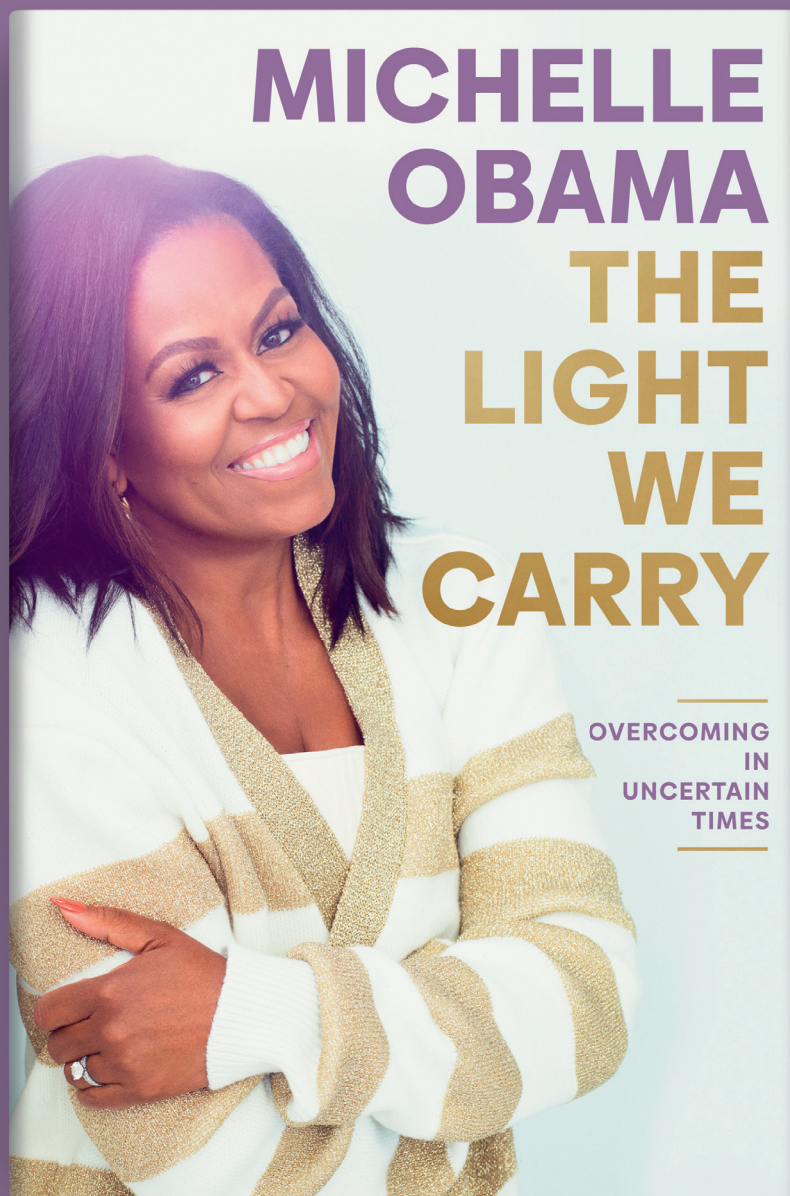


A READING GUIDE FOR

THE LIGHT WE CARRY

BY MICHELLE OBAMA



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CROWN

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1. In the introduction to her book, Mrs. Obama discusses the process of finding strength and light within yourself: “I believe that each of us carries a bit of inner brightness, something entirely unique and individual, a flame that’s worth protecting.” What do you consider your “inner brightness,” and how do you keep that flame lit? Is there someone who brightens your life with the light they carry?
2. “It’s okay to prioritize your wellness, to make a habit of rest and repair,” writes Mrs. Obama. How do you prioritize yourself and your own wellbeing so that you can sustain your energy for working toward your goals, both big and small? Do you use any of Mrs. Obama’s simple tools—taking a walk, getting some exercise, prioritizing sleep, or engaging in a hobby or activity such as knitting—to help you return to a balanced state when you’re facing challenges or feeling depleted?
3. Mrs. Obama writes about how even the most outwardly successful and balanced people require a support system to help them get it all done. How do you lean on your support system to help you stay upright?
4. Mrs. Obama unravels the ways that abstract and common fears—such as embarrassment, rejection, or facing new situations—have the power to influence our choices if we don’t learn to decode them. “Jeopardy is woven into the experience of being human,” she writes. But she argues that the fears arising in response to disorder and differentness are often worth taking on in direct ways to understand and overcome them. When in your life have you encountered something new or intimidating that elicited fear? How did you work through that fear? Did you have a different perspective on the source of your fear after you faced it?
5. “Doubt comes from within,” writes Mrs. Obama. “Your fearful mind is almost always trying to seize the steering wheel and change your course. Its whole function is to rehearse catastrophe, scare you out of opportunity, and throw rocks at your dreams.” Mrs. Obama now accepts the presence of this fearful mind, addressing its patter of negativity and self-criticism with familiarity to diminish its influence over her thoughts: “*Oh, hello. It’s you again. Thanks for showing up. For making me so alert. But I see you. You’re no monster to me.*” What has your fearful mind said to you? What are other names for this phenomenon? Have you found ways to counter the interior critique, calm the inner chatter? How would you address your own fearful mind?
6. As a contrast to the passing moments of fear Mrs. Obama describes experiencing in new and unfamiliar situations, she also discusses the tangible and legitimate fears that affected previous generations of her family and had limiting and detrimental impacts on their lives—like her grandfather Southside’s distrust of doctors which resulted in a late diagnosis of lung cancer, and her grandfather Dandy’s extreme anxiety

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about traveling outside of his own Chicago neighborhood. Both men were born in the Jim Crow South and, even after they moved north to Chicago, a racial caste system still presented real dangers for them if they stepped outside the bounds of their own communities. Do you recognize any lasting effects of fears like these in older generations in your own family? How do these fears impact your loved ones today, and has anything changed for younger generations?

7. “Gladness is nourishing. It is a gift. When someone is happy to see us, we get a little steadier on our feet. We have an easier time locking into our poise. And we carry that feeling forward.” Describe times in your life when you experienced the gift of gladness. Who has given it to you, and who have you given it to? How did it feel to share gladness and to receive it?
8. Everywhere Mrs. Obama goes, she meets people who describe the self-consciousness that comes with feeling like you don’t belong in the space you’re in. She writes: “Nearly everyone on earth experiences this sort of feeling at some point—that prickling awareness that you’re somehow not suited to your environment, that you’re being viewed as a trespasser.” Describe a time in your life when you felt this way. How did you navigate the situation?
9. Mrs. Obama defines her “Kitchen Table” as “the people beyond my family whom I trust, delight in, and rely on most—and for whom I would do anything.” Do you have your own “Kitchen Table”, and if so, who does it include? What do you bring out in each other?
10. “Discomfort is a teacher,” Mrs. Obama writes: “Lack of reward is a teacher. Dealing with these things gives us practice at life, helping us figure out who we are when we’re a little pushed.” When in your life has discomfort been a teacher and what did you learn?
11. How has a spouse, friend, or sorority sister added light to your world? Have your thoughts on what a fulfilling and supportive relationship looks like changed over time and with experience?
12. On parenting, Mrs. Obama says that she and her brother, Craig, were encouraged to speak their minds at the dinner table, allowed to horse around on the couch, and expected to make their own beds in the morning. Many of these basic expectations were a complete contrast to how Mrs. Obama’s own mother, Marian, was raised. What were the rules in your house growing up? Do you have a different perspective on any of those rules now than you did as a child? If you’re a parent, what are your basic rules around the house and how did you come by those rules?
13. Mrs. Obama writes a lot about the idea of home, which means different things to different people. For some, home is a specific person, a warm hug, or a place to put your feet up. For others, home is fraught, a painful place or time to which you never want to return. “And that is okay. There’s power in knowing

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where you don't want to go. And then there's also power in discovering where you want to head next. How do we build places where gladness lives—for ourselves and for others, and most especially for children—and to which we will always want to return?" Describe your idea of home.

14. Sometimes the very things that we try to hide from others, or that we imagine to be vulnerabilities or weaknesses, can actually be powerful points of connection and motivating factors that drive us to overcome. "When someone chooses to lift the curtain on a perceived imperfection in her story, on a circumstance or condition that traditionally might be considered to be a weakness, what she's often actually revealing is the source code for her steadiness and strength." Think about anything you may have instinctively withheld about yourself with certain people or in certain situations in your life, or still do choose to withhold. How might you reframe these things as part of the source code of your strength?
15. "The strength of one resolute soul can become the strength of many." Discuss this idea. What does it mean for you? Have you witnessed the power of such "resolute souls" in your life, in your community, in history?
16. When Mrs. Obama discusses our differences, she talks about the importance of stepping forward rather than back, saying more rather than less. Has there been a time in your life when you felt like the "other," that you had something difficult to share about yourself but felt lifted and unburdened by stepping forward and sharing it?
17. Mrs. Obama also acknowledges that "the work of visibility is difficult, and it's distributed unevenly. There's nothing fair about it, in fact. I happen to be well-acquainted with the burdens of representation and the double standards for excellence that steepen the hills so many of us are trying to climb." Think about a time when you stepped forward when you could have stepped back. How did it make you feel? How might you continue to step forward, whether to advocate for yourself or in support of others who face greater burdens in doing so, within your own community, school, or workplace?
18. Mrs. Obama describes the various forms of armor that we put on to protect ourselves in certain situations—on the job, in a new relationship, in the classroom. Mrs. Obama writes: "Preparedness is part of the armor I wear. I plan, rehearse, and do my homework ahead of anything that feels remotely like a test. . . . Preparedness becomes a hedge against panic. And panic is what will lead you into disaster." Why is preparedness such an important part of Mrs. Obama's armor? What strategies, tools, and behaviors make up the armor you wear?
19. When it comes to armor, the challenge, Mrs. Obama notes, is to "remain tough without being overly guarded, to stay nimble and open to growth, allowing others to see you for who you are. It's learning how to shelter your flame without hiding its light." In what areas in your life has your protective armor served you, and in what situations might your armor have backfired and stifled your light?

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20. Mrs. Obama writes that “going high” is “a reminder to pause and be thoughtful, a call to respond with both your heart and your head. . . . It’s about taking an abstract and usually upsetting feeling and working to convert it into some sort of actionable plan.” Give an example of a time when you have chosen to “go high.” Have there been moments in your life when you chose a different option and “went low” instead? Thinking back now, would you have done anything differently?
21. As Mrs. Obama established herself as First Lady and grew more comfortable in her role, she started to give herself more permission to be expressive and creative. “My goal was always to do serious work in a joyful way.” Reflect on that idea. Where in your life could you do “serious work in a joyful way”? Are there ways you bring joy into your work already?
22. “Progress requires creativity and imagination,” writes Mrs. Obama, “It always has. Ingenuity is born of boldness. We have to be able to envision what’s possible, summoning it from the unknown—whatever does not yet exist, the sort of world we hope to live in—in order to even begin to actualize a plan to get there.” What is your vision for the world you hope to live in or to leave for the next generation? Has your idea of what is possible to achieve changed over the course of your lifetime and, if so, how?
23. Reflecting on the various tools and strategies that Mrs. Obama has described throughout *The Light We Carry*—knitting needles and the power of small, starting each day with kindness, filling the seats at your own “Kitchen Table,” practicing decoding fears, showing and spreading your gladness for others—which of these things might you carry forward into your own life? In what ways do you hope these tools and strategies will serve you and help to strengthen your light? How will nourishing your own light help you to overcome uncertainty and make a difference in your community and in the world?