

From the Stacks
By Julie Orf
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Do you know someone who always has to have the last word? While this is my final column of the year, I promise will not be the final word on 2025. December is a month of reflection, a season where experts and many others alike crown the "Best of" everything from gadgets to people. The most revealing lists are often the "Words of the Year," which act as a digital pulse check for our culture.

This year, the Cambridge Dictionary chose "parasocial," describing the one-sided emotional bonds we form with influencers and celebrities who do not actually know we exist. On the more volatile side, Oxford University Press crowned "rage bait" which is content engineered specifically to spark anger for the sake of "engagement." Even slang made the cut, with Dictionary.com selecting "67," a term (likely from a rap song by Skrilla) used to describe something "so-so" or "maybe." It is a fickle landscape; today's viral slang is tomorrow's forgotten footnote.

Selecting a "Book of the Year" is a more permanent and personal challenge. How do you choose a winner when opinions are as varied as colors? Some prizes, like the Pulitzer, reward the "craft" of the highbrow, while the Goodreads Choice Awards reward popularity. At our local library, the metric is simple: circulation. Thanks to its selection for the Ennis Book Discussion in February, *The Women* by Kristin Hannah dominated the charts. It is a rare "bridge" book, appealing to men through its gritty military history and to women through its powerful themes of female heroism and enduring friendship.

However, my personal "Best of" list looks a bit different. My standout novel was *The Secret Book of Flora Lea* by Patti Callahan Henry. It is a beautiful literary puzzle centered on a rare bookstore and a secret fairytale world that should not exist outside of two sisters' memories. It offers a look at WWII through the eyes of London's evacuated children. On the road, my husband and I found a different kind of immersion in the audiobook of *Fractured* by Karin Slaughter. Part of the Will Trent series, its engrossing plot expertly narrated by Kathleen Early made our spring road trips fly by.

If I had to choose a word of the year, not just for 2025, but for every year, it would be "Joy." Shakespeare was famously fond of it, and it remains the cornerstone of our holiday season. It is the "exceeding great joy" felt by the Wise Men and the simple, quiet delight found in a good story. As a year-end challenge, I encourage you to think of ten synonyms for joy. May you find every one of them in the coming months. Wishing you a Joyful New Year!