

100 MUST-READ

LIFE-CHANGING  
BOOKS

... was so completely wanting in the face, that it could not be that resemblance which had struck her; but I know the lodiness and haughtiness of Lady's face, at all, in any man. And yet I - I, Ruth Redbar, the child who lived a life apart, and on whose birthday I no rejoicing - seemed to arise before my own eyes, out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady, not only untraced no fancy that I had ever seen, but infinitely well knew I had never seen until that hour. I am tremble as, to be thrown into this unaccountable that I was conscious of being dispersed even by the of the French maid, though I knew she had been richly here, and there, and everywhere, from the of her coming, into the church. By degrees, though very of her existence my strange emotion. After a long time, I words Lady Deillock again. It was while they were pre- ing, before the sermon. She took so heed of me, and the my heart was gone. Neither did it revive for more than a me, who she could be taken afterwards glanced at Ash or ough her glass.

Her being concealed, Mr. Deillock gave his arm with and gallantry to Lady Deillock - though he was walk by the help of a French maid - and escorted her out in the grey carriage in which they had come. The in dispersed, and so did the congregation; when she it accompanied all along (Mr. Skinspole said to Mr. Boy- ous she looked as if he were a considerable landed a house).

... said Mr. Boythorn, "I'm fairly believe it. So and his grandfather, and his great-grandfather!"

... pursued Mr. Skinspole, very unconsciously to ... "it's impossible to me to see a man of that sort."

NICK RENNISON

BLOOMSBURYGOODREADINGGUIDES

100 MUST-READ

# LIFE-CHANGING BOOKS

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# ABOUT THIS BOOK

The individual entries in the guide are arranged A to Z by author. They describe the chosen books as concisely as possible and say something briefly about the writer and his or her life. Each entry is followed by a 'Read on' list which includes books by the same author, books by similar authors or books on a theme relevant to the entry. Scattered throughout the text there are also 'Read on a theme' menus which list between six and a dozen titles united by a common theme.

All the first choice books in this guide have dates attached to them. In the case of English and American writers, there is one date which indicates first publication in the UK or the USA. For translated writers, there are two dates. The first indicates publication in the original language and the second is the date of the book's first appearance in English. For example, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is marked as 1949 (first publication in French) and 1953 (first translation into English). For some older texts, either there is no commonly accepted date for publication or the idea of publication, in the modern sense, was largely meaningless in the social context in which they were written. In these instances, approximate dates for the writing of the texts have been given.

In choosing the 100 books for this guide, I have followed in the footsteps of *Desert Island Discs*. The guests on that long-running radio programme are always asked about the one book that they would take with them to the desert island but it is assumed that the Bible and the Complete Works of Shakespeare are already awaiting them on the sands beneath the palm trees. In the same way, I have excluded the Bible, the Koran and other major religious texts as well as Shakespeare from my list. On the basis that poetry is too large a subject to have what could be seen as just a token presence in this guide, I have also omitted volumes of verse. Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*, which some people would label poetry, I *have* included because I prefer to categorise it as lyrical prose.

# INTRODUCTION

What exactly is a ‘life-changing’ book? There is no genre of ‘life-changing’ literature in the same sense that there are genres of ‘crime fiction’, ‘romantic fiction’ and ‘science fiction’ yet nearly all enthusiastic readers would acknowledge that some books they have read have had a profound impact on them. Books that change lives undoubtedly exist. This guide is not meant to provide a list of the ‘best’ life-changing books available. The idea that there can be a definitive list of the books most likely to change lives, and change them for the better, is a ludicrous one. Books *can* change lives but they do so in a wide variety of often subtle ways. Very different books can, in different ways, be life-changing and the selection of titles in this book reflects that. *100 Must-Read Life-Changing Books* finds space for, amongst others, a children’s novel about a young girl who discovers a key to a secret garden, a Chinese text on war from the sixth century BC, a black comedy set in the Second World War, the autobiography of one of the twentieth century’s most remarkable statesmen, a handbook on happiness by one of the world’s great religious leaders and a fable about a pilot who meets a storytelling child in the Sahara desert. What such widely varying books *do* have in common is that they have all changed the lives of readers in the past and they will continue to do so in the future.

Some books can change people in very specific ways. Those oppressed by racism can take strength from works like the autobiographies of

Nelson Mandela and Malcolm X. Women can reassess society and their own position in it after reading books like *The Female Eunuch* or *The Beauty Myth*. Those who feel themselves alienated from the world can take heart from reading about the lives of those, like Helen Keller, who have triumphed over the most extraordinary odds. This guide includes a significant number of titles which fall into this category.

Other books have a greater life-changing impact when read at one age than they do when read at another. Some novels read in adolescence (Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, for example, or Kerouac's *On the Road*) can fundamentally alter the way in which the reader views the world. They become so identified with a particular period in the reader's life that re-reading them later can be a disconcerting, even disillusioning, experience. Yet adolescence is not the only age at which certain books are likely to have their most profound effect. E.M. Forster once wrote that, 'the only books that influence us are those for which we are ready, and which have gone a little farther down our particular path than we have yet got ourselves'. And, as Doris Lessing says in her introduction to a 1971 edition of her novel *The Golden Notebook* (a book which has its own place in this guide), 'Remember that the book which bores you when you are twenty or thirty will open doors for you when you are forty or fifty — and vice versa.' Her advice to readers ('Don't read a book out of its right time for you') remains valid.

Books that make us look at the world anew can be either fiction or non-fiction. Both have their place in a guide to life-changing literature. Novels can be much more than just entertainment — engaging narratives with which to while away some of life's idler moments. Very often emotional truths can be better conveyed through stories than they can by any other means. The stories we have always told ourselves give meaning to our



lives and help to draw us out of the narrow sphere of self into a more active engagement with others. It should come as no surprise to learn that about a third of the titles in *100 Must-Read Life-Changing Books* will be found on the Fiction shelves in any bookshop or library.

The two-thirds of titles in the guide that are non-fiction can be further sub-divided into a number of smaller categories. There are memoirs of remarkable people which can inspire new ways of seeing our own lives. There are masterpieces of spiritual insight, which can re-adjust one's sense of the human and the divine and the relationship between them, and books by distinguished scientists which explain for non-scientists the often dizzying ideas about the nature of the universe and about ourselves which modern physics and biology have revealed. Other entries in the guide introduce the works of psychologists whose writings re-interpret human nature, self-help authors who can open up new paths through life for people in trouble and commentators whose wisdom and understanding make us look again at the kind of society we have created.

I have tried to make the selection of 100 books in this guide as interesting and varied as I could. Some were written more than 2,000 years ago, some in the last 20 years. Some present a simple and direct message to their readers, others a demanding and challenging intellectual argument. Some are the work of people who are household names, others by writers who are less well-known than, perhaps, they should be. There were titles which it was very difficult to ignore. It would be difficult to argue with the sheer statistics of numbers of copies sold and claim that books like Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* do not deserve their places in a guide to life-changing books. There are other titles (Jean Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees*, for example) which may not have quite the

fame that others do but which, I would argue, have a message for readers just as important.

There is sometimes an assumption that, if we want to change our lives for the better, the books that we read should be relentlessly upbeat and optimistic. It is an assumption on which many a career in writing self-help and business books has been built but it is, I think, a false one. We cannot change ourselves or our lives in any meaningful way by pretending that the world is other than it is or that terrible things do not happen in it. A significant number of the books in this guide have as their subject matter some of the worst events in human history. Yet, paradoxically, books about the Holocaust (Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* or Elie Wiesel's *Night*) or Stalinist terror (Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope*) can be the ones which alter readers' views of life the most. Perhaps it is only through facing up to the suffering and wretchedness in the world that people can come to appreciate the best that it has to offer.

I return to the point I made in the first paragraph of this introduction. Books that change lives inarguably exist. I believe that every single one of the 100 titles I have chosen for this guide can be placed in the category of 'life-changing' books. However, the ways in which books change lives are multifarious and the titles in *100 Must-Read Life-Changing Books* have been selected in order to reflect this fact. Any reading guide which includes books by J.K. Rowling and Germaine Greer, Richard Dawkins and Mahatma Gandhi, Stephen Hawking and J.R.R. Tolkien is going to be wide-ranging, whatever else it is. I hope that it will also prove inspirational enough to send readers off in search of books that they might not otherwise have read. And – who knows? – perhaps some of those readers will find their lives changed.

# A-Z LIST OF ENTRIES BY AUTHOR

The following is a checklist of authors featured in this book.

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100 MUST-READ LIFE-CHANGING BOOKS

- |                            |                           |
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# A-Z OF ENTRIES

## **ISABEL ALLENDE** (b. 1942) PERU/CHILE

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### THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS (1982)

Isabel Allende was born in Peru, where her father was Chilean ambassador, and had a peripatetic upbringing around the world as the family moved from country to country. As a young woman she worked for a time in Europe but she was living in Chile in 1973 when the coup which brought to an end the democratic government of her cousin Salvador Allende put her life in danger and she was forced into exile. Her first novel for adults, *The House of the Spirits*, became an international bestseller and she has since published more than a dozen further books, both fiction and non-fiction. 'What I don't write, I forget,' Isabel Allende once said, 'and then it is as if it never happened; by writing about my life I can live twice.' Allende has always drawn heavily on her own life in her writing. Even her fiction, so often hailed as the embodiment of 'magic realism' and so filled with imagination and invention, often has its roots in the story of her family. In *The House of the Spirits* strange and wonderful things may happen but, at its heart, it is a family saga of love and life and death. Three generations of women provide the backbone of the story, from the moment when the clairvoyant Clara del Valle first sees her future to the terrible events which circle around her granddaughter Alba.

The book was only the first of Isabel Allende's remarkable works of fiction which have ranged from *Of Love and Shadows*, a novel in which the brutal politics of South America and magic realism meet and mingle, to *Zorro*, her own very particular take on the legend of the swashbuckling, masked hero. By living twice in her own writing, Isabel Allende has provided her readers with some memorable experiences.

 **Read on**

*Of Love and Shadows*, Paula

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*; Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*

## **MAYA ANGELOU** (b. 1928) USA

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### I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS (1970)

As a young woman, Maya Angelou was a singer and actress, touring the world in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and working in New York nightclubs. In the 1960s she became a civil rights activist and spent five years in Africa as a journalist and teacher. Today she is one of America's most respected poets and writers. Her finest work is the reconstruction of her own life she has made in several volumes of autobiography. The first of these is *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* which records the difficulties of her upbringing in the American Deep South during the 1930s. With her brother, the young Maya is sent to live with her grandmother who runs a store in a small town in Arkansas. She learns

much from her grandmother but she also witnesses the endemic racism in the town and the casual contempt that the white people have for the black. Still only eight years old, Maya is then despatched to stay with her mother in St. Louis where she is raped by her mother's current boyfriend. Mute with trauma and distress, the girl withdraws into her shell and few people other than her brother are able to reach her. In her adolescence, and now living permanently with her mother in San Francisco, Maya continues to suffer guilt and misery. She becomes pregnant while still at high school and the first volume of the autobiography ends with the birth of her child and her realisation that new responsibilities demand a new commitment to life. Poignantly recreating Maya Angelou's struggle to forge her own identity and to triumph over the obstacles of being black and poor in a racist society, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* repays reading and re-reading. It is a scathing indictment of injustice yet it also holds out hope that even the worst of circumstances can be left behind.

### Read on

*Gather Together in My Name; Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas; The Heart of a Woman; All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (the other volumes of autobiography)

Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*



## **MARGARET ATWOOD** (b. 1939) CANADA

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### THE HANDMAID'S TALE (1985)

Margaret Atwood is one of Canada's most admired living writers and her works range from volumes of prize-winning poetry to historical fiction like *Alias Grace*, the story of an enigmatic nineteenth century serving maid who may or may not be a murderess, and novels (*The Edible Woman*, for example) which explore questions of gender and identity. Probably her finest books, however, use motifs and ideas from science fiction to throw new light on contemporary debates about feminism and the position of women. Of these books the most interesting remains *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel is set in the near future in the Republic of Gilead, where fundamentalist Christianity rules and the laws are those of Genesis. Women are chattels: they have no identity, no privacy and no happiness except what men permit them. Offred, for example, is a Handmaid, and her life is devoted to one duty only: breeding. In Gilead public prayers and hangings are the norm; individuality – even looking openly into a man's face or reading a woman's magazine – is punished by mutilation, banishment or death. Atwood shows Offred's struggle to keep her sanity and her identity in such a situation, and her equivocal relationship with the feminist Underground which may be Gilead's only hope. Through the dystopian prism of Gilead, Atwood is able to investigate many of the issues of gender and sexuality which trouble our own society and to suggest that forces in contemporary society (religious fundamentalism, anti-feminism) could only too easily accommodate the worst forms of totalitarianism. With great imaginative power she takes some of the