

Hope Amidst Hardship

“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.” James Baldwin, novelist and poet

As we all know, no one gets through this life without some pain along the way. What we don't always know is that we are not alone in that pain. One way we learn this is through literature. Recognizing ourselves in others, even as we read of hardship, is a major reason we find reading enjoyable. Hardship comes in many varieties and the books in this series offer varied examples but present a common theme: there is hope along the way. Sometimes this hope comes from deep within ourselves. Sometimes it comes from others in unexpected ways.

The books in this series represent a variety of genres and include a memoir by the daughter of voluntarily homeless parents (*The Glass Castle*.) The second book in the series, *Wonder*, is a deeply engaging children's book with an adult message about bullying. *Where the Heart Is*, a novel set in Oklahoma, begins when a pregnant teenager is dumped by her boyfriend at a Wal-Mart in a strange town. Another novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, beautifully illustrates the prejudice and discrimination of the South during the Civil Rights era and its effects on a young white girl and her African-American maid. The final book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, is a memoir written by a college student about his dying professor. All of these books have been New York Times bestsellers and are individually powerful but read together, give readers the sense that through our common hardships we find the commonality of hope and perseverance. Take your seat at the human table and prepare to be entertained and uplifted.

The Glass Castle **by Jeannette Walls**

This memoir epitomizes our concept of the dysfunctional family and by so doing, sets the stage for the theme *Hope Amidst Hardship* in a personal way. Written by journalist and author Jeannette Walls, we're privy to some of the neglect, alcoholism, hunger, shame, and deprivation that Walls and her three siblings endured growing up.

Central to the story is an alcoholic, unemployed father whose genius combines with a quirky and dangerous zest for life. His constant wanderlust and dreamy ambition creates a family tradition, 'the skedaddle', in which the family abandons whatever life they have and drive to the next unknown stop. The college-educated, artist mother views her children as an obstacle to her never-realized art career. She believes that suffering when you are young is good for you. Despite the realization that she should leave her husband she never does, choosing her own desires over her children's welfare.

The children experience real hunger, homelessness, raised hopes that are consistently dashed, bullying, brushes with sexual and physical abuse, and love that is conditional. Like all children of abusive parents, Walls and her siblings at first do not realize that the life they lead is not the norm. They learn resilience and survive together often working as a team to deny their father drinking money or convince their mother to be responsible.

At first, hope is exhibited through childish dreams. The father promises to build the family a glass castle. The children begin to dig the foundation, a hole in the backyard that eventually becomes the family's garbage pit. The hope of a Christmas with a tree and presents is dashed by the father's drunken cruelty. Eventually hope is directed toward escape and odd jobs lead to a stash of money, only to be stolen for drink by the father. Escaping to New York City, the siblings eventually support themselves only to live with the shame that their parents choose their free-spirited lifestyles even when it means homelessness.

Wonder

by R.J. Palacio

Auggie is a wonder to his parents. Born with a facial deformity, this story follows ten-year-old Auggie as he enters public school for the first time. Not surprisingly, he is confronted by bullies and although he would at times like to quit school and remain homeschooled by his mother, he is hopeful that he can be seen as a normal boy.

Auggie is an extraordinary boy in many ways. He is smart, thoughtful, resilient, and isn't afraid to express his emotions. These traits are largely the product of his upbringing by parents who teach him that outward appearance is the least important thing about a person. He is supported by them throughout his transition to school and also by an older sister, Olivia, or "Via" as she is called. Although one of Auggie's biggest protectors, Via does not remember a time when she captured her parents' undivided attention. Growing up she knew that Auggie's health and recovery from his many surgeries took

precedent over her own needs. She is not resentful, only hopeful that her new high school friends not learn of her brother's existence.

As is the case with many bullies, Auggie's tormenters gain popularity with their classmates. Auggie is ostracized and alone. Even the students who appear to be friendly are often behaving that way out of duty or pity. Friends do not come easily and even when sincere attempts are finally made to befriend him, he doubts their sincerity. Auggie is not only isolated, he is the victim of verbal and physical abuse. It is only when a series of events occur that his schoolmates recognize his outstanding inner qualities and in the process, learn a great deal about themselves.

Where the Heart Is

by Billie Letts

Oklahoma-born author Billie Letts, in capturing many of the seamier aspects of life in our state, also highlights its greatest quality, the willingness of its citizens to help strangers. Novalee Nation, a homeless teenager, experiences pregnancy and childbirth, abandonment, poverty, and the devastation brought by a tornado. She also learns that our lives can change for the better with every breath we take.

The theme throughout the book is home, how we define it, how we find it, how we keep it. Novalee believes she can hear home in the beating of her unborn child's heart and discovers that home can also be a place that will catch you when you fall, and she falls many times. She is fortunate to find caring friends who take her in, quirky friends who are extraordinary in their generosity and love.

Novalee has to learn to abandon her belief that she is undeserving of happiness. When her good friend is a victim of violence Novalee is jarred from her previous acceptance that women like her only get what they deserve. She begins to question if ill treatment is the best she can hope for. Even when a decent man, the town's librarian, falls in love with her, Novalee doubts that he could be happy with her. It is through his influence that Novalee becomes a reader of books. She devours the books he lends her and eventually realizes that because of her reading, she will never be the same again. She feels connected to the many women in the stories she has read. She can never be who she had been before. It is this personal journey and the support of friends along the way that lead Novalee to accept herself as lovable and deserving of happiness. She finally finds her home.

The Secret Life of Bees

by Sue Monk Kidd

Beautifully written and set in a South Carolina town in 1964, this story is about Lily, a fourteen-year-old who has always known that she was the cause of her mother's death. Raised by an uncaring father, the only love she finds is from the family's African-American maid Rosaleen. When racial tensions result in Rosaleen's imprisonment, Lily finds a way to rescue her and they set out together to escape their shared hardships.

Through a quirk of fate, Lily and Rosaleen are taken in by a family of beekeeping sisters who once knew Lily's mother. Lily gathers strength from these women, learning that like bees, we all have a secret life that we know nothing about. Analogies about bees and life abound in this book as Lily realizes that like bees in a hive, we require social companionship and support. Isolating a honeybee from her sisters will result in her death. Lily begins to feel her life depends on these newfound friends and life teachers.

Motherless, Lily has to come to the realization that she has to find the mother inside of herself. She is told by one of the sisters that when she is unsure of herself, when she starts pulling back into doubt and small living, that internal mother's voice is the one saying, "Get up from there and live like the glorious girl you are. She's the power inside you." It is through the loyal caring of Rosaleen and the sisters that Lily learns to accept herself and the circumstances of her life and find the mother inside.

Tuesdays with Morrie

by Mitch Albom

Although the impetus behind the writing of this book was the impending death of his much beloved professor, the author Mitch Albom tells a story of love, hope, and happiness. Albom's relationship with Professor Morrie Schwartz began in 1979 at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. After graduation, Mitch loses contact with Morrie but learns his much revered mentor has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease.

Mitch reintroduces himself to his professor and makes regular visits to his home where he interviews Morrie about his life and his thoughts about life and death. The disease slowly takes control but not before Mitch hears profound, often surprisingly upbeat and happy life lessons.

Among the gems in this book is Morrie's contention that in order to get meaning into our lives we must be devoted to loving others, our community around us, and to creating something that gives us purpose and meaning. Even as Morrie is confined to his

home, his chair, his bed, he creates a cocoon of human activities around him: conversation, interaction, and affection. He admonishes Mitch to accept the past without denying it or discarding it. Even in the face of death Morrie refused to be depressed and put a daily limit on self-pity, just a few tearful minutes. As a final message to Mitch and the readers of this book, Morrie tells us that once we learn how to die, we learn how to live.

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