

Loving Day: A Novel

By Mat Johnson



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A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK | NAMED ONE OF THE TEN BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY MIAMI HERALD AND ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY San Francisco Chronicle • NPR • Men's Journal • The Denver Post • Slate • The Kansas City Star • Time Out New York | From the author of the critically beloved Pym ("Imagine Kurt Vonnegut having a beer with Ralph Ellison and Jules Verne."—Vanity Fair) comes a ruthlessly comic and moving tale of a man discovering a lost daughter, confronting an elusive ghost, and stumbling onto the possibility of utopia.

"In the ghetto there is a mansion, and it is my father's house."

Warren Duffy has returned to America for all the worst reasons: His marriage to a beautiful Welsh woman has come apart; his comics shop in Cardiff has failed; and his Irish American father has died, bequeathing to Warren his last possession, a roofless, half-renovated mansion in the heart of black Philadelphia. On his first night in his new home, Warren spies two figures outside in the grass. When he screws up the nerve to confront them, they disappear. The next day he encounters ghosts of a different kind: In the face of a teenage girl he meets at a comics convention he sees the mingled features of his white father and his black mother, both now dead. The girl, Tal, is his daughter, and she's been raised to think she's white.

Spinning from these revelations, Warren sets off to remake his life with a reluctant daughter he's never known, in a haunted house with a history he knows too well. In their search for a new life, he and Tal struggle with ghosts, fall in with a utopian mixed-race cult, and ignite a riot on Loving Day, the unsung holiday for interracial lovers.

A frequently hilarious, surprisingly moving story about blacks and whites, fathers and daughters, the living and the dead, *Loving Day* celebrates the wonders of opposites bound in love.

Praise for Loving Day

"Incisive . . . razor-sharp . . . that rare mélange: cerebral comedy with pathos. The vitality of our narrator deserves much of the credit for that. He has the neurotic bawdiness of Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy; the keen, caustic eye of Bob Jones in Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go;* the existential insight of

Ellison's Invisible Man."-The New York Times Book Review

"Exceptional . . . To say that *Loving Day* is a book about race is like saying *Moby-Dick* is a book about whales. . . . [Mat Johnson's] unrelenting examination of blackness, whiteness and everything in between is handled with ruthless candor and riotous humor. . . . Even when the novel's family strife and racial politics are at peak intensity, Johnson's comic timing is impeccable."—*Los Angeles Times*

"Johnson, at his best, is a powerful comic observer [and] a gifted writer, always worth reading on the topics of race and privilege.""—**Dwight Garner**, *The New York Times*

"Hilarious and touching new novel about family, identity and what it means to truly love other people . . . The disasters make us who we are, and the results can sometimes be amazing—as amazing as this beautiful, triumphant miracle of a book."—**NPR**

"Giddy, biting . . . ferocious . . . Grand metaphors, unsparing social commentary, sharp characters, and sharper humor help propel the book. . . . A welcome effort from a major talent."—*The Boston Globe*

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Editorial Review

Review

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"The politics of his own racial mix is a topic [Johnson has] written about with discernment and a rumbling wit. . . . *Loving Day* is about being blackish in America, a subject about which Mr. Johnson has emerged as satirist, historian, spy, social media trickster (follow him on Twitter) and demon-fingered blues guitarist. . . . Johnson, at his best, is a powerful comic observer; his punches land. . . . [He's] a gifted writer, always worth reading on the topics of race and privilege. . . . I loved and will never forget Warren's definition of what a daughter is: 'A man's daughter is his heart. Just with feet, walking out in the world.'"—**Dwight Garner**, *The New York Times*

"Hilarious and touching new novel about family, identity and what it means to truly love other people . . . Johnson is one of the funniest writers in America. . . . [He] gets at the heart of what it means to be a person—and he does so with more skill, generosity and, yes, love, than just about anyone else writing fiction today. 'Forgiveness comes later in life, after you've created enough disasters of your own,' Warren observes toward the end of the novel. The disasters make us who we are, and the results can sometimes be amazing—as amazing as this beautiful, triumphant miracle of a book."—**NPR**

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"Writers who are as smart as Mat Johnson are rarely as funny, and those who are as funny are rarely as smart. He is unique, and simply must be read. *Loving Day*, a tender, ribald, fast-moving novel, is the perfect place to begin."—**Teju Cole, author of** *Open City*

"Hilarious, sometimes discomforting, always brilliant, *Loving Day* tackles with heart and sly humor identity, family, and finding that elusive place where you belong. This is an awesome, viciously witty novel."—**Roxane Gay, author of** *Bad Feminist* and *An Untamed State*

"Loving Day is wonderful satire, sharp and funny about so many contemporary themes and anxieties, including race, money, family, sex, and love. Mat Johnson has a deep comic gift, and his laughs always come with real thought and feeling."—Sam Lipsyte, author of *The Ask* and *The Fun Parts*

"This is what happens when races mix: Mat Johnson. Not a soul or a post-soul is spared in his brilliant and hilarious satire of modern American tribalism."—Danzy Senna, author of *Caucasia*

"Genius! Mat Johnson is hands-down one of my favorite novelists writing today. He writes about the difficult stuff—the stuff that matters—in the most humorous and heart-wrenching way. *Loving Day* is Johnson's triumph and a reader's great joy."—**Heidi Durrow, author of** *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky*

"Since this is a book by Mat Johnson, one of the best American satirists since Mark Twain, I don't have to tell you it's as funny as it is smart. It's the most poignant father/daughter story I've read in years."—**Emily Raboteau, author of** *Searching for Zion*

About the Author

Mat Johnson is the author of the novels *Pym*, *Drop*, and *Hunting in Harlem*, the nonfiction novella *The Great Negro Plot*, and the comic books *Incognegro* and *Dark Rain*. He is a recipient of the United States Artist James Baldwin Fellowship, the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, and the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature. He is a faculty member at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program.

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In the ghetto there is a mansion, and it is my father's house. It sits on seven acres, surrounded by growling row homes, frozen in an architectural class war. Its expansive lawn is utterly useless, wild like it smokes its own grass and dreams of being a jungle. The street around it is even worse: littered with the disposables no one could bother to put in a can, the cars on their last American owner, the living dead roaming slow and steady to nowhere. And this damn house, which killed my father, is as big as it is old, decaying to gray pulp yet somehow still standing there, with its phallic white pillars and the intention of eternity. An eighteenth-century estate in the middle of the urban depression of Germantown. Before he died, my father bought the wreck at auction, planned on restoring it to its original state, just like he did for so many smaller houses in the neighborhood. Rescuing a slice of colonial history to sell it back to the city for a timeless American profit. His plan didn't include being old, getting sick, or me having to come back to this country, to this city, to pick up his pieces. This house is a job for a legion, not one person. It would kill one person. It did—my father. I am one person now. My father's house is on me. I see it from the back of the cab, up on its hill, rotting.

Donated by the Loudin family after the Depression, the mansion was used by the city as a museum until a fire that created repair costs beyond its means and interest. At one point in my life, decades before, I was a boy. As such, I knew this house. I used to ride the 23 trolley past its absurd presence and marvel at this artifact of rich white folks' attempt at dynasty. A physical memory of historic Germantown's pastoral roots, before the larger city of Philadelphia exploded past this location, propelled by the force of the industrial revolution. Most things from childhood get smaller with age, but Loudin Mansion towers, because now I have to take care of it. So I want to run. I sit passively in the taxi as I'm driven closer, but my thighs ache and my bowels are prepared to evacuate, and I want to open the door and run. I'll run. I'll run through North Philly if I have to, all the way downtown. Run along the highway back to the airport, then run away again from the whole damn country.

The white cabdriver makes no move to get out with me when he finally stops, just pops the trunk open with one button and with another relocks the doors after I open mine. That lock clicks hard. I'm on the street with my bags, and I can't get back inside. I'm not white, but I can feel the eyes of the few people outside on me, people who must think that I am, because I look white, and as such what the hell am I doing here? This

disconnect in my racial projection is one of the things I hate. It goes in a subcategory I call "America," which has another subheading called "Philly." I hate that because I know I'm black. My mother was black—that counts, no matter how pale and Irish my father was. So I shall not be rebuked. I will not be rejected. I want to run but I refuse to be run off.

A kid walks by, about seventeen, not much younger than I was when I escaped this neighborhood. He looks up, and as I lift my bags I give him the appropriate local response, an expression that says I'm having a bad life in general and a headache right now. Welcome home. There are blocks around here where you can be attacked for looking another man in the eyes, and other blocks where you can be assaulted for not giving the respect of eye contact. I could never figure it, which blocks were which, until I realized these were just the excuses of sociopaths. The sociopaths, that's the real problem. The whole street demeanor is about pretending to be a sociopath as well, so that the real ones can't find you.

When I get to the porch, the front door opens. I can hear it creak before I see someone emerging from behind its paint-cracked surface. Sirleaf Day is carpeted in cloth. He's got a Kenyan dashiki, Sudanese mudcloth pants, and a little Ghanian kente hat. It's like Africa finally united, but just in his wardrobe. Last time I saw him, he dressed the same, but he only had one leather medallion. Now he has enough to be the most decorated general in the Afrocentric army. I give him a "Howyadoin," and the Philly salute, a hummingbirdlike vibration of my forehead, the most defensive of nods. He gives me a hug. He hugs me like he knows I'm trying to get away.

"So you had your first divorce. That just means you a man now. Which kind was it? She stop loving you, or you stop loving her?"

"It wasn't like that," I tell him. Sirleaf grips me closer.

"Oh hell no. I hope it wasn't one of those where you both still love each other, but it's broke anyway. Those are the worst. My first, fourth marriages, they were like that. At least you didn't have any kids with her."

"Uncle Sirleaf, I really don't want to talk about-"

"Don't give me that 'uncle' mess. You're too old for that shit. And I'm way too young," he says, pushing me back for another look before pulling me in once more. "Your pop was waiting for you to come home, you know that? This house, it was going to be for you. You and your wife, your children. Bring you back to the community." Sirleaf's voice cracks with emotion. It makes me feel guilty for wanting to break free of his musky grasp. "And it did. You got to give that crazy honky that."

I look over Sirleaf's shoulder: there's a rusty Folgers Coffee can sitting on the porch, by the wall. It's there because my dad never smoked in a house. This can of ashes is full of cheap cigar butts, mixed with the cigarette butts of whoever visited. I know without looking inside it, because there was always a can like that on the porch of wherever my dad was living.

"He knew I wasn't coming back. He was just going to fix it up to sell it, like he always did." This gets him to release me, partially. He still holds my shoulders, pushes me back as far as he can to take a look at my face.

"Wasn't his fault you ran off, was it? My daddy left me when I was four and gave me nothing but my stunning Yoruba features. So stop bitching."

Sirleaf is a lawyer, a realtor, a griot, and a kook, and he's good at all of those things. My dad was his white

friend, because they had the kook thing in common. For three decades, they would get together to sell a property or drink whiskey and get kooky together. My dad had his own realtor's license, but he wasn't good with most types of humans. Sirleaf is the people's man, knows everyone that matters in Germantown, from councilmen to people looking to buy their first homes. He speaks three languages: Street, Caucasian, and Brotherman.

Sirleaf's getting old and finally he looks it. Some people age, and some just dehydrate. Sirleaf looks like someone let the water out and the creases dried in its absence. I can't imagine how old my dad must have looked. They were the same age but my father was one of those pasty Irish people with no melanin to protect his skin from time. He could barely manage enough pigment for a mole.

"We should really have a funeral," I tell him. "Or a memorial or-"

"He ain't want one, and we're going to respect that. You know your pop—he wasn't one to spend good money on a bunch of bullshit. His legacy, it's this house, this property. And it's you. Now let's look at your inheritance."

With great flourish, Sirleaf turns back to open the front door. But it's stuck. The wood's swelled and it takes a lot to jar, a lot of effort to protect so little. Hell's lobby waits on the other side. If my father's soul is left in the physical world, it's in the tools he left behind. Sandpaper, ladders, and scaffolding. Plaster and tarps, rollers and paint tins. At the back of my nose I can smell the Old Spice and Prell even though he hadn't used either since I was eleven. I will be buried here too, I just know, and then I fight that thought with the words I have been thinking in the days leading up to this moment: paint and polish. Paint it, polish the wood floors, tidy up whatever basic visual problems might get in the way of a buyer's imagination. Build on whatever my father managed in the months since he'd taken ownership. Use all the tricks he taught me. That's what I thought, packing to come back Stateside; that's what I thought waiting for the plane. That's what I tell myself now. Paint and polish. I even say it out loud.

"There ain't no roof," Sirleaf says back to me. "Go on, take a look at that jawn. That shit's crazy. The wiring in here is, like, seventy years old. And exposed—I seen that old fuse box in the back pop sparks twice in the last hour. It's a miracle he didn't burn the place down running his power tools. I don't know how your pops lived up in this mess. Craig was one cheap bastard. No offense," and he wags his head at the shame of it.

I don't remind him about a childhood camped out in many a shelled home. My dad had been doing the same thing since my mother kicked him out, and that was twenty-seven years ago. I don't tell him about pissing in paint buckets and dumping it out the window.

"You sure you want to sleep here? I mean, what about Tosha's? They still in the house I sold them. Six bedrooms. Maybe you could stay there."

"I'll stop by, but I doubt her husband wants me under the same roof for an extended period."

"Up to you, but I'm out of here. This place creeps me out. You better see what you're dealing with on the second floor, before it gets dark. Power's iffy up there." He points to the stairs. I get the message that he wants me to go up. I also get the message that he's afraid to. That at least he understands the limits of his age. As he leaves, Sirleaf stares at his feet with every step, as if he's worried the old beams might give out on him.

"How soon can you get it listed?" I ask. He sighs. I've missed something.

"I told you. You can't sell this place the way it is, not without taking a huge loss. You can't sell it for the land; it's historic so it's hard to get permission to build on it. You going to have to pick up where your pop left off, and it's going to take a while to get it together. At least, the basics. You got shoes to fill, boy," he tells me. I just happen to look down when Sirleaf says it. His shoes have at least two-inch heels on them. He catches me staring and says, "I'm engaged to this new jawn: young sister. She likes me tall."

"Sirleaf, look: I just got divorced. My comic-book shop, I had to sell it. I owe my ex half of that, but I'm still living off the money. Whatever we got to do, whatever we can get, let's just get it soon, okay? I don't care if we take a loss, I just want out."

"Yeah. Sure. Right. You seeing the same house I'm seeing, are you not? I mean, take a look around," he implores me. I don't need to do that.

"My ex is a lawyer. A really, really, good one. And she'll sue the living shit out of me if I don't pay back the money I owe her. I'm already late on the payments. You read my emails, right? I need that cash, man."

"Your ex isn't an American citizen, so she can't sue you here. I'm telling you, Warren, it might seem like a big deal to get sued, but that ain't your major problem right now. You got other things to worry about," and he lifts a mudcloth-adorned arm and motions in a slow sweep around the whole damned building.

Sirleaf is right: there is no roof. There are walls. It has floors. Just no real top. In my book, that barely qualifies it as a house, makes it more of a massive cup. I brave the stairs, shining a flashlight above me as I pace the hall of the second story. In most parts of the ceiling, there's nothing but blue tarp separating the interior from the elements. There are a few charcoaled beams in those rooms where my father hadn't knocked the remains of the fire damage down. In the master bedroom, there's a green canvas tent, the old Coleman tent my dad used when he took me on trips to the Pine Barrens and the Appalachian Trail. Now its yellow plastic spikes are nailed directly into the blackened, fire-ravaged hardwood. Instead of camping out in the room of the house least damaged, as I would have done, as any normal person would have done, my father took up residence in a room that looks like a hollowed out piece of charcoal. There's a tarp on the floor to match the one glimpsed through the burnt shingles above, but besides that, the space is nearly unprotected to the heavens. It's the nineteenth of August, about 80 degrees outside and 90 in this room. The windows up here are covered with brown paper, taped to the glass, but the sun's heat gets in anyway. This is the place he grew sick in. Made the decision to not go to the doctor in. Then died in. Quietly, of pneumonia. I always assumed he would die on the streets of Germantown itself, loud. Knocked over the head for being the wrong race in the wrong neighborhood in the wrong century.

In the gloom, I drag everything—the foldout table and chair, the lamp connected to the car battery, the propane grill, the five-gallon jugs of water, and eventually the tent itself—one by one downstairs to the dining hall, the least damaged room in the whole house. My father managed new drywall in here, matched and replaced sections of the crown molding, and had gotten as far as laying out cans of primer for painting. With the sliding doors to the hall closed, the room almost seems habitable.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Donald Dickens:

This Loving Day: A Novel book is not really ordinary book, you have it then the world is in your hands. The benefit you have by reading this book will be information inside this publication incredible fresh, you will

get data which is getting deeper a person read a lot of information you will get. This Loving Day: A Novel without we recognize teach the one who examining it become critical in imagining and analyzing. Don't possibly be worry Loving Day: A Novel can bring once you are and not make your carrier space or bookshelves' grow to be full because you can have it with your lovely laptop even telephone. This Loving Day: A Novel having great arrangement in word in addition to layout, so you will not truly feel uninterested in reading.

Rosa Goldschmidt:

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