



# Heartwood

*Belva Plain*

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## Heartwood Belva Plain

Few authors have understood the tender intricacies of relationships better than the incomparable Belva Plain. For three decades her deeply moving epics have captivated the hearts and imaginations of readers everywhere. Now, in her final novel, she comes full circle with the themes she took up in her very first work, *Evergreen*, bringing us this unforgettable story of family and friendship, love and marriage, the challenges of life and the true secret of happiness.

Though Iris Stern considers herself a modern woman, with a successful academic career and a happy marriage, she still holds steadfast to her old-fashioned sensibilities. But as the mother of three adult children, each with their own lives and burdens to bear, she often finds those sensibilities called into question when confronted with the choices her children have made.

For one of Iris's daughters, it's the choice of a fresh start in New York City—and a last chance to save her troubled marriage. While Laura and Robbie cope with an impending separation and its effect on Iris's young granddaughter, Iris herself must come to grips with the discovery of a long-held family secret. But it's an emotional parting of another kind that looms most prominently on Iris's horizon—as neither her beloved husband, nor the solidity of her own marriage, is immune to the ravages of time.

Through separations and reunions, the changes we cannot avoid and the love that sustains, Iris will weather whatever lies ahead with a faith that cannot be shaken. Like the inmost rings of a tree that abide through the generations, she will be as strong as heartwood.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## Heartwood Details

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Author : Belva Plain

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## **From Reader Review Heartwood for online ebook**

### **Donna says**

Heartwood is the conclusion of the Evergreen series. Joseph and Anna Friedman and Paul Werner have all died. Now, Iris, the Friedman's daughter, is seeing herself as a modern woman. She has a successful academic career and a happy marriage to Theo Stern, an oncologist. Unbeknownst to Iris, she is the daughter of Anna Friedman and Paul Werner after an afternoon of lovemaking. Neither of them have ever told Iris or the family of this. Joseph raised Iris as his own loving child. Theo is struck down after a serious heart attack and can no longer work. His death was a tragedy to the whole family.

Now Laura has a chance at a fresh start in New York City and maybe a last chance to try to save her marriage to Robbie McAllister. Robbie always had his heart on becoming an archeologist, but just never made the grade. They are blessed with a child, Katie; who is so smart for her age and can figure out what is going on. Laura, however, became successful with her catering company and household tips to share in books and on tv. Robbie felt he could never compete with her and she was being the higher paid of the two of them. He could stand that.

Laura meets Nick, the photographer for her catering and household hints segments, and falls for him. Foolishly they meet and become lovers as well as friends.

Laura is going to tell Robbie she wants a divorce (never a divorce in either side of the families) and start anew. The most awful tragedy occurs; Robbie dies in a plane crash on his way home to talk with Laura about their future. Laura is so upset by this that she calls it off with Nick.

Now that I have brought you up to steam, you will have to read for yourself the outcome.

As an aside, it is sad that Belva Plain is no longer with us as she was a very great storyteller. She was in a class by herself. Thank you Belva.

Her mother, Iris, talks to Nick and tells him that she does love him and not to give up.

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### **Karen & Gerard says**

"Heartwood" is Belva Plain's last novel, a sequel to Harvest actually. Belva Plain is one of my favorite authors and did not disappoint me with this contemporary fiction novel about love, marriage, life's challenges, family relationships, forgiveness, infidelity and secrets. I enjoyed reading this book very much because it delves into the inner workings of marriage and family. It continues the saga of a Jewish family that Belva Plain first writes about in Evergreen. This is about Laura, who tries to be a good wife out of duty but becomes more interested in her catering business than her husband who feels like a failure for being unable to achieve his dream. I highly recommend Heartwood to women.

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### **Kathy Alphs says**

## The Ultimate Family Saga

Desmond Tutu once said, "You don't choose your family. They are God's gift to you, as you are to them." Belva Plain's "Werner Family Saga" is about the importance of family, and how the choices we make effect those within our immediate sphere of influence. The first book in the series "Evergreen" tells the story of a young Polish Jew, named Anna who leaves the old country to pursue the dream of living in the new world: America. Through Anna's eyes we get a first hand glimpse of what life was like for European immigrants in New York City at the turn of the century. As a stranger in a foreign land, Anna dreams of becoming a proper lady, and receiving an education. Through a twist of fate, she is allowed into the world of the wealthy Werner family, and meets her soul mate, Paul Werner. However, due to the constraints of society, Anna is forced to marry Joseph Friedman, a humble tradesman who is driven to live "the American dream." Anna, the dutiful wife, seeks to help Joseph make his dreams reality. But in the end, the choice she makes has a ripple effect which reaches across the generations of both the Friedman and Werner families. Through the decades we see Anna rise from an illiterate immigrant to a wife, mother and pillar of her community.

In "The Golden Cup" you are introduced to a young Paul Werner, his Aunt Hattie, Uncle Daniel, Cousin Lea and extended family. The author's intent with this novel is to give you the opportunity of hearing the story of "Evergreen" from the prospective of Paul Werner.

In the subsequent novels, "Tapestry", "Harvest", and "Heartwood" the focus shifts to Anna and Joseph Friedman's daughter, Iris Stern and her relationship to the Werner family.

As always, Belva Plain's novels transport you to a place and time which is rich in history and the drama of humanity. I was introduced to Plain's novel "Evergreen" as a high school freshman in 1979 by our librarian, Jane Lambertson. As each new installment of the series was published, I read with delight as I once again entered the world of Anna, Paul, Joseph, Maurice, Iris and Theo.

Belva Plain is a third generation Jewish-American who was reared in New York City. She graduated with a degree in history from Barnard College. She is the author of twenty three novels which are published by Random House Books.

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## Elizabeth says

This is Belva Plain's last book and the first I've read. I will read others, I'm sure. Plain's first chapter has Iris Stern looking for a parking spot at a grocery store a few days before Thanksgiving. All the while, Iris is thinking about her family. A unique way to introduce the characters - and well done.

As Iris Stern's daughter, Laura, goes through her daily life, she realizes her marriage is failing. She has supported her husband's dreams and put off her education to do so. Now with a daughter and a father facing heart disease, she goes home to New York from the West Coast. While there, her husband loses another job and they plan to move to the East Coast. Iris's brother finds a job for her husband, who is an archeologist, and he works at it, but not hard enough.

As Laura's business as an event planner personified takes off, her husband feels more and more ineffective and does not show his support. Meanwhile, family secrets start to be revealed and the story reveals bits at a time that keep us reading.

When Laura is about to let her husband know she wants a divorce, something horrible happens and she lives with guilt. She has had an affair and calls it off. When her mother learns an old secret, she is the one who does a 365 degree turn around to ensure Laura has a full life.

Even with the infidelity issues in this book, and I know it happens, I thought her writing honest and interesting.

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### **Anne (Booklady) Molinarolo says**

*Heartwood: The older harder nonliving central wood of trees that is usually darker, denser, less permeable, and more durable than the surrounding sapwood.*

*-Merriam Webster Dictionary*

Upon closing the novel, swells of warmth and melancholia flooded my heart. I smiled and thought, “What a wonderful way to end the story, she started in the 1978 paperback edition of EVERGREEN.” But the tear tracking down my right cheek mourned the fact that I’ll never know the story of Anna Friedman’s great grand-daughter, Katie. Belva Plain died in October, 2010.

Ironically, HEARTWOOD begins in 1979. Anna and Joseph Friedman are gone, so is Paul Warner. But the long held family secret is still alive, and Theo Stern will protect Iris Friedman Stern from learning it until the day he dies. He made that promise long ago. He knows that his lovely wife is too fragile, and then there is her great neediness; Neediness of him, neediness that her children be happy and lead a successful life, neediness to understand her late mother. Perhaps if the 58 year-old Iris knew the secret, many of the heartaches and conflicts she will soon endure could be avoided, but that is NOT Iris Friedman Stern.

On a lovely November day, she is happy. All of the Sterns will be under the same roof celebrating her favorite holiday, Thanksgiving. It has been years since they have been together: all four adult children, her grandchildren, and Theo. Just as it is supposed to be, she reminisces while finding a parking space in the grocery lot. Her three sons had given her many sleepless nights but never her Laura. Laura is the stable child, the “rock” of the family that Iris and her brothers to in times of crisis. Besides her daughter is happy and has a wonderful marriage. But Laura, also reminiscing, isn’t so sure. While her mother is giving herself a mental pat on back, congratulating herself that she is a beloved college professor and has long moved past Theo’s philandering, Laura is seeing the cracks within her life, dreams, and marriage to Robby McAllister. But when Theo is struck down by a near fatal heart attack, Laura seizes the opportunity to move her family from California back to New York and starts to live HER life, not the one she desperately lived as she thought her Grandma Friedman would want her to live.

HEARTWOOD is extremely well written and the characters are real with multi-layers to them. While capturing the turbulent 60s and the early 80’s- when women started to have both a successful career and a family- Belva Plain concentrates on relationships between wives and husbands and between a mother and daughter. These relationships are the heartwood of a happy and successful life. Just ask Iris Stern.

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### **Mary says**

Iris Stern considers herself to be a thoroughly modern woman, although she still holds steadfast to her old-

fashioned sensibilities. She has a successful career in academia and a happy marriage. But as the mother of four adult children, each with their own lives to live and burdens to bear, Iris often finds her sensibilities called into question when confronted with the choices her children have made.

For Iris' daughter, Laura, the choice is a fresh start in New York City - and a last chance to save her troubled marriage. While Laura and Robbie cope with their impending separation and its effect on Iris' young granddaughter, Iris herself must come to terms with the discovery of a long-held family secret. However, it's an emotional parting of another kind that looms most prominently on Iris' horizon - as neither her beloved husband, nor the solidity of her own marriage, is immune to the ravages of time.

Through the inevitable separations and reunions, the changes one cannot avoid and the love that sustains, Iris will weather whatever lies ahead with a faith that cannot be shaken. With an inner strength like that of a tree that abides through the generations, she will be as strong as heartwood.

I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. I was completely drawn into the story and engrossed in it until the very end. I had also read *Harvest* - the fourth book in the Werner Family Saga - back in July of 2011. I've probably said this before, but in my opinion Belva Plain is a truly gifted storyteller. *Heartwood: A Novel* was her last published novel and I give it an A!

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### **CoffeeTimeRomance andMore says**

This book captivated me from the first page. In its telling, the story unfolds beautifully, piece by small piece, section by section. The flow and the sentences are structured with such precision it is truly a delight to turn to each new page. The author's astute understanding of human relationships and of the bonds between family members radiates throughout. Caught up in the lives of characters I cared for, I had little thought for the passage of time and read late, late into the night. There is no preachiness in the tone, just a deep, discerning, clear delivery that shines with uncanny perceptiveness. What a terrible loss that this author is no longer among us. Like the title of this book, Ms. Plain's stories are like heartwood – strong and enduring – and will, no doubt, be treasured through many future generations.

Laurie

Reviewer for Coffee Time Romance & More

Full Review: <http://coffeetimeromance.com/BookRevi...>

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### **Denise Jo says**

I have read just about all of Belva Plain's books and this was very good. It is just sad that this author has passed away, as she is a wonderful story teller.

Though Iris Stern considers herself a modern woman, with a successful academic career and a happy marriage, she still holds steadfast to her old-fashioned sensibilities. But as the mother of three adult children, each with their own lives and burdens to bear, she often finds those sensibilities called into question when confronted with the choices her children have made.

The interactions of the family both together and individually are interwoven throughout the story. I would recommend this book to those who want a good read.

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### **Sue Seligman says**

Although I am not quite done with this book, I am enjoying it much more than I thought I would. I have been a fan of Belva Plain for over 30 years, starting with her first book *Evergreen*; there are not too many Jewish family sagas written these days, unlike years ago when she along with Gloria Goldreich and Maisie Mosco wrote several novels in this genre. Although not all of Belva's books were family sagas, I enjoyed these the most. Knowing that Belva Plain was quite elderly, and after hearing that she had died last year, I did not expect another novel to be released. Not only does *Heartwood* remind us of her old style of demonstrating passion, family loyalty and conflict, and undying love and devotion, it concludes the story of the descendants of the characters in *Evergreen*, a fact that I wasn't aware of until I started the book. Although it is much shorter in scope and sequence, it is still engrossing and emotionally charged, and it hooked me in right from the beginning, and made me realize how much I miss reading the family sagas of which I couldn't get enough in the 1970s and 1980s. I am not sure whether Belva Plain wrote the entire book by herself or if she had help, but it is only fitting that her final work brings to a conclusion the story of the beloved family from *Evergreen*. It is not as good and as riveting as *Evergreen*, but it is still a decent and interesting book.

Well, I finished the book in only a few days, but I am not quite sure why the review never appeared on my profile or my facebook page. It was an excellent quick read which did not disappoint, especially since Belva Plain had to have been in her 90s when she wrote it. I miss the family sagas of years ago, so this book left me nostalgic and wanting more of this genre. I definitely would pass this book on to my friends.

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### **Anna says**

I had read a couple of this author's books in my twenties/thirties, ie my distant past, and remembered them with a vague fondness, but had no recall of what they were about. When I came upon this book in my library I thought I'd give it a go as the first paragraph appeared to be written from the POV of a woman with grown children, such as myself. However that changed quickly, and the novel was more about the only perfect daughter and her life than about the mom, Iris. I didn't love this book even a little bit. Not one of the characters gave me a sense of wanting to know them in real life; even Laura, the main character, was annoying, placid, and unable to make decisions about her fractured relationships. The ending was predictable and eye rollingly convenient. I'd not have missed anything had I not read this book. It made me realize how much my reading tastes have changed over the years, and that I much prefer a novel, which, while entertaining me, allows me to learn something. This one, although it entertained me mildly( I finished it after all) did no teach me a thing, except not to bother with anymore books by this author.

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### **Dana says**

I thoroughly enjoyed this final and posthumous novel written by my beloved Belva Plain. I read "*Evergreen*" as a young woman, commuting to work in a busy city. Those hours on buses in Atlanta were my favorite time to read and relax. *Evergreen* was a book that stayed in my memory for more than 30 years. And now, as a last gift, Ms. Plain (who died recently at age 90) has finished the story of ANNA's children and

grandchildren in this lovely, heartbreaking tale of Iris Stern (Anna's daughter), Theo, her once philandering husband, and THEIR children, especially their daughter Laura. Laura married the wrong boy when she was 19. They were f/totally different worlds. She was the child of wealthy Jewish east coast parents who grew up encouraged to be whatever and to get a good education. She gave that up when she married Robby, a small town Ohio boy with narrow minded parents, and who was raised to go to church. They married, had a baby (so that Robby, who was extremely selfish, could avoid the Viet Nam draft. In the days in which this story begins, having a baby was a valid reason for a deferment.) Laura gave up school, lived in a horrible, noisy little apartment in Ca. and followed Robby wherever he went for school or work, both of which he seemed to fail at miserably, always with a lame excuse. He was denied his PHD and, with baby in hand, Laura and Robby went back to the East Coast, where Laura, always creative with cooking and decorating, started her own catering business and built an empire, much like that of a modern day Martha Stewart. She provided well for Robby and their baby Katie, bought a magnificent home and held weddings and other events in the ballroom of that home. At one event, a dashing photographer is hired and there is instant magic when Laura and he, Nick, meet for the first time. The story takes on an aching tone from that point on. There are turns, secrets, deaths, affairs, family splits and reconciliations, and finally, for me, a bittersweet ending. Anyone who loved Belva Plain's early works, will want to read this one. The last page was predictable, and this is not the best AMERICAN novel ever written, thus I gave it 4 stars, not 5, but I still totally enjoyed it and did not want it to end.

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### **Dale Harcombe says**

Three and a half stars. It is years since I have read a Belva Plain book but this was probably just what I needed after the last book, *Through the Cracks*, which was oddly compelling but hard to read. This book is the opposite. It is like snuggling into a warm bed on a cold night. It just sort of wraps around you. The people and the themes are familiar. That's not to say that I didn't get angry with the way Iris, and Laura at times dealt with the issues that arose, but this was an average sort of family dealing with everyday issues and sometimes all I want to read is something comfortable.

It's the story of Iris and Theo, their sons and daughter, Laura. Laura is the one they feel they never have to worry about because she does everything well. However the way she and Robbie decided to handle the Vietnam Draft is immature and stupid beyond belief. Yet for those who remember those days of conscription and the Vietnam War their decision is perhaps understandable in a misguided way. Therein is the catalyst which is at the heart of all Laura and Robbie's problems, along with Laura's inability to always wanted to please everyone and not rock the boat.

Robbie is a weak character who cannot cope without someone propping him up and building his ego. But Laura and Robbie cannot talk about issues and resolve them. Just so Iris and Theo have issues in their past that have not been satisfactorily dealt with. And then there is a secret. But it doesn't come out until a long way into the book.

While I enjoyed this novel, despite not agreeing with some of the decisions made or the way they were handled, I also thought the ending with Robbie was just too convenient and predictable.

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### **Becky Ford says**

What a beautiful swan song for Belva Plain. I loved this finale to the Werner Family Saga. Plain will remain one of my all-time favorite writers. This novel is beautiful and touching. I'm going to miss this family.



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## **Barbara says**

Robbie sure got the short end of the stick. The author took the easy way out with the solution to Laura's problem. It would have been much better to make Laura deal with the issue directly so that she would mature in the process. I'd have rather seen a divorce between the two and a hea for Robbie. He wasn't any worse the Laura. Laura was immature as well. She really should have acted like a grown up wife and talked to him about her needs and made the marriage better. Instead she decides the grass is greener elsewhere, but she hasn't changed. she has just found someone more willing to cater to her and read her mind about what she needs. We haven't seen that her communications skills have gotten any better. Without that she may be finding more green grass with someone else.

Time must have been short with this book. It seemed barely filled out, more like an outline. I realize this took place 30 years ago, but the issues seemed so out of date. It was hard to see what the big deal was.

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## **Dav says**

### **Heartwood • by Belva Plain**

Trying too hard to be a tearjerker, as the story presents the family, Iris Stern and her adult children, dealing with challenges of life and secrets. After some anti Vietnam War propaganda the story becomes a morality tale; commitment verses feelings and infatuation. Should you stay married to your perfectly okay spouse or dump the relationship in pursuit of someone you feel is a soulmate? Laura struggles with dumping her marriage vows in pursuit of pleasure with someone she "really" loves.

The great grandparents stayed together, but cheated, briefly and had a love child Iris that no one knew about. Now Iris' kid Laura must choose. She decides to divorce, but her hubby dies in a plane crash before she can tell him. Laura is overcome with guilt. It takes a long time with Iris' help to get the soulmates back together.

An unpleasant story that promotes chasing feelings over keeping vows. Laura could salve her conscience by viewing it as fate rather than dancing on her dead husband's grave. I kept waiting for someone with common sense to tell her feelings come and go, but love is a commitment, which is why you can promise to love someone. You cannot promise to have feelings.

A disappointing story that does gets better near the end.

### **Werner Family Saga**

Evergreen (1978)

The Golden Cup (1986)

Tapestry (1988)

Harvest (1990)

● Heartwood (2011)

*The Werner Family Saga...fiction novels by American author Belva Plain. The series kicks off with Belva's debut novel Evergreen, which follows the feisty redhead Jewish woman named Anna. Anna has emigrated from Poland to New York City at the turn of the century. The books follow her family from there on....The series lasted five novels, concluding in 2011 with Belva's final novel, Heartwood. order of books.*

Belva Plain (1915 – 2010)

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