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Santa's sleigh stuffed with science

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Science Snapshot
Dan Vergano

By **Dan Vergano**, USA TODAY

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Santa only arrives once every year, but popular science books land in our mailbox all year round.

That means there is good news if you are still looking for that timely tome to park under your scholarly-minded loved one's tree. It has been a great year for science books.

Amazon recently announced *The Immortal life of Henrietta Lacks* by [Rebecca Skloot](#), the tale of the forgotten woman whose undying cells underpin cancer research, was its book of the year. And *Cleopatra: A Life* by Stacy Schiff, which wraps up classical scholarship about the famed Queen of the Nile into an enthralling tale, has reportedly been [optioned for a movie](#) starring [Angelina Jolie](#).

The bad news is choosing which book to give. But we're here to help with a look at some of the year's most intriguing science books:

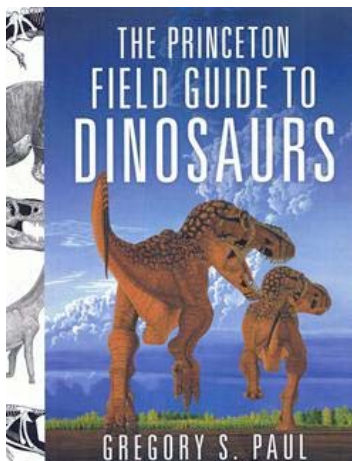
• *Atlas of Science: Visualizing What We Know* (MIT Press, \$29.95)— Katy Borner maps the history and worlds of science, from 1607 charts of Virginia to today's global maps of Wikipedia contributors.

An explosion in scientific visualization techniques ticks away inside this atlas, ready to blow the reader's mind. Anyone out there who digs maps and digs science (maybe someone knows a Dad like this?) will delight in these discoveries.

• *The Poisoner's Handbook: Murder and the Birth of Forensic Medicine in Jazz Age New York* (Penguin Press, \$25.95)— The scarily super storytelling skills of Deborah Blum bring to life Prohibition-era Gotham, where two fearless forensic scientists, New York's Charles Norris and Alexander Gettler, unraveled dozens of poisonings, and established their discipline as an investigative tool. Each chapter's detective story hides a toxic twist.

A real-life Watson and Holmes, "Norris and Gettler had been forgotten, so it took a lot of digging to tell their stories," Blum says, in a brief interview about the book. "The only problem, after four years of poison research, is that now no one will eat my cooking without asking questions." You may never look at gift cookies again without some anxiety, but the book delivers a bountiful buffet for true-crime buffs.

• *The Princeton Field Guide to Dinosaurs* (Princeton University Press, \$35)— Dinosaur artist Greg Paul presents this [illustrated field guide](#) to the ancient era of the dinosaurs. Lavishly filled with fossil forms and drawn interpretations of their outward appearance, the guide covers the entire spectrum of dinosaur species. The color images of some of the rock stars of the Age of Dinosaurs, from T-Rex to Triceratops, will enthrall any youngster with a yen for these ancient beasts.



Enlarge By Princeton University Press

The book 'The Princeton Field Guide to Dinosaurs' by Gregory S. Paul.

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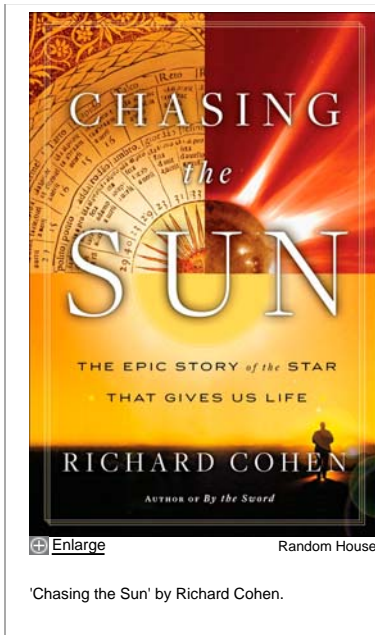
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'Chasing the Sun' by Richard Cohen.

Not a textbook, the guide has fostered debate among some paleontologists about its classification of dinosaurs, but Utah Geological Survey paleontologist [James Kirkland](#) applauds the oversized effort that went into compiling essentially a survey of the entire scholarly field of dinosaur paleontology. Paul has revitalized and re-invented the depiction of dinosaurs in recent decades, and the book brings the breadth of their lost world to today's readers.

•*Evolution: The Extended Synthesis* (MIT Press, \$35)— Lost amid the hubbub over school boards debating creationism instruction, a quiet discussion plays out among scientists over extending the latest findings in molecular biology into tomorrow's textbooks. Anyone wanting a serious, scholarly look at how the natural selection of ideas plays out in this realm, may want to consider this compilation of scholars' entries into this arena, edited by scientist philosopher Massimo Pigliucci and theoretical biologist Gerd Muller.

The pair have spearheaded calls for integrating epigenetics, which looks at how environment and growth activate individuals' genes, and "evo-devo" concepts, which can suggest ways that embryonic growth patterns may help allow new species to develop, into the conventional picture of evolution (the "modern synthesis"), alongside other ideas. The book is for those seriously interested in evolution, and is [not without critics](#), but captures questions that many evolutionary biologists are pondering.

•*Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (Bloomsbury Press, \$27)— Historian Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway burrow into the shadowy world of once-eminent researchers who traded lab coats for talking points aimed at gainsaying everything from tobacco to climate science. One explanation for public confusion over the extent of the solid scientific evidence for global warming in the view of the authors can be found in these annals of Cold Warriors turned nonsense peddlers.

"Scientists have faced an ongoing misrepresentation of scientific evidence and historical facts that brand them as public enemies — even mass murderers — on the basis of phony facts," Oreskes and Conway sum up, after detailing six decades, from tobacco to DDT to acid rain to nuclear winter to climate science, of authorities pushing doubt about scientific challenges to industry.

•*Planet Arctic: A Life at the Top of the World* (Firefly Press, \$40)— Photographer Wayne Lynch, an Arctic addict, takes readers to places explored in a 30-year career documenting the land of the midnight sun. In page after page, Lynch delivers the denizens of the far north to the readers eye, from bumble bees that revive during the day to heaps of walrus sunning themselves in the afternoon sun.

A nature-lover's delight, the book doesn't neglect any of the wild inhabitants of the Arctic, some of them threatened today by a changing climate at the top of the world.

Still can't make up your mind? Some of the other books we looked at in this column over the last year include, *From Eternity to Here: The Quest for the Ultimate Theory of Time* by [Sean Carroll](#), *Proofiness* by Charles Seife, and *The Grand Design*, by [Stephen Hawking](#) and Leonard Mlodinow.

With so many choices, you can't go wrong. Happy shopping season.

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