



# OVER THE RIVER

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# Better A Days Ahead

By CHARLIE VALENTINE

Welcome to the 1950's where four uniquely intriguing families are in search of the American dream. In **BETTER DAYS AHEAD** (English Mill Press Trade Paperback Original, April 2006, \$19.95), debut novelist Charlie Valentine brings mid-century America to dazzling life in this enthralling tale of passion, power, and betrayal that sweeps from the Midwest to the deep South to the West Coast.

During the course of this dramatic saga, readers will be enthralled with these four interwoven stories and will relate to the sacrifices each family must make and the consequences they must live by in order to realize their visions for a better way of life.

We meet:

**Sarah Robbins**, a lounge singer with a drinking problem from Cleveland. Her life will soon change forever when she discovers at the last possible moment that she is pregnant. Readers will become acquainted with her adorable son, Billy; her business partner, Sam; her svengali, Judge Henry Kinslow; and her lover, Jack Stratton.

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**Neil Dvorak**, a Detroit native with exquisite taste in woodworking and rotten taste in women. After his first wife, Janet, is caught in a bold affair, he leaves her and loses his beloved daughter, Amy, in the process. Neil thinks his luck has changed when he meets Anne – a “respectable and kind” woman, but after she gives birth to baby Victoria, Anne’s true nature emerges with unforgivable consequences.

**Dolores Drake**, a devoted mother of two teenage daughters, with a baby boy on the way. She works long hours in a local Alabama sweatshop to provide for her two teenage daughters and her drunk, abusive creep of a husband. The rest of her hours are spent keeping her children safe from the clutches of her leering husband and warding off his drunken blows to her unborn baby. When she finally gains the courage to leave him and accepts the help of Ruthie Jackson, a black woman in town, ugly racism bubbles to the surface and lives are changed irrevocably.

**David and Karen Stratton**, the California golden couple who has everything going for them – stunning looks, excellent breeding, the best educations, and wealth. But even the Strattons are not immune to loss and tragedy as they learn when David becomes way too close to one particular client, Jessica Heisen.

Eventually, circumstances compel three of these families to head West to California in search of a fresh start for their children. No one can predict the high-stakes drama and devastating results that ensue when their lives intersect.

**BETTER DAYS AHEAD** is filled with historical detail, drama, and romantic intensity. With moving prose, Charlie Valentine tantalizes readers with a captivating saga that explores the struggles of love, hope, disappointment, and loneliness – universal themes that touch us all. Ultimately, this tale, the first in a trilogy, is a story of possibilities and hope...of **BETTER DAYS AHEAD**.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Charlie Valentine** was born and raised in Southern California. She now resides in Washington State with her husband and Japanese Chin dog. Before becoming a writer, Charlie worked as a service manager, technical support manager, and customer service advisor for a national telecommunications company and also served as the owner of a travel agency specializing in luxury cruises. **BETTER DAYS AHEAD** is Ms. Valentine’s debut novel. She is now at work on the sequel, **Harbor Nights**, which will ultimately become a trilogy.

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For further information, please contact Jennifer Richards at Over the River Public Relations: 201/242-9637, [Jen@otrpr.com](mailto:Jen@otrpr.com).

#### **BETTER DAYS AHEAD**

By Charlie Valentine

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English Mill Press

ABOUT

CHARLIE VALENTINE

Author of

# Better A Days Ahead



Charlie Valentine grew up in Southern California during the 1950s. She has always had a fondness for this decade, and she enjoyed revisiting those nostalgic times while writing her debut novel, **BETTER DAYS AHEAD**.

Ms. Valentine began writing as a hobby in her spare time while operating her own travel agency, Prestige Travel by Valentine. After 9/11, she made the life-changing decision to devote herself full-time to writing. **BETTER DAYS AHEAD** is the wonderful result. Charlie is now writing the sequel, **Harbor Nights**, which will ultimately be part of a trilogy about the Robbins, Dvorak, Drake, and Stratton families.

Prior to running a travel agency, Charlie Valentine worked for GTE, a national communications company. There, she held diverse positions as a business service manager, technical support manager, and customer service advisor.

Over the years, Charlie Valentine has resided in Pasadena, Detroit, and Thousand Oaks, California. She now lives in Washington State with her husband, Roger, and Kokomo, a 14-year-old Japanese Chin.



# English Mill Press

A CONVERSATION WITH

CHARLIE VALENTINE

Author of

**Better  
A Days  
Ahead**

Q. In your debut novel, **BETTER DAYS AHEAD**, you whisk readers back in time to the nostalgic days of the 1950s. Why did you choose this particular time period for your novel?

A. *I was fascinated with a time when America appeared to be innocent. The mother was in the kitchen wearing a white ruffled apron and cooking dinner with all the modern-day conveniences. The father, who managed their financial obligations, independently made the decisions for his family. Even the children found ways to entertain themselves with the most basic of toys. It was life at its best, or so the illusion presented itself.*

Q. What kind of research did you do to ensure that you accurately depicted this time period beloved by many?

A. *Besides utilizing reference books and Internet sites to verify information, I purchased antique magazines (Redbook and Motion Picture and Television Magazine, for example) from the era and learned what was important to the readers of the time. I found it interesting that it was fashionable to promote cigarettes and hard liquor, and yet pertinent issues were approached in a subtle, less pointed manner.*

Q. Your novel takes place in diverse locations: Cleveland, Detroit, rural Alabama, and Southern California. What is the significance of these four locations?

A. *I was born in Southern California and, except for the ages of four through eleven when we lived in Detroit, I was raised there. During the seven years in the Midwest we often traveled to Cleveland. Those were the areas with which I was most familiar. However, on a family vacation, we drove through the state of Alabama. The pride of the Southern people intrigued me and left a lasting impression. In **BETTER DAYS AHEAD** I wanted to give the reader a flavor of life from various regions across America.*

Q. Your novel centers on the lives of four distinct families. Tell us a little bit about them.

A. *All four of these families have a child within two years of one another. Sarah Robbins in Ohio is living as an unwed mother in a time when that was strictly taboo. Neil Dvorak, a kindhearted cabinetmaker from Detroit, wants nothing more than to be a family man. He tries love twice and is ultimately betrayed twice. Dolores Drake from Alabama defies her community and against all odds, takes refuge in the home of an African American cleaning woman. The Strattons in California have all the luxuries of life; but David's ambition to be a self-made man overpowers his love for his family.*

Q. You depict the life of an alcoholic in a very realistic way through your character, Sarah. What do you hope your readers will learn from Sarah's story?

A. *Even though we all pay the piper at some time in our life, it is never too late for self-redemption.*

Q. Another social theme that you address is domestic violence. Neil's wife, Anne, verbally and physically abuses their daughter, Victoria, and Thomas Drake abuses his wife and daughters. Were these difficult chapters for you to write? Why did you decide to address this important issue in your book?

A. *These chapters were a challenge to say the least. When I was writing the story, tears kept streaming down my face because I felt so much compassion for them. It was as if the characters and their situations came to life through me.*

Q. Your character, Dolores Drake, seems to suffer the worst. She is a victim of domestic abuse, of discrimination, and of racism. How does she put a stop to this vicious cycle and stop becoming a victim?

A. *When times were at their worst, she finds her strength through the kindness of Ruthie Jackson. It is because of their friendship that Dolores makes a life commitment to do what she can to stop racial violence.*

Q. Your depiction of the Strattons serves as a stark contrast to that of the Drakes. They seem to have it all: wealth, power, and beauty. And yet, underneath the veneer of privilege, they have problems just like anyone else. You write very sensitively about Karen's predicament – what to do when one suspects her husband is having an affair. Tell us how Karen fights back.

A. *Instead of spending her life wallowing in self-pity, Karen transfers her feelings of hurt, betrayal, and inadequacies into positive energy. She strives for her own independence and, with the help of her mother, opens a small swimwear shop.*

Q. You tackle many serious issues in your novel: racism, domestic abuse, alcoholism, and adultery, but your book is not weighed down by these topics. On the contrary, it's a spellbinding saga. I couldn't put it down, and I'm dying to know what will happen next to the Robbins, Dvoraks, Drakes, and Strattons? Can you give us a hint of what is to come?

A. *The tables turn for all the families in the sequel, entitled **HARBOR NIGHTS**. You will meet new characters who create new situations for revenge, dishonor, and unexpected love. Additionally, as the four children grow into adulthood, you will experience their tragedies, intimacies, and unforeseen victories.*



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DISCUSSION GROUP GUIDE

# Better Days Ahead

A Novel

CHARLIE VALENTINE

\$19.95 · 400 pages · ISBN#: 0-9772187-0-8

## About this Guide

Welcome to the 1950's where four uniquely intriguing families are in search of the American dream. In **BETTER DAYS AHEAD** (English Mill Press Trade Paperback Original, April 2006, \$19.95) debut novelist Charlie Valentine brings mid-century America to dazzling life in this enthralling tale of passion, power, and betrayal that sweeps from the Midwest to the deep South to the West Coast. This guide will help direct your group's discussion of this unforgettable saga of four families' quests for a better way of life.

## Suggested Topics for Discussion

- 1) *Better Days Ahead* takes place in the 1950's. Why did the author choose to write about this time period? How does this time period shape the decisions that different characters make?
- 2) *Better Days Ahead* is set against the backdrop of several distinct regions – the Midwest, the rural South, and Southern California. How do these regions shape the lives of the characters in the novel?
- 3) What does the America Dream represent for Sarah? For Neil? For Dolores? For David? What actions do they take to achieve their dreams? Do you think they succeed?
- 4) Did this saga unfold as you expected? Think about how the points of view change throughout the novel. How does the shifting point of view affect the telling of the story?
- 5) With which characters do you most clearly identify? How would you describe each of the main characters in this story?
- 6) How would you describe the relationships that exist between the adults in the novel?

- 7) In what ways does Sarah defy the social mores of the time?
- 8) Lust is a recurrent theme throughout the novel. How does lust lead to the downfall of several key characters? Do they find redemption? How?
- 9) Do you think that Neil has unrealistic expectations for his wives? How do his expectations lead him to become a victim?
- 10) Neil is a complex character. In some ways we feel compassion for him, but in other ways we grow to resent him for not protecting his daughter, Victoria. Discuss what you think drove him to protect his daughter sometimes and at other times to overlook his wife's horrible behavior. What do you think his motives were for the choices that he made?
- 11) What role does racism play in this novel? How does racism affect Dolores and her family?
- 12) Friendship doesn't come easily for Dolores Drake. She is mocked by most of the townspeople and abused by her husband. Discuss how Dolores and Ruthie Jackson's relationship develops. Why do you think they are drawn to one another? And, how do you feel about the way Ruthie protects Dolores and her family?
- 13) Do you think the author's portrait of a small Southern town is accurate? What aspects of Purvis and its denizens ring true to you?
- 14) Discuss the social distinctions embodied in the Stratton family. What roles did society prescribe for Karen and David, based on gender and class?
- 15) Do you think it was weak or strong of Karen to take David back after his infidelity? Why?
- 16) Which woman character do you think most embodies the emergence of women as a growing force in the 50's and foreshadows the rise of feminism in the 70's?
- 17) What are the men's roles in this novel? Who are the villains, the heroes, and the victims?
- 18) There are instances of theft throughout the novel. What are examples of things that have been stolen – both tangible and intangible – in the book? How does Jack Stratton fit in with the theme of theft?
- 19) What do you think is the most important lesson each family learns as a result of their personal tragedies?
- 20) The final sentences of the novel read: "She wanted to overlook all that had happened and simply say, 'Aloha.' Instead, she responded hopefully, 'To better days ahead...'" What is next for the Robbins, the Dvoraks, the Drakes, and the Strattons? Does the author give us reason to believe that these families are on the road to better lives?
- 21) Do you think *Better Days Ahead* would make a good film? If so, why? Who would you cast as the major characters in the film version? Why?