

Pick Up & Deliver 814: Reading Roundup: Q4 2025

Transcript

Welcome to Pick Up and Deliver, the podcast where I pick up my audio recorder as I step out for a walk and deliver an episode to you while I stroll around. I'm Brendan Riley.

Well greetings listener. I'm Brendan Riley. I realize it's not that many episodes ago that I did a reading roundup. I did the reading roundup for quarter three of 2025, but generally my goal is to have the reading roundup come about a month or a month and a half after the end of the quarter. So I really should have been doing quarter four. In fact, we're almost to the end of March, which is the end of quarter one of 2026. And I still haven't done quarter, quarter five of quarter four of 2025. So that's what I'm doing today.

This is the reading roundup quarter four of 2025. As always, I will talk about each of the books that I read during that time. If I run out of time, I'll just quickly mention at the end which books I read. Along with each book, I'll suggest a game that would make a nice accompaniment to the book. If you decide you wanted to try both. All right, let's just jump right in. Oh, if you want to know more about any of these books, they're all listed on the show notes over at Rattlebox Games.com, where I have discussed all of these books. I have links to my Goodreads reviews and discussions of them as we go.

So first we have the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, volume one. This is something I've read many times, certainly at least three or four times before. I'm not sure what made me pick it up now. I was looking at the comics shelf in my basement. I was feeling like reading something. I enjoyed something with fun art and interesting storytelling, and I settled on this classic. The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen is an interesting idea from comics legend Alan Moore. In it, several characters from Victorian era literature are gathered together by a shadowy agent from the British government and assembled into a team of adventurers. The team consists of Alan Quartermaine, Mina Harker, Captain Nemo, Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and The Invisible Man. These people are sent by the British government to handle mysterious and outrageous claims. And so they have adventures. It's a really interesting book. The artist is, I think Kevin O'Neill doesn't say on my sheet here, but he has a very thin style, very like pencil focused. He draws characters with thick with tight angles, and several of the characters are sort of wafer thin or else bulbous, and it makes it's very compelling. The writing is really tight. It sort of imagines that everything that happens in British literature, particularly fantastical literature, is all real. So we have a whole bunch of different cameos or events from different characters in literature that pop up. As I said, I've read this a number of times. I think the storytelling is really clever. There is a volume two and then a volume three called the Black Dossier, and then a number of other stories told in this world as well. I think volume one is amazing, volume two is great. And after that you could probably take them or leave them at the end of the black dossier is pretty great as well, but I think there are parts in the middle that really don't hold up. If you wanted to play a game that touched on these issues, there's an excellent game called Victoriana that really looks like it was made to be League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, the board game you play as a lot of these same characters, and you are adventuring in London, trying to stop a shadowy figure causing all kinds of mayhem. It's a very difficult, cooperative game. I've played it a number of times, and we always run right up to the wire if we win at all, which we often don't. So definitely worth checking out if you get a chance.

I must have been in a not nostalgic mood because shortly after League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, I picked up the Player of Games, which is an eon the second of the Ian Banks culture novels. Culture is one of my favourite science fiction series. I think the idea of the culture is really interesting, and the way that banks imagines the different beings in culture working is fantastic. In the player of games, there's a character who is sort of one of the top players of games in the galaxy, and he is invited by the culture to go on a sort of diplomatic mission to play a ceremonial game on this planet, where a game is the central power mechanism of the planet. It's one of the more direct versions of Banks discussion about economics and the relationships of power and people. But it also is about games and the and people who like to play games and the playing of games. It's really thoughtful and interesting and fun and dark and sad. I just like it a lot actually. Just talking about it now. It makes me want to read it again. I like the story so much. That's the player of games number two from Ian Banks. I don't know what would be. I don't know what would be a game that would fit this story. Honestly, anytime you play a board game, you're playing into it a little bit. One of the really big games, perhaps Mega Civilization or something like that, because the game that's played in this game, the game

that's played in the book, is played out over vast, a vast board and over many, many rounds and so on. So that's the player of games culture number two.

Next up, we have *Midnight in Chernobyl* the untold story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster. This is written by Adam Higginbotham, who is a history, a history writer whom I will certainly read more of. This book is the primary document from which the HBO miniseries *Chernobyl* was scripted, and that series was incredible. So reading this book equally incredible. It's fast making *Chernobyl* one of the historical. One of the historical events about which I am most interested. Like the Titanic, which is another thing I'm very interested in. The *Chernobyl* represents a sort of confluence of things that have gone wrong on all kinds of ways, on individual level, on the systemic level, on the cultural level. There's like an overlap of problems that lead to this one dramatic and devastating moment. So it's really interesting to study and explore. How did this happen? What happened when it happened, and so on. If you're at all interested in this event, I can't recommend a better source than *Midnight in Chernobyl*. I think the HBO mini series is incredible, but I don't really know how many dramatic liberties they took in order to make the storytelling compelling. I think there's a lot there that they didn't need to, and Higginbotham does an excellent job capturing much of what they're talking about here. I can't think of a book. I can't think of a game that would fit this. I guess you could play something like, I can't even think of what it would be. It has to be something. I can't think of a game that is about everything going wrong. I guess there are a number of cooperative games that are about keeping things from failing. So you could play *Daybreak*, perhaps, but that might be depressing in the context of *Chernobyl*, since *Daybreak* is about trying to save the world, and *Chernobyl* is about what happens when we fail to save things.

Next up we have *Mr. Magic* by Kiersten White. This is an audio book I listen to, and the premise is, did I listen to it as an audiobook? Maybe not. I think maybe I just read this one. Um, it's a, it's a horror novel with a really interesting premise. It's like there's this children's TV show that everyone's sort of remembers, but nobody remembers definitively. Anytime you see anything online about it, people are always kind of like, hey, did you ever see this show? And people are like, yeah, I kind of remember that, but nobody knows what it was. And more importantly, there's no documentation of it anywhere. There's no tapes of it, there's no recordings. It's all word of mouth. And but the idea is that everybody had it when they were kids. The main character is one of five people who were on the cast of this show. It was like a children's adventure show. Think of like the *Magic School Bus* kind of, but it had a sinister overtone to it. And she is sort of drawn back for a reunion taping of the show, but nobody really knows what's happening with the show. It's it's a good creepy horror novel. It's a little weird. Not the best, but I thought it was pretty good. So that is *Mr. Magic*.

Next up we have *I Was a Teenage Slasher* by Stephen Graham Jones. This is another horror novel. I listened to this one, and it's sort of an interesting meta narrative here. The main character becomes a slasher from like a horror movie, and he understands that he has the drive of the slasher and a horror movie, like he has to do what a slasher does. And he's got he's got things that help him or things that hurt him. And like the stereotypes of the slasher movie enact as people encounter him, such that the things that happen to slashers happen to him and the people he's chasing. It's a weird book. It's sort of meta. It reminds me a little bit of lit RPGs where the mechanics of the RPG video game like in *Dungeon Crawler Carl* or *How to Kill a Demon King* in ten days, or in ten steps that. Those are all sort of bound together. This idea of telling the story while also making straightforward, or making or foregrounding the meta narrative or the rules that make that drive the system. *I Was a Teenage Slasher* does that as well. I'm reminded if you want to do a movie with it rather than a game. A game you could use *Last Friday*, I suppose. Um, or *Final Girl*, uh, and *Last Friday* you get to play as one of the serial killers, as the one of one player plays as the serial killer, which maybe fits better. Uh, if you want to do a movie, I would say in a quiet nature is probably the one because that one is a sort of slasher movie from the perspective of the slasher. Now, you don't get much interiority there, whereas this book is all interiority, but it works out fine. So that is. *I Was a Teenage Slasher*.

Next up we have *Victorian Psycho*, which is. It's kind of what it says on the cover. Uh, it is a woman who is raised in the Victorian era, locked into strictures of life, shaped by being a woman in the Victorian era. She has a governess, for example, but she's also a psychopath and sort of follows her as she navigates the world and her psychopathy drives how she interacts with people. It's pretty entertaining, actually. I like that one a lot. From what I remember, it's been a bit, but pretty good. That was *Victorian Psycho*.

Next up we have *Carpathians*. This is the one I'm most excited to read the next book. This is a far future space opera story where a sort of corrupt planetary, uh, government person working for a corporation

discovers an immensely valuable, world-changing alien artifact and tries to figure out how to capitalize on it for his own financial good. Meanwhile, several other characters are also embroiled in the discovery of this artifact and the documentation of it. It's just a really good book. I liked it a lot. I'm interested to see where the series goes. It definitely did not reach an end point, and so I'm keen to see how things progress. I haven't played *Cryo*, but it feels like *Cryo* might be a game that would fit alongside this story. *Cryo* is a game about going on sort of mining expeditions and trying to get the most out of them, but usually in order to do it, you have to bring one of the other players along. So there's a lot of negotiation and sort of capitalist Scrooge, while also trying to avoid running out of resources or losing people and that sort of thing. So that's *Carpathians* by Paul Dickson.

Next up we have *Too Like the Lightning*. This is *terra incognita* or *terra incognita* number one by Ada Palmer. This book is so weird but interesting. The story is told from the perspective of a character who has some level of villainy in the society, which holds on to that idea. I'll come back to it. The narrator is telling the story about. It's a far future semi-utopian world, but with so much sort of extreme, so many ideas packed into the story that it's very hard to share without just blurting out a list of tropes. But the novel has a little bit of gender politics, a little bit of real world politics, a little bit of psychology, a little magic, a little sci-fi. And this wild cast of characters with elaborate names and complex backstories is very much a novel that just throws you in the deep end and demands that you swim. I liked it enough to read the second one. The second one I thought was fine. I probably will read the third one, but if the third one isn't better than the second one, I'll probably be done at that point. I think there are five altogether. To be fair, I did listen to this instead of reading it, so maybe hearing it changed the level of comprehension I had, but overall it was pretty good. So that is *Too Like the Lightning*. T-o-o as in this person is too much like the lightning. I don't know what that means too. Like the lightning. All right.

Next up we have Michael Schumacher's *Mighty Fitz*. The sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. Schumacher very carefully details the story of the *Edmund Fitzgerald's* final voyage. So we follow the careers of the different people who were on the ship, what roles they had, what is known about the last few hours of the *Fitzgerald's*, um, of the *Edmund Fitzgerald's* journey. If you don't know what I'm talking about, the *Edmund Fitzgerald* is a ship that sank in Lake Superior in the nineteen seventies. Sort of famous because it wasn't that far from shore when it sank, but it sank in a terrible storm and all hands were lost. So there were other ships in the area who saw, like, they sort of saw the lights disappear and couldn't raise it on the comms again. And the storms were so bad, it took a while for people to go out and look for them. It's probably most famous because a folk singer named Gordon Lightfoot then wrote a song about the wreck that became a massive worldwide hit and solidified the sort of famous nature of that particular shipwreck. The book was really good. It gives you a lot of insight into what happened at the night and the different people who were involved. So if this is something you find interesting, the *Mighty Fitz*, the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* is a great way to explore that story.

Next up we have *Empire of Silence*, the *Sun Eater* number one by Christopher Ruocco. This is pretty good. It is a high fantasy sci-fi space opera. I say high fantasy because the story involves a lot of sword fights and royal houses, and the sort of things you would find in a high fantasy, a high fantasy story, a coliseum. But it's sci-fi because it takes place in a far future scientific world. There are no AI computers because computers cause a lot of trouble for human beings. So they were very limited in what they could do to keep by people in the future. So not surprising to learn that AI caused trouble. The story is being told by the protagonist, who is at the center of the story, but he's telling it in past tense. First person, like a journal or a recording. He's recording for you. But he has done something terrible, much like the narrator from *Too Like the Lightning* or *Too Like the Lightning*. Both of these characters have. They are narrating from a place of having done something bad in the past. It seems like the epic scale, the scale of the bad thing done is much grander for the character in *Empire of the Silence*, but both are seen as villainous. I like this one a lot. Sort of sword and sword and sorcery adventure along with sci-fi stuff. Good characterization. The main character is kind of a prick, but I think that's that. We know that. And often he causes trouble for himself by being one. So interesting story. Glad to keep reading.

Next up we have *We Are Legion*. *We are Bob*. That's from the *Babar* verse number one. This maybe is my favorite book I read in this time. Uh, it is a story about a guy who gets uploaded into an autonomous space probe and sent to another planet to try to find room for human beings to live. One of the things he has is a series of 3D printers, which he can use to build other 3D printers. And then they can build other bobs. So he copies himself. He makes copies of himself and spreads out and runs into all sorts of different shenanigans.

It's just very well told. The storytelling isn't quite as good as Andy Weir, but it's in the same neighborhood in terms of the kind of story it is. It's a smart person, relatively likeable, trying to solve problems with a good sense of humor. I really like this story. I've read all three by now, and it turns out there are two more I didn't know were there, so I'll be getting those and reading them soon. I suspect you'll hear about them in quarter two of 2026. So that is we are legion. We are Bob.

Next up we have Kamila Sten. *The Lost Village*. This is an audio book I listened to in which the main character is a filmmaker who is trying to make a documentary about a small Swedish village where the whole village disappeared, and she recruits a couple friends to go with her to make this documentary. It is a thriller slash horror novel. A whole bunch of stuff goes wrong, but it's very well. It's a very strong, character driven story with high emotions and interesting storytelling. Really atmospheric, very well told. You can really envision the creepy lost village when they get there, and the weaving in of her own past is really smart and thoughtful. So I enjoyed this one quite a bit. That's *The Lost Village* by Kamila Sten.

Next up we have *Friend of the Devil* by Stephen Lloyd. Uh, I thought this book was okay. I read it on recommendation from a podcast, which I will say lowered my view of the podcast recommenders sense of what is a really good book or not. I thought it was fine. Um, it is a sort of horrific murder mystery novel set in the nineteen fifties in a children's or like a boarding school, and a private detective is brought in to try to suss out what's happening at the school and who's to blame. The detective is written in a sort of stereotype of a detective style. The author certainly kind of knows that's what they're writing. And in fact, maybe the character knows that's what they're enacting. The mystery is okay, but ultimately I just it was fine. Not super memorable. I honestly couldn't tell you the whole plot at this point. It's only been a few months, so I have some vague memories, but anything I can remember would be a spoiler. So I'll leave it at where I left it and say I was not all that intense about *Friend of the Devil* from Stephen Lloyd.

Next up we have *How to Defeat a Demon King in ten Easy Steps* by Andrew Rowe. I read this off of a recommendation of lit RPGs to check out if you liked *Dungeon Crawler Carl*. I don't know why I didn't just read the next *Dungeon Crawl Karl* book. I thought this was fine. There were some amusing parts, but ultimately the lit RPG genre seems a little gimmicky to me. I have trouble seeing it sustain itself. I'm sure *Dungeon Crawler Karl* wasn't the first one to do it, but it was the first one I read, and so I have space in my mind for that one to be what it is. As I encounter other books doing the same thing, I'm less and less intrigued with each one. So meh. That's what I have to say about that. That's *How to Defeat a Demon King in ten easy steps*.

Next we have *Death Comes at Christmas*. This is a series of short mysteries my wife and I read these were. Some of these were really good. Then some of them were okay and a couple were just dumb. It's a. Which is not surprising for a short story collection. You're generally not going to like all of them or like them at different levels. Generally, these are murder mysteries focused on Christmas events of some sort. The writing styles vary widely, the genres vary widely. There are some that are pretty funny, some that are very serious, and a variety that are sort of classic locked room mysteries or classic detective mysteries of the sort where there is an inspector and he has to question a bunch of people or whatever. She asked a question, a bunch of people. All in all, it was fine. I don't know that I would say stay away, but if you can find a highly rated short story collection, I might go that one instead. I think we picked this one because it was Christmas themed and we were traveling for Christmas, that is. *Death comes at Christmas*.

And finally we have the Titanic story. Hard choices, dangerous decisions. Now you listener, know me, having been listening to this podcast for eight years now, you know I like to read a book about the Titanic every now and again. And this one was the current read the log line or the. The claim was the author is a philosophy and humanities professor, and they're exploring the Titanic story from the perspective of difficult choices people had to make. All right. Interesting. Maybe this will give me a light of something I hadn't thought about before, or go into the sort of moral calculus or moral philosophy of what happened on the ship. It didn't. Uh, generally it was there was a short section about the some crucial problem on the Titanic and then a recounting of, uh, the stories that have come from various places that I already knew. There were a couple stories where I thought, oh, this person just hasn't read enough about the Titanic in particular. I don't have much patience for anybody who still blames captain Lord for not going to help Titanic. I think the preponderance of evidence suggests he couldn't see the ship. Anyone says he could has not read enough about the issue. Yeah. So it was kind of disappointing not I wouldn't put it on my recommended list. If you're trying to pick a Titanic book to read.

So that brings me to the end of the books I read in 2025. What did you what did you read in October, November, and December of 2025? Dear listener, head over to BoardGameGeek guild 3269 and share your reading there. I'd love to know about it, but until next time, I'm gonna say thanks for joining me on my walk today, and I hope your next walk is as pleasant as mine was. Bye bye. Brought to you by Rattlebox games.