



Since starting this website in 2013, I've included a year-end reading list every December. But last year I did something different. I took the time to reflect on the books I read and distilled [5 major life lessons](#) from them.

In doing so, I found that I was better able to remember and internalize what I read -more so than by only listing out a bunch of titles.

This year has been crazy. I published essays in two books: [Winning Westeros: How Game of Thrones Explains Modern Military Conflict](#) and [Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War](#). We hosted one of the [most popular panels at AUSA 2019](#) and *From the Green Notebook* was even featured in a [post on Forbes](#). I also deployed to Afghanistan, so reading has been challenging.

But, I still managed to keep at it. And no matter how crazy your year has been, I hope you

kept up with the practice too. Below are a few of the major lessons that I will take with me into 2020.

## **If you don't decide what's important to you others will**

In Greg McKeown's book [\*Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less\*](#), he argues that if we don't prioritize our lives, someone else will. And this lack of prioritization pulls us away from doing the things we really want to do. Also, it holds us back from doing anything well. I've seen this play out in areas of my own life where I either tried to take on too much or allowed myself to be swept down a path of doing things that weren't important to me, but important to someone else. I've also seen military organizations get run into the ground because commanders had too many top priorities.

So, to paraphrase [Mark Manson](#) from one of my favorite reads this year, [we need to figure out what we truly give a f\\*ck about](#).

To determine what is essential in our lives, we should heed the wisdom in Ryan Holiday's [\*Stillness is the Key\*](#). We need to step away from our phones, television screens, and be present, thoughtful, and reflective. In doing so, we can take better control over the decisions we make.

This idea of focusing on stepping back from the noise of daily life is echoed in Cal Newport's [\*Digital Minimalism: On Living Better with Less Technology\*](#) and [\*Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World\*](#). Joe McCormack also provides some great advice for cutting out the noise in [\*Noise: Living and Leading When Nobody Can focus\*](#).

## **Books take on new meaning when read a second time**

This year I decided to re-read a few books after coming across a quote from Dr. [Christopher Coker](#) who wrote, "I am not exactly the same person I was when I first read the works; and I am a different person, in part, because of what the books have made me."

I discovered that he's right.

I reread [\*Ego is the Enemy\*](#) and the [\*Obstacle is the Way\*](#) by Ryan Holiday as well [\*The Last Place on Earth\*](#) by Roland Huntford and [\*The War of Art\*](#) by Steven Pressfield. I found new meaning and insights in these books based off the experiences I've had since I last read them. In some respects, it was like reading entirely new books.

These books also came with bonus materials -my margin notes and highlights from the last time I read them. For example, I read *The Last Place on Earth* in 2013 and it was interesting to see what I wrote in the margins over six years ago.

## Asking what others are reading is the best way to expand your horizons

Some of my favorite books from 2019 weren't even on my radar, but I quickly picked them up after asked the question, "What are you reading?"

For instance, I discovered the impressive prose of Margaret Atwood in [The Handmaid's Tale](#) and [The Testaments](#) only after having a conversation about books over coffee.

I was introduced to the sage wisdom of Mark Manson, and picked up [The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F\\*ck](#) and [Everything is F\\*cked](#) after a friend sent me pictures of two books she brought with her on vacation.

I took a deep dive on the history of Afghanistan after a leader I admire explained how [The Game Without Rules](#) and [A Kingdom of Their Own](#) shaped his outlook on the current conflict.

I learned about [Essentialism](#) when a mentor recommended the book during a weekly lunch. I also gained an appreciation for working with introverts when one of my coworkers recommended Susan Cain's [Quiet](#).

I picked up [Mindset](#) by Carol Dweck and [Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage](#) by Lansing after a conversation with one of the most talented officers I know.

## Keep on reading

If you have been following this site for a while, you know that I like to read. At any give time, I'm reading between 3-5 books. They range from history to science fiction and everything in between

If you're interested in reading for personal or professional growth, join over 2k other readers who receive my monthly Read of the Month email. Each month I send out some thoughts on the books I'm reading. It's a great way to learn about new titles. [Click here to sign up](#).

Below is the entire list of books I read this year.

## **Fiction**

[The Handmaid's Tale](#) By Margaret Atwood

[The Testaments](#) By Margaret Atwood

[Recursion](#) by Blake Crouch

[The Warehouse](#) by Rob Hart

[Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O](#) by Neal Stephenson

## **Productivity and Personal Growth**

[Great Leaders Have No Rules](#) by Kevin Kruse

[How to Think Like a Roman Emperor: The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius](#) by Donald J. Robertson

[The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F\\*ck: A Counterintuitive Approach to Living a Good Life](#) by Mark Manson

[Noise: Living and Leading When Nobody Can Focus](#) by Joseph McCormack

[Brief: Make a Bigger Impact by Saying Less](#) by Joseph McCormack

[Stillness is the Key](#) by Ryan Holiday

[The Obstacle is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph](#) by Ryan Holiday

[Perennial Seller: The Art of Making and Marketing Work that Lasts](#) by Ryan Holiday

[Ego is the Enemy](#) by Ryan Holiday

[Side Hustle: From Idea to Income in 27 Days](#) by Chris Guillebeau

[Initiative: A proven Method to Bring Passions to Life](#) by Joshua Spoked

[Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking](#) By Susan Cain

[Herding Tigers: Be The Leader that Creative People Need](#) by Todd Henry

[The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles](#) by Steven Pressfield

[Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World](#) by Cal Newport

[Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World](#) by Cal Newport

[A Curious Mind: The Secret to a Bigger Life](#) by Brian Grazer

[Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#) by Carol S. Dweck

[Peak Performance: Elevate Your Game, Avoid Burnout, and Thrive with the New Science of Success](#) by Brad Stulberg

[Grit](#) by Angela Duckworth

## **World Views**

[Skin in the Game: The Hidden Asymmetries in Daily Life](#) by Nassim Taleb

[Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About People We Don't Know](#) by Malcolm Gladwell

[The Laws of Human Nature](#) by Robert Greene

## **Afghanistan**

[A Kingdom of their Own: The Family Karzai and the Afghan Disaster](#) by Joshua Partlow

[The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan](#) by Michael Hastings

[Game Without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan](#) by Tamim Ansary

## Warfare

[The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder](#) by Sean McFate

## History

[Generals in the Making: How Marshall, Eisenhower, Patton, and Their peers Became the Commanders Who Won World War II](#) by Benjamin Runkle

[Planning to Fail: The US Wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan](#) by Jame H. Lebovic

[The Last Place on Earth: Scott and Amundsen's Race to the South Pole](#) by Roland Huntsford

[Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage](#) by Alfred Lansing

## Sports and Human Performance

[War Room](#) by Michael Holley

[Endure: Mind, Body, and the Curiously Elastic Limits of Human Performance](#) by Alex Hutchinson

I hope you read some great books this year and take the time to absorb the lessons you gained from them! Don't forget to [sign up](#) for my monthly reading list email!

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