

## Better Days: Love, Loyalty, Betrayal...

**Len Joy**

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*Better Days is a bighearted, wry, and tender novel that focuses on love and loyalty.*

Len Joy's *Better Days* is an attention-grabbing crime story in which unexpected upheavals result in welcome second chances.

What's the penalty for blind trust and loyalty? That's the question Darwin Burr must answer when the FBI announces that his lifelong friend and now missing boss, Billy, is a person of interest. Mysterious envelopes stuffed with money, diamonds, and gold coins turn up out of nowhere, and Darwin's leisurely work life at an auto parts distribution center becomes anything but—particularly since he's always signed the papers Billy passed across his desk, no questions asked. Soon, everything in his life is called into question, including his marriage, his family, and his career.

Darwin narrates his tangled web with amusing slang and witty observations. His voice is a counterpoint to the story's serious legal accusations and dark romantic temptations. Winning, laid-back prose belies the seriousness of Darwin's situation, but turns up the tension to eleven as he seeks truth from those who say they are only trying to protect him.

Detailed scenes set in familiar bars and sweaty high school gyms are juxtaposed to spirited dialogue, resulting in a rhythmic text that moves at a clip. Through capable foreshadowing and well-timed revelations, the story negotiates absorbing subplots—especially around an endangered young girl, Toni, who is in Darwin's charge, and her basketball coach for whom Darwin develops feelings. References to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, with its themes of racism and incest, bring in weightier topics than the novel's primary themes of guilt and innocence, perhaps hinting at things happening offscreen in Toni's life. This layered undercurrent adds more to contemplate, though such secondary story lines slow the novel's pace, and the denouement feels delayed as a result.

There are many characters in this book, but they are all complex and realistic. Sympathy is secured when even the villains exhibit humanity, from a lawyer sent to take Darwin down who helps him instead, to a misanthropic prepper neighbor who becomes a powerful ally. This caring lineup of secondary characters is drawn with optimism that fits the story's tone.

Appropriate punishments and rewards are meted out by the end, with puzzle pieces clicking into place to reveal the entire picture. Some characters' secrets, now known, remain unacknowledged, and that silence reads as an act of love.

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