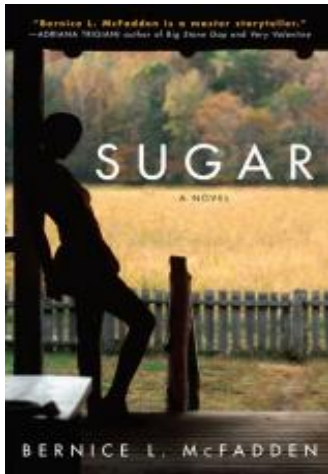


Sugar

by Bernice L. McFadden



About the Book

When Sugar Lacey arrives in Bigelow, Arkansas, to the women of the town it seems as if "a storm blew in.... A storm walked into their town on two legs in spiked, red patent leather heels." Afraid for their men and their morals, they want Sugar out of Bigelow. But Sugar, who has traveled too far and survived too much in her short life, has finally found a place in which she could put down roots.

To the surprise of the town, and most of all to Sugar herself, she develops a friendship with Pearl Taylor. Pearl, a respected member of the community, carries with her every day an overwhelming burden of grief over her daughter Jude's murder fifteen years before. From its tenuous beginnings, Pearl and Sugar's friendship allows each woman to confront the very thing that most haunts her.

In language that is by turns lyrical and stark, and with a cadence that invokes the rhythm of the storytelling to which she grew up listening, Bernice L. McFadden brings vividly to life a 1950s Southern black town. *Sugar*, her first novel, is a powerful exploration of the sometimes unrelenting depths of grief and despair, the seeds of hope that can grow in even the bleakest of circumstances, and the role that love and friendship can play in helping us find redemption within ourselves.

Discussion Guide

1. *Sugar* opens with the murder of Jude Taylor. Why do you think the author chose to open with this graphic-and horrific-scene? How did this scene set the tone for the rest of the novel? Why is Jude's murder such an integral part of the storyline?

2. When Pearl first sees Sugar, she is "struck by the familiarity of her face"(pg. 37) because it reminds her of Jude. Pearl also called Sugar by Jude's name on several occasions. What draws Pearl to Sugar besides her physical resemblance to

Jude?

3. By associating with Sugar, Pearl alienates Shirley and some of the other women in Bigelow. Why do these women feel so threatened by Sugar?
4. Sugar and Pearl's friendship is an unlikely pairing. What does each one gain from the relationship?
5. At one point in the story the author writes, "Knowing each other's past helped both Pearl and Sugar. Secret pains, now told, bonded the women together tighter than anything else in this world" (pg. 125). Why do Pearl and Sugar choose to confide in one other when neither has ever done so with anyone else?
6. In the beginning of the book, the author has included this quote by Sarah Miles: "There's a little bit of hooker in every woman. A little bit of hooker and a little bit of God." What do you think of this statement? How does it pertain to the story?
7. *Sugar* is set mainly in the small town of Bigelow, Arkansas. What "role" does the small town play in the story? Sugar was raised in a small town by the Lacey sisters and later lived in St. Louis, Detroit, and Chicago. Why does she choose to return to a small town?
8. Describe Pearl and Joe's relationship. What first drew them to one another? How would you describe their relationship when the story first begins? How does it change as the novel progresses? At the end of the story, the reader finds out that Joe is going to make a confession to Pearl. How do you think she would have reacted to the news?
9. "Pearl looked around her. She tried to imagine herself without Sugar. She didn't know who that might be, the person that existed before Sugar's arrival was buried deep into the hard, dry memory of Bigelow next to the rotting bones of her baby girl. How could she be anything more with the loss of two in her life now?" (pg. 218). Why does Pearl feel so bereft by Sugar's departure? Do you think she sensed that Sugar was more than just a neighbor and friend to her and Joe?
10. One reviewer stated that "*Sugar* speaks of what is real." What aspects of the novel do you think the reviewer is referring to?

Author Bio

Bernice L. McFadden is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Tulane University and the author of several critically acclaimed novels, including *SUGAR*, *THE WARMEST DECEMBER*, *LOVING DONOVAN*, *NOWHERE IS A PLACE*, *GLORIOUS*, *GATHERING OF WATERS* (a *New York Times* Editors' Choice and one of the 100 Notable Books of 2012), *THE BOOK OF HARLAN* (winner of a 2017 American Book Award and the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work, Fiction), and *PRAISE SONG FOR THE BUTTERFLIES* (long-listed for the 2019 Women's Prize for Fiction). She is a four-time Hurston/Wright Legacy Award finalist, as well as the recipient of three awards from the Black Caucus of the American Library Association.

Critical Praise

"Unforgettable?a haunting story that keeps pages turning until the end."-*Essence*"Vivid."-*The New York Times Book Review*"Strong and folksy storytelling...think Zora Neale Hurston... Sugar speaks of what is real"-*The Dallas Morning News*"One of the most compelling and thought-provoking novels I've read in years. Bernice McFadden is truly a welcomed voice in the literary world."-*Terry McMillan, bestselling author of A Day Late and A Dollar Short*

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