



## Terry Wogan

The real miracle of Christmas is that it doesn't end in murder, never mind divorce



## Christina Odone

No asses, oxen or angels - but let's not rob the season of all its fun



## Gifts: Children's books

Friendly yetis and put-upon ghosts to a mouse with a festive quandary



## Susy Atkins

White wine to drink with Christmas starters and turkey

### Christmas 2012: Art books of the year

Martin Herbert chooses the most stylish art and photography books, from the mist-wreathed sublime to the erudite and curious.



From William Eggleston's *Chromes*

By Martin Herbert

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Two lavish art books vied for dominion over my coffee table this year. The first was Johannes Grave's *Caspar*

*David Friedrich* (Prestel, £80), a slipcased dreadnought of a monograph on the German Romantic painter, easily the best ever published in English, which boasts a double hook: plentiful top-flight reproductions of Friedrich's sublime, mist-wreathed 19th-century landscapes, and an essay that upends previous conceptions of his project.

The artist is typically seen as a visual poet of melancholy and solitude; here, though, he is recast as a sharp theoretician whose images intricately resist letting a viewer "enter" them, and a raptly religious figure whose paintings craftily demonstrate that the ineffable can't be pictured. It's a fairly audacious standpoint, but one comes away swayed – and, thanks to the visuals, transported.

The second sizeable tome – a borrowed copy I bridled at returning – was William Eggleston's *Chromes* (Steidl, £220). That the American photographer's saturated colour photography is accepted as "art" at all is his own stubborn doing: or, at least, his and that of John Szarkowski, curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art, who showed Eggleston there in 1976 to genteel uproar, initialising a sea change in attitudes to art photography.

For that show's now-lauded catalogue, *William Eggleston's Guide*, Szarkowski initially selected 48 photographs from an archive of 5,000 Ektachromes and Kodachromes, shot between 1969 and 1974 and heisting evocative details from Memphis landscapes, townscapes and interiors.

*Chromes*, a deluxe reissue overflowing with bonus materials, plunders the same sprawling cache, widening the edit to a three-volume set of 364 images: Baptist funerals, black-shadowed emerald lawns, decrepit white barber-shops under topaz skies, youths lounging on car bonnets – a half-gone world preserved in chromatic heat.

Bridging Germany and photography, Wolfgang Tillmans's *Neue Welt* (Taschen, £27.99) housed this year's boldest new camera-wielding. Vastly ambitious and super-attentive to pictorial nuance (as the extensive opening interview with curator Beatrix Ruf makes clear), Tillmans has upgraded his medium's artistic status as decisively as Eggleston did.

In terms of critical writing, the standouts this year were both by British authors born in 1958, and both approaching art and culture from avowedly personal angles. For *The Space Between* (Ridinghouse, £20), Michael Bracewell – a burnished stylist who began favouring art writing over novels and music-centric cultural criticism a decade ago – gathers his art-related scribing.

This is a far tauter book than one might expect from a round-up of old catalogue essays and art-magazine articles, partly due to the unifying effect of Bracewell's aesthete-with-muscle-tone voice, his devotion to close yet contextual viewing, and his particular outlook – which makes a continuity of Pop, punk, postmodernism and Englishness (if in doubt, quote Auden or Lydon).

But its chief pull is that, organised by date of subject matter rather than of publication, *The Space Between* functions as a strobe-lit chronology of British art from the Sixties onward, from Richard Hamilton to Damien Hirst. If the trajectory aims downward, so be it.

Bracewell shares a high-wire ability to privilege his own slanting subjectivity with Geoff Dyer, who's written extensively on art (mostly photographic) in the past and has rarely written a more careening book than *Zona* (Canongate, £9.99), which uses Andrei Tarkovsky's art-house masterpiece *Stalker* as the pretext for a bravura

circumnavigation of the author's own head.

Paralleling the film-maker's "special intensity of attention" yet endlessly glancing dilatorily away from the screen, it's a consciously genre-less project. For every burst of cineaste evaluation there's a mention of Dyer's father's fear of overpriced choc-ices, Kafka, Chernobyl, Björk, the artist Hiroshi Sugimoto, et cetera. Yet the author's bounding, bare-nerve tone, and implicit argument that the critical act has no edges, make it fly.

In the category of artists' writings, meanwhile, *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard* (Library of America) is an out-of-the-blue beauty. The late American fashioner of Pop-flavoured collages and paintings – who died of an Aids-related condition in 1994, and whose self-described "one major work" in words, the 136-page prose-poem "I Remember" (1975) that opens this chunky compilation, positions him as a demotic American Proust – was a wildly various, wildly life-loving writer.

The subsequent pages brim with sweet hits of pleasure: casual poems tabulating offbeat likes and dislikes ("pink nuns and salty peanuts, and Renoir who bores me" – shades of Frank O'Hara, a friend and occasional lover); sensualist screeds; autobiographical thumbnail sketches (Brainard alone with Mozart and Campari, snow falling outside "against a translucent sky of deep lavender"); and the artist's antic drawings, putting words into the mouths of characters from the funny pages of old newspapers.

"People of the World: Relax! Make all the noise you want to on the toilet: people will hear you but it does not matter", one of these reads. Bathroom reading par excellence, then, but *Collected Writings* works everywhere else too.

For sheer charm, though, two books share the laurels: *Artwork* (LRB/Profile, £30) is a lovely tribute to Peter Campbell, an integral part of the *London Review of Books'* visual and verbal identity who not only painted virtually every cover since it stopped using photographs – in his flowing, intimist watercolour style – for two decades until his death in 2011, but was also the journal's unshowy art critic. The practices, judicious yet understated, feel of a piece.

This cleanly designed volume reproduces numerous covers, watercolours, smart little cartoons soliciting subscriptions and book covers, along with a long, illuminating essay by Jeremy Harding. Virtually none of Campbell's writing, though, which suggests that a separate compilation is in preparation – or, at least, one hopes so.

Christine Davenne and Christine Fleurent's *Cabinets of Wonder* (Abrams, £30), meanwhile, manages to be something close to what it describes. It's an erudite historical tour of the titular concept, from 15th-century Italian studioli to Wunderkammeren to scientific cabinets of death masks and skeletons. Cue gorgeous photography (by Fleurent), a sleek design and a twist: Davenne asserts that the modern incarnation of the subject is the contemporary art exhibition.

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