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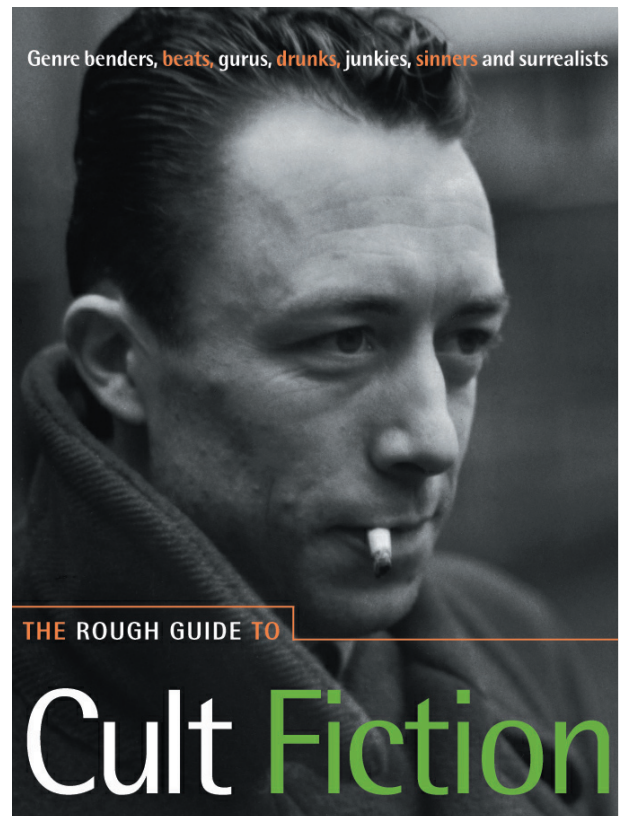
# The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction

Genre benders, beats, gurus, drunks, junkies, sinners, surrealists

Google the words "cult fiction" and you will unearth: a story about a religious sect suspected of coercion in Oxford and a compilation album on Virgin called *This Is The Return Of Cult Fiction*; while one online forum kicks off with the plaintive cry: "Who has a definition of cult fiction for me? Is it a genre?"

The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction is an eclectic, essential guide to the world's greatest cult authors and the facts behind their fiction. The Rough Guide includes critical coverage of more than 200 writers, from Walter Abish to Richard Zimler, with potted biographies, must-reads and surprising influences. It features a section entitled The Isolation Ward, covering influential books by authors who never quite became cult figures, but who wrote one classic work. And it incorporates a feast of trivia, revealing authors who wrote standing up, who disdained punctuation, or who aspired to be heavyweights in the boxing ring as well as in print.

The term cult fiction implies lengthy and irrational devotion by an ardent minority to an author or book - a work or a body of work that is read and re-read repeatedly. Toby Litt suggests that in their purest form, cult books ought to have been out of print for ten years, although the title he nominates as his all-time cult book (the Bible) hasn't been unavailable in the last four hundred. He has a point, though, when he suggests that cult fiction can be dangerous. Think JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, a classic novel of protest against phonies, and almost a sacred text for a surprising number of America's most infamous assassins. Cult fiction moves people, often in unexpected ways. Thousands wanted to go on the road with Jack Kerouac, discuss mystic motorcycle maintenance with Robert Pirsig, debate existentialism and raincoats with Albert Camus or pay homage to Thomas Pynchon or Gabriel García Marquez.



The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction

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(continued overleaf)

The quality of the writing is often beside the point. Should Marcel Proust be considered cult? Many would simply claim he is a great writer, and he's reviewed in the Rough Guide to Cult Fiction because being cult and being great are not mutually exclusive. But you can be a bad writer and a cult one: Truman Capote described Kerouac as "not writing but typing", yet it's the latter's books, not those of his critic, that strike a chord with successive generations of readers.

Being a cult author brings certain messianic burdens, which possibly explains why so many have gone underground. James Joyce so inspired F Scott Fitzgerald that, on meeting his idol, the American novelist offered to throw himself under a train to prove his devotion. Yet cultiness is fickle: nothing kills a literary cult quite as fast as being studied in classrooms, which is why the Rough Guide doesn't include Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a cult book in the 1960s.

If the true cult book should be out of print for ten years, the truly cult author ought to have written one seminal novel, behaved abominably in public and then died tragically young. Or, better still, vanished without trace. As a strategy, however, this is not infallible. In 1955, the 21-year-old American poet and short story writer Weldon Kees abandoned his car near the Golden Gate Bridge and was never seen again; but his mysterious exit failed to lead to a boom in reputation or sales. Dylan Thomas never wrote a serious amount of anything, but lived up to the stereotype of how cult authors ought to behave. Not long before his death, while staying in Cornwall, he ran out into a sunny field one morning sipping a local herbalist's champagne wine tonic and talking copiously. Then he stopped suddenly and said "Somebody's boring me - I think it's me".

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## "The book that means the most to me...."

Actors and authors nominate their favourite works.

### Charlotte Rampling

"Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. I will read and re-read it. I adore his books, they are so dark, so provocative."

### Minnie Driver

"Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*, preferably read by Richard Burton. My dream entertainment."

### Oprah Winfrey

"Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. A mother's love, a ghost story, a spiritual quest. I felt this was part of the reason I was born."

### Kyle McLachlan

"Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. When I first read it I thought Josef K, the man in a nightmare tale at the mercy of authority, was a very hyper guy, a tenacious man driving himself for answers. Then I got to play him on film and found he was a little like *Twin Peaks*' Dale Cooper - an innocent drawn to darkness."

For the full selection, see the Rough Guide to Cult Fiction, p.7