

BOOKS

What to Read If You Want to Reinvent Yourself

Whether you're starting over or discovering a new identity, these works can help reset your perspective.

By Chelsea Leu



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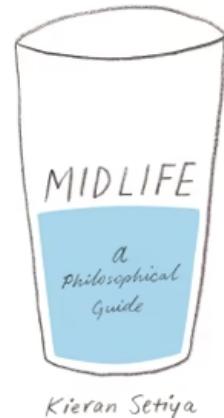
A new calendar year frequently conjures up visions of radical self-transformation. *This* year, we tell ourselves, will be the one where we finally lose 20 pounds, take up gratitude journaling, or read 100 books. New year, new you! But then inertia slowly creeps in, inconveniences arise, and by June our New Year's resolutions are a distant memory.

Changing oneself is harder than perky how-to guides and self-help books suggest. The genre is so popular because its titles briefly allow us to imagine that reinvention is a matter of performing specific actions, rather than an ongoing battle with our own recalcitrant nature. This is also precisely why their advice often doesn't stick: The first step should be attempting to understand the self you're trying to change.

The books below, by contrast, are honest about the difficult emotional realities that accompany personal growth—discouragement, self-recrimination, fear of the unknown—and still offer hope. In depicting people grappling with unpredictable tragedies, the effects of aging, or even, as one memoir details, the fall of communism in a Balkan state, the books acknowledge that our lives are shaped by forces we can't control. What they convey is the surprising extent to which we can influence our own mindset, and thus our experience of any given situation. Whether you're starting over or discovering a new identity, these works can help adjust your perspective and set you on a path to—haltingly, imperfectly—reinvent yourself.

***Midlife*, by Kieran Setiya**

“The trials of middle age have been neglected by philosophers,” writes Setiya, an MIT professor who found himself in the throes of a midlife crisis despite a stable marriage, career, and his relative youth (he was 35). His investigation of the experience, *Midlife*, is “a work of applied philosophy” that looks a lot like a self-help book. Setiya examines pivotal episodes from the lives of famous thinkers—John Stuart Mill’s nervous breakdown at 20; Virginia Woolf’s ambivalence in her 40s over not having children; Simone de Beauvoir’s sense, at 55, that she had been “swindled”—and extracts concrete lessons. Feeling restless and unfulfilled by a sense of repetition in your life? Setiya advises finding meaning not in telic activities, tasks that can be completed, but in atelic activities such as listening to music, spending time with loved ones, and even thinking about philosophy. Still, not every problem yields a solution: Setiya offers up several strategies for coming to terms with one’s own death and then ruefully admits, “There is no refuting this despair.” But this resigned honesty is part of the book’s charm. You may not end up radically changing what you do on a daily basis, but *Midlife* will help you recast your regrets and longing for the possibilities of youth into a more affirming vision for the rest of your life.



Princeton University
Press



Midlife - A Philosophical Guide

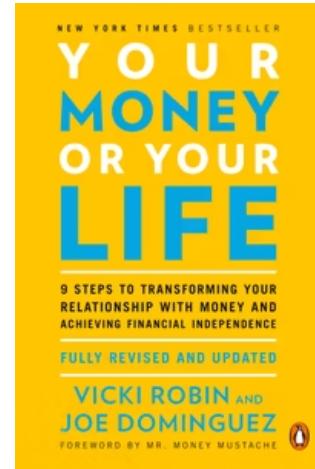
By Kieran Setiya

Buy Book

Your Money or Your Life, by Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez

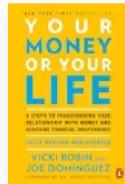
I was surprised, when I first read this classic of financial self-help, to find not just practical advice on managing money but a blazing critique of consumer culture and our obsession with lucrative jobs that “limit our joy and insult our values.” Revised and republished in 2018, *Your Money or Your Life* aims to rewire our attitudes toward consumption by asking us to define what we actually value, how we want to spend our time, and what counts as “enough.” The nine steps the book prescribes aren’t easy. One involves calculating how much money you’ve earned, ever; another highlights the true cost of a job by asking you to factor in all the time you spend commuting to it or decompressing from it. Every month, you evaluate your spending based on your

values and life purpose—a granular process that, over time, forms a picture of what genuinely matters to you. Once the urge to spend beyond your needs has faded away, Robin writes, the savings you'll accumulate will build “the potential for freedom—from future emergencies, from being in debt, and from working nine to five until sixty-five.”



Penguin Books

[Read: Eight self-help books that actually help](#)



Your Money or Your Life

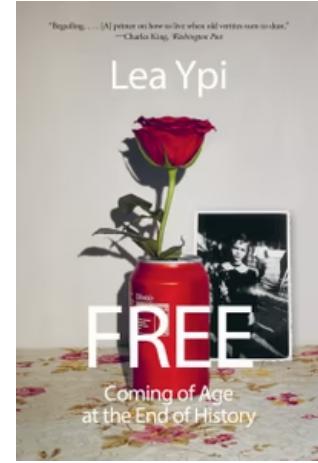
By Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez

[Buy Book](#)

Free, by Lea Ypi

In 1989, Ypi's world was easy to understand: Albania was a socialist haven from the class divisions that ravaged other countries, and Joseph Stalin was a benevolent, inspiring figure. But when the communist government fell, everything 11-year-old Ypi knew was whipped away nearly overnight. “Things were one way, and then they were another,” she writes in her memoir of the period. “I was someone, then I became someone else.” She discovered that the old regime had actually seized her family’s

property; sentenced her relatives to prison, forced labor, and execution; and punished her father because his grandfather was a former prime minister. Albania's rocky transition to capitalism and its terrifying civil war in 1997 shaped her beliefs on liberty forever; those convictions inform her work as a political theorist today. "Despite all the constraints," she writes, "we never lose our inner freedom: the freedom to do what is right." Ypi's narration of the events of her coming-of-age is suffused with love for her parents and grandmother, and deadpan enough to draw out the absurdities of both socialism and capitalism. The result is a gripping and surprisingly funny tale of a young person and a country both reinventing themselves.



W. W. Norton & Company



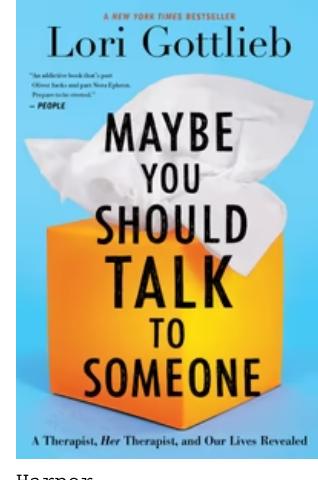
Free - Coming of Age at the End of History

By Lea Ypi

[Buy Book](#)

Maybe You Should Talk to Someone, by Lori Gottlieb

Gottlieb, the author of *The Atlantic's "Dear Therapist"* column, has written "a story about therapy: how we heal and where it leads us." Fittingly, the book is both chatty and profound. It braids the narratives of Gottlieb's clients—an abrasive TV producer, a terminally ill professor, a 69-year-old woman with suicidal intentions—with Gottlieb's own sessions with Wendell, a therapist she starts seeing after a shattering breakup. We're treated to fascinating tidbits that show how therapists really feel about their clients and what exactly they think about in those interminable silences. But as Gottlieb wrestles with her own feelings in Wendell's office, the disparate pieces of her past and present that she reveals gradually coalesce into a full portrait of a grief-stricken human being, illustrating just how messy and agonizing the process of seeing oneself clearly is. "People need to do the same thing over and over a seemingly ridiculous number of times," she writes, "before they're ready to change." I shed tears while reading the accounts of people coming to terms with the worst moments of their lives and then



Harper

evolving for the better. Starting over is possible for anyone, Gottlieb makes plain—perhaps with the help of a good therapist.

Read: [Making a New Year's resolution? Don't go to war with yourself.](#)



Maybe You Should Talk To Someone - A Therapist, Her Therapist, and Our Lives Revealed

By Lori Gottlieb

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How to Live, by Sarah Bakewell

After a series of calamities, including the death of his best friend and a near-fatal riding accident, the 16th-century French nobleman Michel de Montaigne completely overhauled his life. He quit his job as a magistrate of Bordeaux, set up a library retreat in a tower of his estate, and announced that he would dedicate the rest of his life to contemplation—a declaration he even had painted on his wall. Eventually he began to write discursive, vivid works that plumbed “the experience of being a thinking, feeling being who must get on with an ordinary human life,” and in the process pioneered the form of the literary essay. Bakewell’s biography *How to Live* is a rollicking introduction to Montaigne’s life and times, structured with a twist. Each chapter mines his writing for an answer to the central question of the title, including “Don’t worry about death” and “Do a good job, but not *too* good a job.” Montaigne’s remarkable empathy, moderation, and “suspension of judgment” are all qualities, Bakewell argues, that we could do with more of in our 21st-century lives, and his example still serves as a compelling invitation to investigate ourselves.

RECOMMENDED READING



The Link Between Neanderthal DNA and Depression Risk

ED YONG



Narwhals Are Real

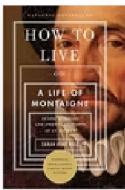
ED YONG



How I Demolished My Life

HONOR JONES





How To Live - Or a Life of Montaigne in one Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer

By Sarah Bakewell

[Buy Book](#)

Diary of a Drag Queen, by Crystal and Tom Rasmussen

This memoir begins by introducing the two authors named on its cover: Tom is a nonbinary 24-year-old from northern England, freshly arrived in New York City to chase a career in fashion journalism. Crystal, on the other hand, is allegedly the lost daughter of the Russian Romanov dynasty, and claims to be a fabulously rich dancer, singer, writer, actor, and eight-time divorcee who was once married to the Sultan of Brunei. What's provable is that she is Tom's drag persona—and while they're the same person, “in my head are two distinct inner monologues, one of reason and one of stardom,” Tom writes. In diary entries dated over the course of a year, we catch glimpses of a vibrant life—embarrassing jobs, performances, a move into a warehouse in East London, scatological accounts of gay sex, and a stomach-churning act of violence—all peppered with Crystal's delightfully brash commentary. Tom movingly calls her creation “a kind of slow unfurling of all of the references you adored as a kid, a teen, an adult; an expansion and performance of all of the things you are desperate to be.” The whole book, in fact, can be read as a meditation on constructing a self that fits: By the end, Rasmussen’s life blossoms with relationships marked by love, safety, and acceptance.

Read: It's the most inadequate time of the year



Diary of a Drag Queen

By Crystal Rasmussen and Tom Rasmussen

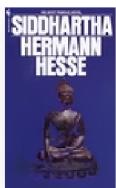
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Siddhartha, by Hermann Hesse

Total personal transformation occurs in Hesse's famous spiritual novel at a dizzying clip. On the ancient Indian subcontinent, Siddhartha, a clever, arrogant high-caste youth, sets out to find himself by renouncing all earthly comforts and becoming a wandering ascetic. Forty pages later, he's a rich merchant, the lover of a beautiful courtesan, and an acquisitive gambler—until, in yet another reversal, he apprentices himself to a humble ferryman and finally attains peace and wisdom. “Many people have to change a great deal and wear all sorts of clothes,” he cheerfully tells his best friend, who fails to recognize him twice over the course of the novel. Running through the book is a meditative, almost blithe acceptance of transitions, as Siddhartha looks back with a gentle lack of regret on the ups and downs of his life. Though inspired by Hindu and Buddhist teachings, the novel is solidly non-doctrinal. It insists, encouragingly, that everyone must find their own individual path. If you're on the cusp of major life shifts, think of *Siddhartha* as a sort of spiritual palate cleanser, a cool drink of a story that can put the journey ahead into perspective.



Penguin Classics



Siddhartha - A Novel

By Hermann Hesse

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