

An aerial photograph of a rugged coastline. A narrow, crescent-shaped sandy beach is nestled between steep, forested cliffs. The water is a deep, dark blue, with white foam from waves crashing against the rocky shore. In the foreground, several large, jagged rock formations jutting out into the sea are visible. The overall scene is one of natural beauty and isolation.

15 Books That Will Change Your Life

That Most People Have Never Heard Of

BY RYAN HOLIDAY

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If you're only reading the books that other people are reading, you aren't getting ahead—you're just keeping up. Smart readers and ambitious people know that the real edge is in seeking out knowledge that other people don't have, that you need to read the other books that most people aren't lucky to know about or too lazy to read. Below are 15 of those kinds of books—cult classics, secret weapons of the powerful and successful, hits from decades ago that have slipped from view. Each one will teach you something—about yourself, about life, about your career, about business—and each will turn you onto to new ways of thinking and living. Read them as soon as you can and absorb them.

The question is what to do with them when you finish. Should you share your edge with others? I think so—but that's up to you.

Meditations by Marcus Aurelius

This is not only one of greatest books ever written but perhaps the only book of its kind. Just wrap your head around this: At some point around 170 AD, the single [most powerful man in the world](#) sat down and wrote a private book of lessons and admonishments to himself on how to be better, more just, more immune to temptation, wiser. It is the definitive text on self-discipline, personal ethics, humility, self-actualization and strength. And it survives and you have access to it today. It has been for decades the secret weapon of many leaders—Teddy Roosevelt took it with him on his dangerous 'River of Doubt' adventure, Bill Clinton re-reads it every year, and Secretary of Defense James Mattis carried it with him on all of his deployments. Sadly, even today, still too few people have read it. Many philosophy students get degrees without picking it up. Why? "Too practical." [Note, I strongly suggest the Gregory Hays translation from the Modern Library]

15 Books That Will Change Your Life

[Letters from a Self-Made Merchant to His Son](#) by George Horace Lorimer

This book is the fictional correspondence between Old Gorgon Graham, a self-made millionaire in Chicago, and his son who is coming of age and entering the family business. The letters date back to the 1890s but feel like they could have been written in any era. Honest. Genuine. Packed with good advice. Consider it an incisive and edifying tutorial in entrepreneurship, responsibility, and leadership. The book was a 1900's bestseller that has since disappeared from view, but the no-nonsense advice it offers is timeless. One example: “Always appoint an hour at which you'll see a man, and if he's late a minute don't bother with him.”

[What I Learned Losing a Million Dollars](#) by Jim Paul and Brendan Moynihan

Most books are about success—here's a good one about failure. With each and every successful move that he made, Jim Paul, who made it to the top of Chicago Mercantile Exchange, was convinced that he was special, different, and exempt from the rules. Once the markets turned against his trades, he lost it all — his fortune, job, and reputation. This book will teach you how letting arrogance and pride [get to your head](#) is the beginning of your unraveling. Learn from stories like this instead of by your own trial and error. Think about that next time you believe you have it all figured out. The great philosopher and investor Nassim Taleb called it “one of the rare non-charlatanic books in finance,” and bestselling author and entrepreneur Tim Ferriss credits half of his net worth to this book's influence. The lessons here will completely change how you think about investing and become indispensable tools the next time you approach any major decision in your life.

[The Score Takes Care of Itself](#) by Bill Walsh

Bill Walsh's best and most unknown book is actually [Finding the Winning Edge](#). He took the 49ers from the worst team in football to the Super Bowl in less than 3 years. I suggest you start with [The Score Takes Care of Itself](#) because it's slightly more

15 Books That Will Change Your Life

affordable. Both teach you Walsh's brand of genius and what he called the Standard of Performance. That is: How to practice. How to dress. How to hold the ball. Where to be on a play down the very inch. Which skills mattered for each position. How much effort to give. By upholding these standards—whatever they happen to be for your chosen craft—success will take care of itself. Even if you've never watched a down of football, you'll get something out of his books. After all, sports embody the best and the worst of life—our competitive urges, teamwork, grace under pressure, realizing our potential, the agony of defeat. It's why books written by great coaches have so much to teach us, not only about the game but about life itself.

[12 Against the Gods: The Story of Adventure](#) by William Bolitho

This old and out of print book shows 12 of history's greats and their hubris-driven failures. Just like [What I Learned Losing a Million Dollars](#) above, it teaches that the only cure to ego is humility. Elon Musk recommended this book and it quickly sold out on Amazon. My copy cost me \$139 but the rule smart readers tend to follow—which I urge you to adopt—is: [If you want a book, you buy it—cost be damned](#). A better starting point might be [Plutarch's Lives](#) or [Vasari's Painters](#), which are also some of [the best 'moral biographies.'](#) or short biographical sketches about great men and women in history, written with an eye towards practical application and life advice.

[The Measure of My Days](#) by Florida Scott Maxwell

The daily notes of a strong but dying woman (born 1883, written in 1968) watching her life slowly leave her and wind to a close. The wisdom in this thing is amazing and the fact that most people have no idea exists—and basically wait until the end of their life to start thinking about all this is very sad. This is a short book but full of timeless wisdom on living well and aging with dignity and grace.

[The Strategemata](#) by Frontinus

This forgotten book is a collection of examples of military stratagems from Greek and Roman history put together by Frontinus, who himself had a renowned military career.

15 Books That Will Change Your Life

According to [one military historian](#), *The Strategemata* was one of the most popular military texts circulating in medieval times but has since been forgotten by history. These are short and to the point teaching you strategic lessons with each and every anecdote. Remember: Strategy is something that is critically relevant to all of us – not just those with careers in the military. We all have goals, we all have obstacles to those goals and we all live in a world we do not control. Those things combine to create the necessity of strategy. The better we are at it—the better we are at doing what we want and need to do. Consider this anecdote from the book and ask whether there are any decisions in your life right now for which you need to make retreat impossible: “Fabius Maximus, fearing that his troops would fight less resolutely in consequence of their reliance on their ships, to which it was possible to retreat, ordered the ships to be set on fire before the battle began.”

[Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed The Art of War](#) by Robert Coram

Boyd was a world class fighter pilot who changed warfare and strategy not just in the air, but on the ground and by sea. His concepts pioneered the modern concept of maneuver warfare (and were used for the First Gulf War, for which one general called him the “architect of that victory.”) His method of problem solving and problem analysis – [known as the OODA Loop](#) – is now used in the military, Silicon Valley and is a required tool you need to adopt in your decision-making process. Boyd also perfected the art of “Getting Things Done” whether that was in war or in the bureaucracy of the Pentagon. You need to know and understand John Boyd’s lessons. Although [this book has become a cult classic](#), Boyd is still unknown to far too many people. Study him and learn from him.

[The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz](#) by Mordecai Richler

Duddy is the ultimate Jewish hustler, always working, always scheming, always looking for a deal, and looked down upon by everyone for his limitless ambition. Duddy never stops in his pursuit to acquire real estate in order to “be somebody” — never forgetting his grandfather’s maxim that “a man without land is nobody.” Except it doesn’t work out like he planned. From this book, you learn that the hustler — the striver — if he cannot

15 Books That Will Change Your Life

prioritize and if he does not have principles, loses everything in the end. Even the 1974 movie based on the book has slipped from view for decades, and after originally rejected by the Cannes festival, it [was only recently invited](#) and earned its place as part of the Cannes Classics series.

[The Moral Sayings of Publius Syrus: A Roman Slave](#) by Publius Syrus

The best philosophy comes from people who were not “philosophers.” Syrus was a slave and his moral maxims are far better than perhaps the most famous book in this category, those of Duc de la Rochefoucauld. Some favorites: “The mightiest rivers are easy to cross at their source.” “Avarice is the source of its own sorrows.” Despite being mostly unknown, [you can trace his influence](#) in Seneca, Shakespeare, The Rolling Stones, and others. In his short maxims you find lessons that will stay with you for years.

[Cyropaedia](#) by Xenophon (a more accessible “translation” can be found in [Xenophon’s Cyrus The Great: The Arts of Leadership and War](#))

Xenophon, like Plato, was a student of Socrates. For whatever reason, his work is not nearly as famous, even though it is far more applicable. This book is the best biography written of Cyrus the Great, one of history’s greatest leaders and conquerors who is considered the “father of human rights.” There are so many great lessons in here and I wish more people would read it. It teaches you self-restraint, generosity, leadership, loyalty and much more. Machiavelli studied him, as this book inspired [The Prince](#). An example lesson from Cyrus that any leader should remember: “Success always calls for greater generosity—though most people, lost in the darkness of their own egos, treat it as an occasion for greater greed.”

[Rules for Radicals](#) and [Reveille for Radicals](#) by Saul Alinsky

Both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama studied Alinsky extensively as they mapped their individual paths to power. For those reasons, Alinsky has become a controversial figure—and far too many people have strong opinions about him without, you know,

15 Books That Will Change Your Life

actually reading any of his brilliant writing. Alinsky was a die hard pragmatist, a man who had ideals but also a sense for working with and through the system to get what he needed. In fact, his best examples in these books is actually how to use the system against itself to get what he needed. These two books are classics and woefully underrated. They are both tutorials in strategy, pragmatism and how to actually get things done. Whatever you set out to do in your life, these books can provide you with strategic guidance and insight. Read them now.

[The Fish That Ate the Whale: The Life and Times of America's Banana King](#) by Rich Cohen

This book tells the incredible story of Sam Zemurray, the penniless Russian immigrant who, through pure hustle and drive, became the CEO of United Fruit, the biggest fruit company in the world. The greatness of Zemurray, as author Rich Cohen puts it, “lies in the fact that he never lost faith in his ability to salvage a situation.” For Zemurray, [there was always a countermove, always a way through an obstacle](#), no matter how dire the situation. Zemurray has perfected the art of overcoming obstacles and this book teaches you how. The book is a course in business strategy and leadership from a fruit peddler-turned-mogul—read it now.

[Bodyguard of Lies: The Extraordinary True Story of D-Day Vol I](#) by Anthony Cave Brown

The book's description says that it's about D-Day but really it's a history of almost every special, covert operation of the Second World War (in fact, Vol I ends as D-Day approaches). Every page is fascinating, none of it dull and it is a masterclass in strategy, espionage, leadership and hard choices. It's old and out of print but worth every penny. Rush and get it. Oh, and [the second volume](#) is just as good.

[Up From Slavery](#) by Booker T. Washington

Of all the seminal slave narratives—[Frederick Douglass](#), [Solomon Northup](#)—this the most

15 Books That Will Change Your Life

accessible and self-improvement oriented. His story is inspiring and remarkable—only sixteen years old, hearing about a school in Virginia, Washington traveled 500 miles, often on foot, and sleeping under a raised sidewalk along the way to make it there. He showed up without a recommendation or even an appointment. Without waiting, he picked up a broom and swept the room immaculately clean, impressing a teacher who remarked “I guess you will do to enter this institution.” He would later on become one of America’s most prominent civil rights leaders and someone worth studying and emulating. His autobiography is a short read but packed full of lessons on personal responsibility, on hard work, on race, on fairness, on advancing an agenda, on building an institution and on working with other people.