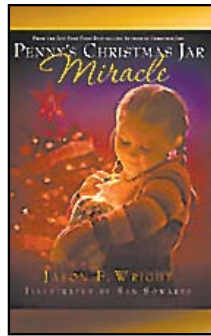
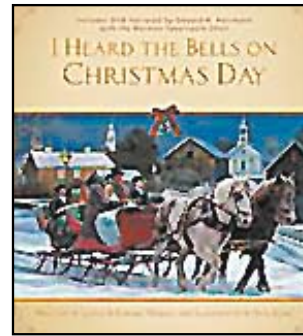
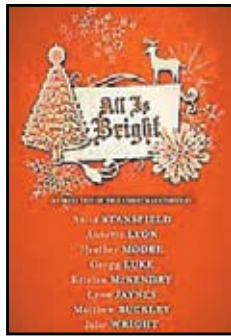
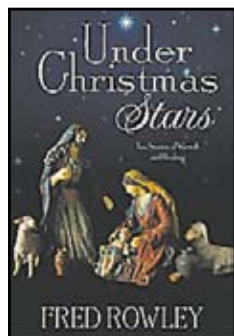


Reads to keep your holiday spirit alive



AS THANKSGIVING quickly approaches, it's time to write my favorite column of the year. Starting in late October and early November, I receive several Christmas books for review — each unique in its own way, but with a common theme: the true meaning of Christmas!

Whether a book honoring the spiritual beginnings of the holiday with the babe in the manger, a change-of-heart story or the good deeds of a child or neighbor who reaches out to another, they always fill me with goodwill and remind me of the goodness of the human heart for at least one month out of the year. When I was raising my seven boys, I always took time to read with them during the holidays, and I know many of you do the same.

These six books are perfect for family read-togethers followed by family discussions of the true meaning of Christmas. As "Black Friday" approaches, keep your local bookstore and these titles in mind.

**"Under Christmas Stars"
by Fred C. Rowley
(Covenant, \$4.95)**

This small book will warm your heart. Consisting of only two short stories, it would be hard for me to say which is my favorite — they both carry a powerful message.

"Fence Mending" is the story of two former friends who have had a falling out and not spoken to each other in years — a fall-

ing out over four tires and 90 bales of hay. An anonymous act of kindness makes one of them realize how trivial their quarrel is and he decides to try to mend their relationship after recalling a quote from St. Mark: "Forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses." Be prepared for a surprise ending.

"Feliz Navidad," based on a true story, tells of the reunion of an adopted daughter and her birth mother on Christmas Eve. Keep the tissue box close at hand — this one will activate your tear ducts.

**"All Is Bright: A Collection of True Christmas Stories"
(Covenant, \$4.95)**

You will find some of your favorite authors in this little anthology of essays, most of whom have appeared in this column at one time or another. All of them LDS authors — Anita Stanfield, Annette Lyon, Gregg Luke, H.B. Moore, Julie Wright, Kristen McKendry, Lynn C. Jaynes and Matthew Buckley — these personal Christmas stories will provide thoughtful reading for all Christians. All good reads and enough depth that teaching moments are sure to arise, especially with tweens and teenagers.

The stories include: A mother in Canada with a sick child

and away from family searches for a specific toy that miraculously appears on Christmas Day in the most unlikely of circumstances; another mother tries to explain Santa Claus to a 4-year-old — without lying to her; three unlikely teenagers bring Christmas to a single mother and her family in a most unexpected way; Christmas in Jerusalem for a 16-year-old girl brings insights she didn't expect to find; a Wyoming family loses their barn and farm animals in a fire and receives an unexpected Christmas gift; Dad receives a bucket of coal for Christmas; Charles Dickens and the movie "Scrooge" start a long-standing family tradition for one young mother; and a 50-year old mother discovers what it means to "follow your star."

**"Christmas on Miracle Lane and Other Holiday Favorites"
by Kaye Jacobs Volk
(Covenant, \$7.95)**

Volk is a new writer to me, but this little collection of four Christmas stories makes me want to read more. In her bio it says, "Writing and seeing one Christmas story published for seven years in a row ... seemed to keep Christmas alive

throughout the year, from one to the next." I loved all of the stories but the one that really captured my attention is the title story.

"Christmas on Miracle Lane" will remind you a bit of "It's a Wonderful Life," yet the story is fresh and compelling. It's the tale of a frustrated and stressed-out mother whose personal relationships with her widowed mother, her teenage daughter and her longtime husband are all frayed, in her mind, beyond repair. She leaves home one evening just before Christmas and ends up in a part of town she has never seen before, even though she has lived there all her life. What magic takes place on Miracle Lane that night will be part of your Christmas reading for many years to come. I have a feeling many mothers will see themselves in Eve as she discovers that the emptiness in her heart comes from her own shortcomings.

I have to admit that the final story, "The Christmas Cradle," is a close second — but you'll have to read the book to find out why.

**"An Angel on Main Street"
by Kathi Oram Peterson
(Covenant, \$8.95)**

This little gem of a book is well written and immediately captured my attention. Micah Connors, his mother and younger sister, Annie, have just moved from Boise, Idaho, to a smaller Idaho town in hopes of

a new start. After some struggles with the law in Boise, Micah has promised his mother that he will stay out of trouble. But as bad luck would have it, Micah innocently falls into an incident that ends with the town sheriff escorting him home.

The mother is struggling financially, Annie is dangerously ill and the sheriff, much to Micah's chagrin, finds his mother attractive. Annie becomes convinced that the manger that suddenly appears on Main Street is being built by "the angels" and confides in her non-believing brother that she "prayed that Jesus would come and make me better. The stable means He's coming, Micah. You wait and see. ... Mama said prayer makes miracles possible." Fearing his sister will die unless "Jesus comes" in the form of a doll, he sets out to get the doll for her, which leads to even more encounters with the sheriff.

As a family you'll want to read this story in chapters, but don't be surprised if you find yourself reading ahead to discover what happens.

**"I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"
by Lloyd and Karmel Newell
(Shadow Mountain, \$21.95)**

This beautifully illustrated book (Dan Burr) tells the mostly unknown story of how Henry Wadsworth Longfellow came to write the poem "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" and how it eventually

Stephen King's dome yarn among his best

By The Associated Press

BY NOW WITH Stephen King, it's easy to think this is all kind of ridiculous. An invisible dome descending upon a small town in Maine? People trapped inside, trying to figure out what on Earth is going on and — as always in a Stephen King story — dying in droves?

Good Lord. Is the King of Really Heavy Books — the author who is a one-man argument for the hernia-preventing benefits of e-books — running out of viable plot devices?

This is, after all, the guy who wrote entire volumes about cell phones turning fellow citizens into ravenous zombies, about possessed and murderous 1958 Plymouths and about evil, immortal clowns who live in the sewers and prey upon children. Really, now. How much gimmickry can one writer expect us to stomach?

Those statements are all completely fair and true. Trouble is, when it comes to "Under the Dome," they're also all entirely inaccurate.

Because "Under the Dome" is one of those works of fiction that manages to be both pulp and high art, that successfully — and very improbably — captures the national zeitgeist at this particularly strange and breathless period in American history.

The town of Chester's Mill, Maine — just up the road from the equally fictional Castle Rock, home to so many of King's unsettling yarns — is minding its own business one



dazzling October day when an unseen force field descends upon it, slicing in two pretty much anything that was crossing the edge of town at that moment.

What happens in ensuing days is even more unsettling. Except for Internet service and spotty cell-phone signals, the town is isolated and imprisoned in plain sight. And inside the dome, society slowly, inexorably, almost methodically begins to fall apart.

King is usually classified as a horror writer, but he is more of a chameleon than that. He's capable of shifting from genre to genre at will, particularly in his short stories. "Under the Dome," however, is such a hodgepodge of genres that it ends up transcending genre entirely, and in the best of ways. The most accurate way of characterizing it in a single line may be "Our Town" meets "Silent Spring" meets "Lord of the Flies."

For it begins becoming evident, in the usual serpentine King way, that the environment and the way we treat it have

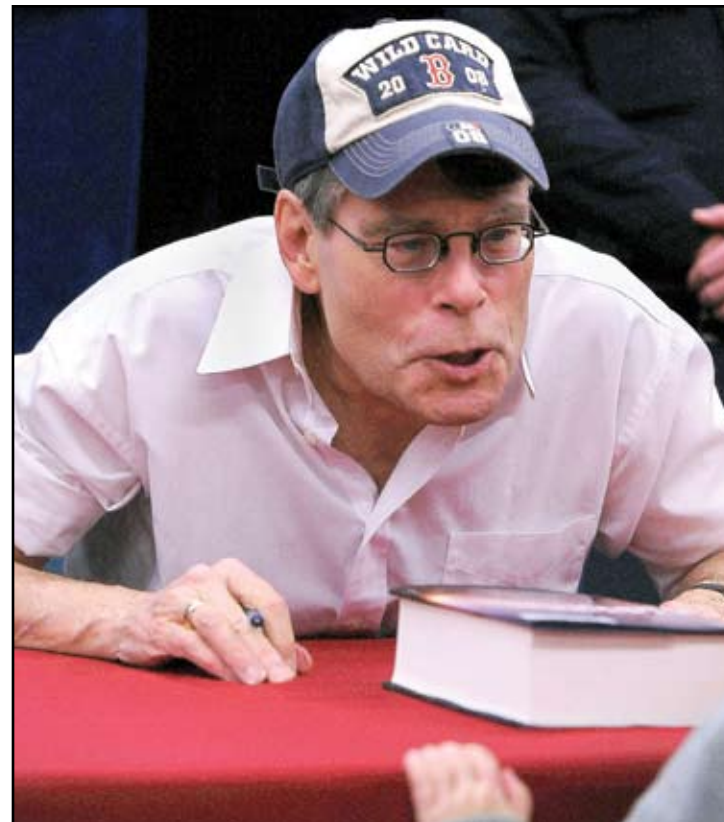
everything to do with why the dome is there and what it might mean. Coupled, of course, with some seriously non-rational things that are going on.

The chief protagonist, Dale Barbara, is a just-retired Army man who fought in Iraq and did some things he isn't entirely proud of. He has repaired to Chester's Mill as a fry cook, trying to lay low. But in the days before "Dome Day," he runs afoul of some of the local cretins and becomes persona non grata through no fault of his own. In fact, he is trying to leave town when the dome falls and narrowly escapes becoming one of its first victims.

Barbara becomes one of the focal points in the us-vs.-them panic that overtakes Chester's Mill like a slow-motion tidal wave, pushed along by the other focal point — "Big Jim" Rennie, the town boss, who is about as prosaically malevolent a character that King has ever devised and who has a no-good son to match.

What pushes "Under the Dome" forward is not so much its whodunit or whatdunit plot, though that is tighter and more well-structured than usual for a King novel, even at more than 1,000 pages. It's how the characters treat each other and react to each other as they are forced together in their Biosphere-from-hell scenario.

And why not? Chester's Mill in late 2009 is a microcosm of America at the same time, with all the angst and post-9/11 fear and suspicion of fellow citizens that pervades the entire repub-



AP photo

Author Stephen King makes a face at 3½-year-old Jason Brock, unseen, who had King sign his new book, "Under the Dome," at the Walmart in Dundalk, Md. King chose this store because it reportedly sells more of his books per capita than anywhere else in the country.

lic. Add to that the notion of an entire society being watched and watching itself through a translucent bubble — a reality-TV metaphor if there ever was one — and you have novel as cultural document.

The end, and the resolution, are less important than the path taken to get there. As usual with King, it's all seen through a fun-house mirror. And though the requisite supernatural elements

are there, the really troubling thing — as with so much in society today — is that the fun-house distortions of popular fiction are, to everyday America, more recognizable than ever.

The main reflection isn't that of Frankenstein or Dracula or the Incredible Hulk. Instead, it looks a lot more like us. That's how King, at his best, has always been. What's really scary is that the world has caught up.

became the hymn most Christians are familiar with. It is sure to become a family keepsake; included is a DVD titled "Longfellow's Christmas." This stunning book includes snippets of Civil War-era history and a heart-wrenching story about Longfellow's frame of mind that compelled him to sit down on a Christmas day to pen the words we are all so familiar with more than 200 years later.

"Penny's Christmas Jar Miracle" by Jason F. Wright (Shadow Mountain, \$17.95)

This book is a sequel to Wright's New York best-selling book, "The Christmas Jar," of a few years back. The illustrations (Ben Sowards) in this children's book are magnificent and sure to mesmerize both young and old.

Penny and her family have been doing Christmas jars for

three years and this year it is her turn to decide what they will do with the money they have saved one coin at a time. Penny's idea is to throw a never-to-be-forgotten party for the entire neighborhood, rather than giving all the money to a single person or family. When her good friend, Grandpa Charlie, becomes ill right before Christmas, she comes up with another idea that even tops the first one.

For those who aren't familiar with the first book, add it to your list of Christmas reading. The "Christmas Jar" movement also has a Web site, www.christmasjars.com, where people are encouraged to share their own "Christmas Jar" miracles.

One last note: in one of Volk's stories, she speaks of having a "Christmas heart" all year-round. I'm going to try my

best this year — hope you'll join me. Happy Thanksgiving!

Book critic Charlene Hirschi holds her master's in English from Utah State University. She is among a number of freelance writers whose columns appear in The Herald Journal as part of an effort to expose readers to a variety of community voices. Authors, readers and editors are invited to visit www.charlenehirschi.com.