Books of Hope for Challenging Times

If you sometimes feel overwhelmed by angry, grim news, turn to these books to lighten your spirits and restore hope. Chosen by Brainerd Library Friends, staff, and trustees, these fiction and non-fiction titles feature courage, redemption, positivity and insight, and just might make your day.

Fiction

All the Light We Cannot See: by Anthony Doerr

Marie-Laure lives in Paris near the Museum of Natural History, where her father works. When she is 12, the Nazis occupy Paris and they flee to the walled citadel of Saint-Malo, where Marie-Laure’s reclusive great uncle lives in a tall house by the sea. They carry what might be the museum’s most valuable and dangerous jewel. In a mining town in Germany, Werner Pfennig, an orphan, grows up with his sister, enchanted by a crude radio they find that brings them stories from places they have never imagined. Werner becomes an expert at building and fixing these crucial new instruments and is enlisted to track down the Resistance. Deftly interweaving the lives of Marie-Laure and Werner, Doerr illuminates the ways, against all odds, people try to be good to one another.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night: by Mike Haddon [Adult & YA]

A bestselling modern classic—poignant and funny—about a boy with autism who sets out to solve the murder of a neighbor’s dog and discovers unexpected truths about himself and the world. Christopher John Francis Boone knows all the countries and capitals and every prime number up to 7,057. He relates well to animals but has no understanding of human emotions. He cannot stand to be touched. And he detests the color yellow. This improbable story of Christopher’s quest to investigate the suspicious death of a neighborhood dog makes for one of the most captivating, unusual, and widely heralded novels in recent years.

A Gentleman in Moscow: by Amor Towles

He can’t leave his hotel. You won’t want to. In 1922, Count Alexander Rostov is deemed an unrepentant aristocrat by a Bolshevik tribunal, and sentenced to house arrest in the Metropol, a grand hotel across the street from the Kremlin. Rostov, an indomitable man of erudition and wit, has never worked a day in his life, and must now live in an attic room while some of the most tumultuous decades in Russian history unfold outside the hotel. Unexpectedly, his reduced circumstances provide him entry into a much larger world of emotional discovery. Brimming with humor, a glittering cast of characters, and one beautifully rendered scene after another, this singular novel casts a spell as it relates the count’s endeavor to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be a man of purpose.

Hannah Coulter: by Wendell Berry

Wendell Berry’s 7th novel and his first to employ the voice of a woman character in its telling. Hannah, the now-elderly narrator, recounts the love she has for the land and for her community. She remembers her two husbands, and all places and community connections threatened by twentieth-century technologies. At risk is the whole culture of family farming; hope redeemed when her wayward and once lost grandson, Virgil, returns to his rural home to work the farm.

The Kite Runner: by Khaled Hosseini

The #1 New York Times bestselling debut novel that introduced Khaled Hosseini to millions of readers the world over. The unforgettable, heartbreaking story of the unlikely friendship between a wealthy boy and the son of his father’s servant, caught in the tragic sweep of history. Transports readers to Afghanistan at a tense and crucial moment of change and destruction. A powerful story of friendship, it is also about the power of reading, the price of betrayal, and the possibility of redemption; and an exploration of the power of fathers over sons—their love, their sacrifices, their lies.
Major Pettigrew's Last Stand: by Helen Simonson

In the small village of Edgecombe St. Mary in the English countryside lives Major Ernest Pettigrew. Wry, courtly, opinionated, and completely endearing, the Major leads a quiet life valuing the things Englishmen have lived by for generations: honor, duty, decorum, and a properly brewed cup of tea. His brother's death sparks an unexpected friendship with Mrs. Jasmina Ali, a Pakistani shopkeeper. Drawn by their shared love of literature and the loss of their spouses, the Major and Mrs. Ali soon find their friendship blossoming into something more. But village society insists on embracing him as the quintessential local and regarding her as the permanent foreigner. Can their relationship survive the risks one takes when pursuing happiness in the face of culture and tradition?

Peace Like the River: by Leif Enger

Enger’s best-selling debut is a heroic quest, a tragedy, and a love story in which "what could be unbelievable becomes extraordinary" (Miami Herald). Enger brings us eleven-year-old Reuben Land, an asthmatic boy in the Midwest who has reason to believe in miracles. Along with his sister and father, Reuben finds himself on a cross-country search for his outlaw older brother who has been charged with murder. Their journey unfolds like a revelation, and its conclusion shows how family, love, and faith can stand up to the most terrifying of enemies, and the most tragic of fates.

A Prayer for Owen Meany: by John Irving

“I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice—not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother’s death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany.”

In the summer of 1953, 2 eleven-year-old boys—best friends—are playing in a Little League baseball game in Gravesend, New Hampshire. One of the boys hits a foul ball that kills the other boy's mother. The boy who hits the ball doesn't believe in accidents; Owen Meany believes he is God's instrument. What happens to Owen after that foul ball is extraordinary.

The Orphan Train: by Christine Baker Kline

Between 1854 and 1929, orphan trains ran from the East Coast to the farmlands of the Midwest, carrying thousands of abandoned children whose fates would be determined by luck. Would they be adopted by a kind and loving family, or face a childhood and adolescence of hard labor and servitude? As a young Irish immigrant, Vivian Daly was one such child, sent from New York City to an uncertain future a world away. Returning east later in life, Vivian leads a quiet, peaceful existence on the coast of Maine, the memories of her upbringing rendered a hazy blur. But in her attic, hidden in trunks, are vestiges of a turbulent past. 17-year-old Molly Ayer knows that a community service position helping an elderly woman clean out her home is the only thing keeping her out of juvenile hall. As Molly helps Vivian sort through her possessions, she discovers that she and Vivian aren't as different as they appear. A Penobscot Indian who has spent her youth in and out of foster homes, Molly is also an outsider being raised by strangers, and she, too, has unanswered questions about the past.

The Secret Life of Bees: by Sue Monk Kidd

Set in South Carolina in 1964, it tells the story of Lily Owens, whose life has been shaped around the blurred memory of the afternoon her mother was killed. When Lily's fierce-hearted black "stand-in mother," Rosaleen, insults three of the deepest racists in town, Lily decides to spring them both free. They escape to Tiburon, South Carolina—a town that holds the secret to her mother's past. Taken in by an eccentric trio of black beekeeping sister, Lily is introduced to their mesmerizing world of bees and honey, and the Black Madonna. This is a remarkable novel about divine female power, a story that women will share and pass on to their daughters for years to come.
Women in Sunlight: by Frances Mayes

By the bestselling author of Under the Tuscan Sun. Written with warmth, heart and delicious descriptions of place, food, and friendship. Kit Raine, an American writer living in Tuscany, is working on a biography. Her work is waylaid by the arrival of —Julia, Camille, and Susan—who have begun a recent and spontaneous friendship that will uproot them completely and redirect their lives. Susan, has enticed them to subvert expectations of staid, unfulfilling retirement by leasing a big, beautiful house in Tuscany. Though novices in a foreign culture, their renewed sense of adventure imbues each of them bravery, a gusto for life, and a fierce determination to thrive. With Kit’s friendship and guidance, the 3 friends launch themselves into Italian life, pursuing passions long-forgotten—with dramatic and unforeseeable results.

Nonfiction

All the Odes: by Pablo Neruda

A career-spanning volume charting the Nobel laureate’s work in the ode form: Pablo Neruda was a master of the ode, which he conceived as an homage to everything that surrounded him, from an artichoke to the clouds in the sky, from the moon to his own friendship with Federico García Lorca and his favorite places in Chile. He was in his late forties when he committed himself to writing an ode a week. In the end he produced 225. This bilingual volume, gathers all Neruda’s odes for the first time. Rendered into English by accomplished translators, collectively they read like the personal diary of a man in search of meaning who sings to life itself, to our connections to one another, and to the place we have in nature and the cosmos. All the Odes is also a lasting statement on the role of poetry as a lightning rod during tumultuous times.

Almost Everything: Notes on Hope: by Anne Lamott

"I am stockpiling antibiotics for the Apocalypse, even as I await the blossoming of paperwhites on the windowsill in the kitchen," Anne Lamott admits. Despair and uncertainty surround us: in the news, in our families, and in ourselves. But even when life is at its bleakest—when we are, as she puts it, "doomed, stunned, exhausted, and over-caffeinated"—the seeds of rejuvenation are at hand. "All truth is paradox," Lamott writes, "and this turns out to be a reason for hope. If you arrive at a place in life that is miserable, it will change." That is the time when we must pledge not to give up but "to do what Wendell Berry wrote: “Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts.” In this profound and funny book, Lamott calls for us to rediscover the nuggets of hope and wisdom buried within us that can make life sweeter than we ever imagined. Short chapters explore life's essential truths, and pinpoint these moments of insight, shining an encouraging light forward.

The Blind Side: by Michael Lewis

Michael Oher is one of thirteen children by a mother addicted to crack; he does not know his real name, his father, his birthday, or how to read or write. He takes up football, and school, after a rich, white, Evangelical family plucks him from the streets. Then two great forces alter Oher: the family’s love and the evolution of professional football itself into a game in which the quarterback must be protected at any cost. Our protagonist becomes the priceless package of size, speed, and agility necessary to guard the quarterback's greatest vulnerability: his blind side.

The Book Of Joy: by Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu

Two spiritual giants. Five days. One timeless question. Nobel Peace Prize Laureates His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have survived more than 50 years of exile and the soul-crushing violence of oppression. Despite their hardships—or because of them—they are two of the most joyful people on the planet. In April 2015, Archbishop Tutu traveled to the Dalai Lama’s home in Dharamsala, India, to celebrate His Holiness’s 80th birthday and to create what they hoped would be a gift for others. They looked back on their long lives to answer a single burning question: How do we find joy in the face of life’s inevitable suffering? They traded intimate stories, teased each other continually, and shared their spiritual practices. By the end of a week filled with laughter and punctuated with tears,
these two global heroes had stared into the abyss and despair of our time and revealed how to live a life brimming with joy. This book offers us a rare opportunity to experience their astonishing and unprecedented week together. We listen as they explore the Nature of True Joy and confront each of the Obstacles of Joy: fear, stress, anger, grief, illness, and death. They then offer us the Eight Pillars of Joy, which provide the foundation for lasting happiness. Throughout, they include stories, wisdom, and science. Finally, they share their daily Joy Practices that anchor their own emotional and spiritual lives.

**The Book of Separation: by Tova Mirvis (Memoir)**

The memoir of a woman who leaves her faith and her marriage and sets out to navigate the terrifying, liberating terrain of a newly mapless world. Born and raised in a tight-knit Orthodox Jewish family, Tova Mirvis committed herself to observing prescribed rules and rituals. To observe was to be accepted and loved. She married a man from within the fold and began a family. But over the years, her doubts became noisier than her faith. At 40 she could no longer breathe in a suffocating existence. Even though it would mean the loss of her friends, community, and possibly even her family, Tova decides to leave her husband and her faith. This means forging a new way of life, not just for herself, but for her children, who are struggling with the divorce and her new status as “not Orthodox”. This is a memoir about what it means to heed your inner compass at long last. To free the part of yourself that has been suppressed, even if it means walking away from the only life you’ve ever known. Honest and courageous, Tova takes us through her first year outside her marriage and community as she learns to silence her fears and seek adventure on her own path to happiness.

**Born Standing Up: by Steve Martin**

In the mid-70s, Steve Martin exploded onto the comedy scene. By 1978 he was the biggest concert draw in stand-up. In 1981 he quit forever. *Born Standing Up* is the story of "why I did stand-up and why I walked away". At age 10 Martin started his career at Disneyland, selling guidebooks. In the next decade, he worked in the Disney magic shop and the Bird Cage Theatre at Knott’s Berry Farm, performing his first magic/comedy act 12 times a week. The story of these years, during which he practiced and honed his craft, is moving and revelatory. Martin illuminates the sacrifice, discipline, and originality that made him an icon. To be this good, to perform so frequently, was isolating and lonely. It took Martin decades to reconnect with his family. Martin also paints a portrait of his times: the era of free love and protests against the war in Vietnam, the irreverence of The Smothers Brothers show in the 60s, and the transformative new voice of *Saturday Night Live* in the 70s.

**Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone: by Brené Brown**

“True belonging doesn’t require us to change who we are. It requires us to be who we are.” Social scientist, Brené Brown, has sparked a global conversation about the experiences that bring meaning to our live. Brown redefines what it means to truly belong in an age of increased polarization. With her research, storytelling, and honesty, Brown will change the cultural conversation while mapping a clear path to true belonging. Brown argues that we’re experiencing a crisis of disconnection, and introduces 4 practices of true belonging that challenge everything we believe about ourselves and each other. But in a culture that’s rife with perfectionism and pleasing, and with the erosion of civility, it’s easy to stay quiet, hide in our ideological bunkers, or fit in rather than show up as our true selves and brave the wilderness of uncertainty and criticism. True belonging is a daily practice that demands integrity and authenticity. Brown offers us the clarity and courage we need to find our way back to ourselves and to each other.

**A Country Doctor’s Notebook: by Mikhail Bulgakoo**

With the ink still wet on his diploma, the twenty-five-year-old Dr. Mikhail Bulgakov was flung into the depths of rural Russia which, in 1916-17, was still largely unaffected by such novelties as the motor car, the telephone or electric light. How his alter-ego copes (or fails to cope) with the new and often appalling responsibilities of a lone doctor in a vast country practice — on the eve of Revolution — is described in Bulgakov’s delightful blend of candid realism and imaginative exuberance.
The Cruelest Journey: by Kira Salak

Kira Salak is a young woman who seeks impossible challenges. She grew up relishing the exploits of the Scottish explorer Mungo Park and set herself the daunting goal of retracing his fatal journey down West Africa's Niger river for 600 miles to Timbuktu. She became the first person to travel alone from Mali's Old Segou to "the golden city of the Middle Ages." In the face of the hardships, it is amazing that she could have been so sanguine about her journey: "I have the peace and silence of the wide river, the sun on me, a breeze licking my toes, the current as negligible as a faint breath. Timbuktu seems distant and unimaginable." Enduring tropical storms, hippos, rapids, the unrelenting heat of the Sahara desert and the moods of this notorious river, she traveled solo through one of the most desolate regions in Africa where little had changed since Mungo Park was taken captive by Moors in 1797. This riveting story is a meditation on self-mastery by a young adventuress without equal, whose writing is as thrilling as her life.

Driving Miss Norma: An Inspiring Story About What Really Matters at the End of Life: by Tim Baeurschmidt & Ramie Liddle

When Miss Norma was diagnosed with cancer, she was advised to undergo surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. Instead of confining herself to a hospital bed, Miss Norma—newly widowed after decades of marriage—took off on an unforgettable around-the-country journey in a 36-foot motor home with her retired son Tim, his wife Ramie, and their dog Ringo. She experiences: regional foods, a hot air balloon, and a horseback ride. With each passing mile (and a visit to a cannabis dispensary), Miss Norma’s health improves and conversations that had once been taboo begin to unfold. Norma, Tim, and Ramie bond like never before, and their definitions of home, family, and friendship expand. State by state, they meet people from all walks of life—strangers who become fast friends and welcome them with kindness. Infused with this irrepressible nonagenarian’s wisdom, courage, and generous spirit, this charming book joyously chronicles their life on the road. It portrays a transformative journey of living life on your own terms; shows it is never too late to begin an adventure, inspire hope, or become a trailblazer.

Gratitude Diaries: How a Year Looking on the Bright Side Can Transform Your Life: by Janice Kaplan

On New Year’s Eve, journalist Janice Kaplan makes a promise to be grateful and look on the bright side of whatever happens. She realizes that how she feels over the next 12 months will have less to do with the events that occur than with her own attitude and perspective. Getting advice from psychologists, academics, doctors, and philosophers, she brings readers on a smart and witty journey to discover the value of appreciating what you have. Relying on amusing personal experiences and extensive research, Kaplan explores how gratitude can transform every aspect of life; marriage & friendship, money & ambition, and health & fitness. She learns appreciating your spouse changes the neurons of your brain and why saying thanks helps CEOs succeed. Through interviews with experts and lively conversations, Kaplan discovers the role of gratitude in our sense of fulfillment to our children’s happiness. With warmth, humor, and appealing insight, Kaplan’s journey empowers readers to think positively and live their best year ever.

Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project: by Jack Mayer

During World War II, Irena Sendler, a Polish Catholic social worker, organized a rescue network to save 2,500 Jewish children from certain death in the Warsaw ghetto. Incredibly, after the war her heroism, was suppressed by communist Poland and remained unknown for 60 years. Unknown, until 3 high school girls from an economically depressed, rural school district in Kansas stumbled upon a reference to Sendler’s rescues, which they fashioned into a history project, a play they called Life in a Jar. Their innocent drama was first seen in Kansas, then the Midwest, then New York, Los Angeles, Montreal, and finally Poland, where they elevated Irena Sendler to a national hero, championing her legacy of tolerance and respect for all people.
The More of Less: by Joshua Becker

Most of us know we own too much stuff. We feel the weight and burden of our clutter, and tire of cleaning, managing, and organizing. While excess consumption leads to bigger houses, faster cars, fancier technology, and cluttered homes, it never brings happiness. Rather, it results in a desire for more. It redirects our greatest passions to things that can never fulfill, and distracts us from the lives we wish we were living. But it doesn't have to be this way. The More of Less, helps you: Recognize the life-giving benefits of owning less, Realize how all the stuff is keeping you from pursuing your dreams, Craft a personal, practical approach to decluttering your home and life, Experience the joys of generosity, Learn why the best part of minimalism isn't a clean house; it's a full life. It's time to own your possessions instead of letting them own you. After all, the beauty of minimalism isn't in what it takes away, it's in what it gives.

The Power of Positive Thinking: by Norman Vincent Peale

In this phenomenal bestseller, “written with the sole objective of helping the reader achieve a happy, satisfying, and worthwhile life,” Dr. Peale demonstrates the power of faith in action. With practical techniques, you can energize your life—and give yourself the initiative to carry out your ambitions and hopes. You’ll learn how to: Believe in yourself and in everything you do; Build new power and determination; Develop the power to reach your goals; Break the worry habit and achieve a relaxed life; Improve your personal and professional relationships; Assume control over your circumstances; Be kind to yourself.

The Tattooist of Auschwitz: by Heather Morris

This beautiful, illuminating tale of hope and courage is based on interviews conducted with Holocaust survivor and Auschwitz-Birkenau tattooist Ludwig (Lale) Sokolov—an unforgettable love story in the midst of atrocity. In April 1942, Lale Sokolov, a Slovakian Jew, is transported to the concentration camps. When his captors discover that he speaks several languages, he is put to work as a tattooist, tasked with marking his fellow prisoners. Imprisoned for over 2 ½ years, Lale witnesses horrific atrocities—but also incredible acts of bravery and compassion. Risking his own life, he uses his privileged position to exchange jewels and money from murdered Jews for food to keep his fellow prisoners alive.

Young adult

The Hate U Give: by Angela Thomas

Sixteen-year-old Starr Carter moves between two worlds: the poor neighborhood where she lives and the fancy suburban prep school she attends. The uneasy balance between these worlds is shattered when Starr witnesses the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend Khalil at the hands of a police officer. Khalil was unarmed. Soon, his death is a national headline. Some are calling him a thug, maybe even a drug dealer. Protesters are taking to the streets in Khalil’s name. Some cops and the local drug lord try to intimidate Starr and her family. What everyone wants to know is: what really happened that night? The only person who can answer that is Starr. But what Starr does—or does not—say could upend her community. It could also endanger her life.

I Kill the Mockingbird: by Paul Acampora

When Lucy, Elena, and Michael receive their summer reading list, they are excited to see To Kill A Mockingbird. But not everyone in their class shares the same enthusiasm. So they hatch a plot to get the entire town talking about the well-known Harper Lee classic. They plan controversial ways to get people to read the book, including re-shelving copies of the book in bookstores so that people think they are missing and starting a website committed to “destroying the mockingbird.” Their efforts are successful when all the hullabaloo directs more people to the book. Soon, their exploits spin out of control and they unwittingly start a mini revolution in the name of books.
Labyrinth Lost: by Zoraida Cordova

The only way to get her family back is to travel to a land in between, as dark as Limbo and as strange as Wonderland...

Alex is a bruja, the most powerful witch in a generation...and she hates magic.

At her Deathday celebration, Alex performs a spell to rid herself of her power. But it backfires. Her whole family vanishes into thin air, leaving her alone with Nova, a brujo boy she’s not sure she can trust, but who may be Alex's only chance at saving her family.

Pay It Forward: by Catherine Ryan Hyde

12-year-old Trevor McKinney accepts his social studies teacher’s challenge: produce a plan to change the world. His idea is simple: Do a good deed for 3 people and ask them to “pay it forward” to 3 others in need. He envisions a vast movement of goodwill spreading beyond his small California town and across the world. The project, however, appears to falter. Jerry, a bum who receives some allowance money from Trevor, returns to a life of dissolution. Trevor wants his mother—a woman who raised him lovingly despite struggles with alcoholism—to marry his teacher. Reuben is a scarred, bitter, untrusting man with a disfiguring injury. The matchmaking brings nothing but problems. Ultimately, though, unusual things start to happen. Crime rates dip across the nation, and nobody knows why. Then a journalist tracks down the source: an epidemic of random acts of kindness. Anyone who has ever despair of one’s ability to effect change will rejoice in Trevor’s courage and determination to see the good in everyone.

Poet X: by Elizabeth Acevedo

Astonishing New York Times-bestselling novel-in-verse by an award-winning slam poet, about an Afro-Latina heroine who tells her story with blazing words and powerful truth. Xiomara Batista feels unheard and unable to hide in her Harlem neighborhood. Ever since her body grew into curves, she has learned to let her fists and fierceness do the talking. But Xiomara has plenty she wants to say. She pours all her frustration and passion onto the pages of a notebook—especially after she catches feelings for a boy in her bio class, whom her family can never know about. With Mami’s determination to force her daughter to obey the church, Xiomara understands that her thoughts are best kept to herself. So when she is invited to join her school’s slam poetry club, she doesn’t know how she could attend without Mami finding out. But she still can’t stop thinking about performing her poems; in the face of a world that may not want to hear her, Xiomara refuses to be silent.

The Thief: by Megan Whalen Turner

New York Times-bestselling author Megan Whalen Turner’s entrancing and award-winning Queen’s Thief novels bring to life the world of the epics and feature one of the most charismatic and incorrigible characters of fiction, Eugenides the thief. Megan Whalen Turner’s Queen’s Thief novels are rich with political machinations and intrigue, battles lost and won, dangerous journeys, divine intervention, power, passion, revenge, and deception. Eugenides, the queen’s thief, can steal anything—or so he says. When his boasting lands him in prison and the king’s magus invites him on a quest to steal a legendary object, he’s in no position to refuse. The magus thinks he has the right tool for the job, but Gen has plans of his own.

With the Fire on High: by Elizabeth Acevedo

From the New York Times bestselling author of the National Book Award title The Poet X comes a dazzling novel in prose about a girl with talent, pride, and a drive to feed the soul. Ever since she got pregnant freshman year, Emoni Santiago’s life has been about making the tough decisions—doing what has to be done for her daughter and her abuela. The one place she can let that go is in the kitchen, where she adds a little something magical to everything she cooks. Even though she dreams of working as a chef, Emoni knows that it’s not worth her time to pursue the impossible. Yet despite the rules she has to play by, once Emoni starts cooking, her only choice is to let her talent break free.