

Sugar by Bernice L. McFadden

Summary

In a debut novel that blends the rich, earthy atmosphere of the deep South and a voice imbued with spiritual grace, Bernice L. McFadden tells the story of two women: a modest, churchgoing wife and mother, and the young prostitute she befriends. "When Sugar arrives in 1950s Bigelow—waltzing down the main square of the sweltering tiny Arkansas town as if she has every right to be there—no one tosses out the welcome mat or invites her in for a Coke.

The Bigelow women hate her from the minute they lay eyes on her—on the bouncing blond wig and red-painted lips that tell them she has never known a hard day's work. All they know is they want her gone, out of their town, and away from their men. "But Sugar has traveled too far and survived too much to back down now. She parks herself in the house at #10 Grove Street, even though she feels there is something about Bigelow that is calling up the past she prayed she'd left behind. "Deep in her soul, Pearl Taylor knows what it is that Sugar feels, because it happened to her. It was the day her world shut down, the day the devil himself murdered her young daughter, Jude.

It wasn't that Pearl stopped believing in God, exactly; she just couldn't trust him the way she used to. Then Sugar moves in next door, and Pearl's life irrevocably changes. Over sweet potato pie, an unlikely friendship begins, transforming the lives of two women—and an entire community. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—N/A
- Where—Brooklyn, New York City, New York, USA
- Education—NYC Fashion College - Laboratory Institute of Merchandising; Marymount College, Fordham University
- Currently—lives in Brooklyn, New York

Bernice L. McFadden is the author of seven critically acclaimed novels, including the classic *Sugar, Nowhere Is a Place*, (a 2006 *Washington Post* Best Fiction title), and *Gathering of Waters* in 2012.

She is a two time Hurston/Wright award fiction finalist as well as the recipient of two fiction honor awards from the BCALA. McFadden lives in Brooklyn, New York. (*From the publisher.*)

More

Bernice L. McFadden was born, raised and currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. She is the eldest of four children and the mother of one daughter, R'yane Azsa. Ms. McFadden attended grade school at P.S. 161 in Brooklyn and Middle School at Holy Spirit, also in Brooklyn. She attended high school at St. Cyril Academy an all-girls boarding school in Danville, Pa.

In the Fall of 1983 she enrolled in the noted NYC fashion college: Laboratory Institute of Merchandising, with dreams of becoming an international clothing buyer.

She attended LIM for two semesters and then took a position at Bloomingdale's and later with Itokin, a Japanese owned retail company.

Disillusioned and frustrated with her job, she signed up for a Travel & Tourism course at Marymount College where she received a certificate of completion. After the birth of her daughter in 1988, Bernice McFadden obtained a job with Rockresorts a company then owned by the Rockefeller family.

The company was later sold and Ms. McFadden was laid off and unemployed for one year. She sights that year as the turning point in her life because during those twelve months Ms. McFadden began to dedicate herself to the art of writing. During the next nine years she held three jobs, always looking for something exciting and satisfying. Forever frustrated with corporate America and the requirements they put on their employees, Ms. McFadden enrolled at Fordham University. Her intention was to obtain a degree that would enable her to move up another rung on the corporate ladder.

She signed up for courses that concentrated on Afro-American history and literature, as well as creative writing, poetry and journalism. She credits the two years spent under the guidance of her professors as well as the years spent lost in the words of her favorite author's, to the caliber of writer she has become.

During those years, Ms. McFadden made a conscious effort to write as much as possible and began to send out hundreds of query letters to agents and publisher's attempting to sell one of her short stories or the novel she was working on.

In 1997, Ms. McFadden quit her job and dedicated seven months to re-writing the novel that would become, *Sugar*. In May of 1998, after depleting her savings, she took her last and final position within corporate America.

On Feb 9th, 1999, her daughter's eleventh birthday (and Alice Walker's birthday—one of Ms. McFadden's favorite author's) she sent a query letter to an agent who signed her two weeks later and the rest is literary history!

Bernice L. McFadden also writes racy, humorous fiction under the pseudonym, Geneva Holliday. (*From the [author's website](#).*)

Discussion Questions

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?

(Questions issued by publisher.)