

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Gift Ideas

By Stephen Somerville

In 2001, PBS aired a television series entitled "Cracking the Code of Life", which chronicled the race to capture one of the biggest prizes in scientific history: the complete letter-by-letter sequence of genetic information that defines human life -- the human genome.

The television program ends with the two participants in the race, the publicly funded Human Genome Project and the private company Celera Genomics, both completing a rough draft of the sequence.

The Human Genome Project gives us the ability to read nature's complete genetic blueprint for building a human being for the first time.

What was especially fascinating about the show was the way they made the science understandable -- even for me.

Mapping the human genome may lead to scientific discoveries or unlocking the mysteries surrounding many of man's major diseases.

But, all these things pale in comparison to the real issue that the Human Genome Project should have been trying to solve; man's inability to shop for Christmas presents.

And it is that time of year, once again.

I believe that there is something in a man's gene pool that does not allow them to begin purchasing any presents until at least 4 p.m. on December 23.

My situation is magnified, as I now need to shop for birthday gifts during the holiday season.

My wife's birthday is the day after Christmas and my son's birthday is the day after that.

When I was first courting Julie, she made sure to inform me that Christmas and my birthday are two separate and distinct events. I guess she felt shortchanged in the gift department growing up. Great, now I get to deal with the guilt!

I thought our son being born so close to Christmas would solve part of my Christmas buying dilemma; the argument being that Ryan is my annual and ever loving gift to Julie. I don't know why, but this did not sit very well with her.

In the spirit of the holiday season that is just beginning, I offer up some book suggestions that could make a great Christmas gift.

For anyone who appreciates reading biographies that touch upon history and politics, then Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, "Team of Rivals: the political genius of Abraham Lincoln", is an absolute must read.

While this 749 page book is centered on the race for the 1860 Republican nomination, it takes us through Lincoln's upbringing, his famous Illinois Senate race versus Stephen Douglas, his views and actions regarding the slavery question, his campaign for the U.S. Presidency and his handling of the U.S. Civil War.

I was startled by the incredible number of casualties in the U.S. Civil War; over 600,000 soldiers died, with an estimated 500,000 civilian deaths. To put this number in perspective, the 600,000 dead are more than resulted from U.S. participation in all subsequent wars combined, until this day.

A marvelous, insightful, thoroughly enjoyable and inspiring book.

For the business person or the kid in all of us, there is a book about Lego entitled, "Brick by Brick: How Lego rewrote the rules of innovation and conquered the Global Toy Industry."

I think most parents at some point have come across the ubiquitous Lego bricks, usually by walking over the ones that your children may have left scattered around the house.

What you might not know is that not that long ago Lego was in bad financial shape and only a wholesale change in the way they did business saved them.

Lego management learned to really innovate to not just make incremental leaps in sales and profits but to leap frog their major competitors, Mattel and Hasbro.

We all know Chris Hadfield as the first Canadian to undertake a spacewalk, and recently as the Commander of the International Space Station. But he has also accomplished a number of other things and his book, "An Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth" goes into these.

The last book on my list is entitled, "Long Walk To Freedom", and it is the autobiography of the late South African President Nelson Mandela.

I have been reading the papers and watching the news about the recently passed 95-year-old freedom fighter but I wanted to know more about the man, so I purchased his autobiography.

I have not yet begun to read the book but I am looking forward to ? over the Christmas holidays ? reading about Mr. Mandela's life before his twenty seven years in prison, the reasons behind his release, and his time as President of South Africa. Any of the above books would make great Christmas presents.

Stephen can be contacted at stephensomerville@yahoo.com