheering her on even though I wished sometimes she’d play it safe. The first 1/3 is somewhat predictable: an orphan manages to get into an elite school to be trained as a warrior, but then it explodes.

41. *EXO* by Fonda Lee

Young adult: science fiction

A futuristic world where the earth is colonized by aliens, the son of the ruler of the humans, Donovan, has been biologically altered to be more like the alien colonizers. He finds himself torn between the world he has known and the human resistance. This was an enjoyable story exploring the issues of empire and colonization for a young adult audience, but I enjoyed the sequel even more.

42. *Cross Fire* by Fonda Lee

Young adult: science fiction

The sequel to EXO, I couldn’t put it down (stayed up too late one night and took an extra long lunch to finish it the next day). As the possibility of war approaches with other aliens, and the struggles between the human resistance and the colonized humans continues, Donovan suffers great loss as others sacrifice themselves for their cause, and others lose their lives. He struggles to straddle his two worlds and maintain relationships. It’s heart-wrenching and action-packed. Unfortunately, I learned the author isn’t planning a sequel—so there are some loose ends that just are not tied up, but it does end with some resolutions.

43. *The Long Way To A Small Angry Planet* (Wayfarers #1) by Becky Chambers

Science fiction

This was a slower read for me and I enjoyed every moment of it. Great characters and worldbuilding that reminded me of Firefly and Farscape, a ship with a cast of characters from around the galaxy and their different points of view. I found myself thinking about the characters when I wasn't reading, and I can't wait to continue the series.

44. *A Closed and Common Orbit* (Wayfarers #2) by Becky Chambers

Science Fiction

Set in the same world as the first, this story follows Lovelace, the AI who was rebooted and has no memory of her voyage on a ship, and Pepper, a minor character we meet in the first. But it’s overall a story of how Pepper survived a harsh and brutal upbringing. Alternating between the past and the present, the story of how family is found and grown and how we need one another to survive is the heart of it all. One of my favorite books of 2018 and my favorite of this series.

45. *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (Wayfarers #3) by Becky Chambers

Science fiction

Again, set in the same world as the first, one of the off-page characters becomes one of the several points of view of the Exodus Fleet, the humans who left Earth and set out for the rest of the galaxy. Humanity has created a new culture, with rituals around death, and finding meaning and purpose in life. Similar to the first, there are several points of view from people of various ages, figuring out who they are and what they believe.

46. *Alternative Theologies: Parables for a Modern World*, edited by Bob Brown and Phyllis Irene Radford

Science fiction/religious nonfiction

(I received a copy in exchange for an honest review)

This is a collection of short stories, poems, and essays containing a wide variety of ideas and beliefs. The entries explore theological and biblical concepts from Genesis to Revelation, from creation stewardship to eschatology (end times). Many of the entries are in response to the religion of nationalism that has flourished in the current political climate, a belief system that claims the cross but cloaks itself in the flag, and casts out all other religions, including many Christians. Some of the entries simply made me shrug, but others made me reflect on what has happened to Christianity in terms of nationalism, and some may even make their way into sermon illustrations.

47. *Strategy Strikes Back: How* Star Wars *Explains Modern Military Conflict*, edited by Max Brooks, John Amble, M.L. Cavanaugh, and Jaym Gates

Science fiction/military nonfiction

Excellent book breaking down the use of different strategies in conflict by examples in Star Wars, the complicated layers of politics and command. Some of the entries are written from the POV if characters in Star Wars; others are essays pointing out the flaws by characters and writers in the series for their choices in strategy.

48. *All Things: A Reverend Alma Lee Mystery* by Amber Belldene

(I received an advance reader copy in exchange for an honest review)

Mystery

This is actually a spinoff series from Belldene’s *Hot Under Her Collar* romance books featuring Episcopal priests as main characters. Rev. Alma Lee is a minor character in that series. Bisexual, Chinese and Latina, Alma doesn’t fit the norm (except that she’s in San Francisco and is vegan—so maybe she does fit in!) She’s falling for a woman rabbi when a murder occurs, and she must unravel what has happened, even if it unravels her fledgling relationship. I enjoyed her previous series, and this is no exception, even if it is in a different genre, she nails the cozy mystery well.

49. *Rogue Protocol* (The Murderbot Diaries #3) by Martha Wells

Science fiction: novella

Murderbot continues to try to deny its very human likeness, but winds up in trying to uncover the answers to its original mission because it cares about the very humans who treated it like it was human. It just can’t stop caring, even though it would rather binge watch Sanctuary Moon instead of sneaking around to expose the company that tried to kill the humans who hired it on the first mission in the first book.

50. *Everything Happens For A Reason (And Other Lies I’ve Loved)* by Kate Bowler

Nonfiction

**My recommendation for nonfiction for 2018.** A powerful and heartbreaking personal narrative woven in with reflection on theological assumptions. Confronting the platitudes that come from a weak theology in which God will magically make everything better if you have a little more faith, Bowler's work is a must read. It's funny and heartbreaking, and there's no magical twist in which everything is made right, as she herself is diagnosed with stage four cancer. Instead, the reader is forced to take a good look at what they believe and the words we say that often make ourselves feel better, but force the person suffering to endure more harm. The appendices are good, quick references that serve as reminders for clergy, medical professionals, and caregivers, as well as friends and family.

51. *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (Time Quintet #3) by Madeleine L’Engle

Science fiction/fantasy

Because I didn’t read L’Engle’s books when I was younger, I’m trying to catch up now. Unfortunately, while I loved the first two, this one was hard for me to finish reading. Meg is all grown up, married to Calvin (but he’s out of the country), and she’s pregnant, and her father now has the ear of the president and the world is about to enter nuclear war. Charles Wallace, while kything with Meg, is now the one who has to save the world. I always connected to Meg much more than Charles as a main character, but even Charles seemed more a bystander to the numerous side stories taking place. I struggled to finish this one and am not sure about picking up the rest (I never finished the Chronicles of Narnia, either).

52. *Phases* by Mischa Willett

Poetry

I heard Mischa read from this collection at the Queen Anne Book Company, and it was the poem *A Medieval Roman Theology, Abridged*, that sold me on buying the book (after I told my spouse I wasn't going to buy any more books). These poems resonated with me in ways that most modern poetry has not--one foot in this world and one foot in the veil of dreams and faith.

53. *Planetside* by Michael Mammay

Science fiction

Well-written story of a missing person that turns into a conspiracy for war. Struggling with bureaucracy and doing the right thing, throw in the moral questions of when to give up and who to blame, this story is gripping and twisted, with a gut-wrenching ending to boot.

54. *Exit Strategy* (The Murderbot Diaries #4) by Martha Wells

Science fiction: novella

The finale of the Murderbot saga, they are reunited with the humans who first hired it, and discover that Dr. Mensah has been kidnapped. Murderbot has to sort through their feelings and their identity (and find time to download more Sanctuary Moon) while rescuing their friend/owner/master/whoever. Murderbot tries so hard not to be human and yet it becomes more human in doing so. This is such a well-written series and each book takes about 2 hours or less to read.

55. *Ignite the Stars* by Maura Milan

Young adult: science fiction

This is a fun, twisted space adventure of a seventeen-year-old space terrorist who is captured and forced to work for the enemy—and of course, ends up making friends and perhaps finding love. In the meantime, as the empire grows, so does its enemies as well as the number of refugee peoples. This story captures the theme of what it means to fit in, especially if you are not of the dominant culture.

56. *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* by Wendell Berry

Poetry

I’ve had this on my shelf for a long time, and finally decided to read it through, a poem or two every morning. Berry focuses on their roots in Kentucky, connecting nature and community as part of the sacred rhythm of life. *The Peace of Wild Things* and *To Know The Dark* are among my favorites.

57. *Vivian’s List* (The List #1) by Haleigh Lowell

Romance

I’m not a big romance reader, but I usually read 2-3 a year, sometimes more if my romance author friends have a new novel out. Unfortunately, I don’t recommend this one. The main character has just come out of an abusive relationship, but the trauma she faced in that relationship isn’t really dealt with, she jumps right into a sexual relationship with Liam. There’s not much plot, and the character Vivian really feels like a teenager with an older man—there was a weird power dynamic in the story that made me uneasy.

58. *Who Is God When We Hurt? A Pastor-Caregiver wrestles with grief, loss, faith & doubt* by Beth Scibienski

(I received an advanced reader copy in exchange for an honest review)

A pastor herself, the author admits that she doesn’t find God easily in her daily life; it’s something that she has to work for. While the circumstances are very different, as a caregiver for a child with a disability I’ve sometimes wanted to ask the question, “why?” even though I know it’s the wrong question to ask. Each chapter is a short reflection on a theme, packed with insight and deep thought-reflecting moments. It seemed like this would be a quick read at first, but I found that I could only read a few chapters at a time, sometimes even just one, because there was so much to think about and reflect upon in my own experience of finding God in the midst of life’s difficulties, especially through grief. Intermixed with biblical reflection, personal anecdotes, and deconstructing the platitudes and well-meaning actions of others that often don’t help, Beth shares her struggles in faith and relating to others.

59. *Broken Wide Whole: Prayers for Daily Living* by Suzanne L. Vinson

Nonfiction: prayer book

I loved reading and looking through Suzanne’s book every day. I left it in my office and used it as a daily devotional. With 50 prayers and 34 watercolors, this book helped me to center each day, to focus on a new aspect and to seek healing and wholeness. The very first prayer I reread for an entire week, it was mind-blowing and exactly what I needed to read in that moment. I highly recommend for something short to center yourselves daily.

60. *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal* by Christopher Moore

Fiction: historical

After several years and about a hundred recommendations, I finally read it. I definitely enjoyed it, though I did think it dragged in the middle. While I find it far-fetched that Jesus ever traveled to Asia in his lifetime, the relationships that Jesus had with others and the sense of community formed among his disciples seemed very real to me. But in terms of Jesus fiction, I recommend Anne Rice’s *Christ the Lord: Out of* Egypt and Kazantzakis’ *The Last Temptation of Christ.*

61. *Joy to the Worlds: Mysterious Speculative Fiction For The Holidays*, by Maia Chance, Janine A. Southard, Raven Oak, and G. Clemans

Science fiction and fantasy: mystery

This was an excellent collection to read during Christmastide. My two favorites were *Ol’ St. Nick* by Raven Oak, a murder mystery in space involving a red suit, and *Bevel & Turn* by G. Clemans, about a time-traveling whirligig (the German wooden towers that spin with candle heat) and two teens in woodshop who discover the mystery of what happened to an aunt who disappeared in time.

62. *Star Wars: Women of the Galaxy* by Amy Ratcliffe

Featuring eighteen artists, this collection of all the women characters in the *Star Wars* universe is incredible. The artwork is breathtaking and the biographies of each of these women are inspiring. This is a great book for all ages.