

Sugar

CARLY NUGENT

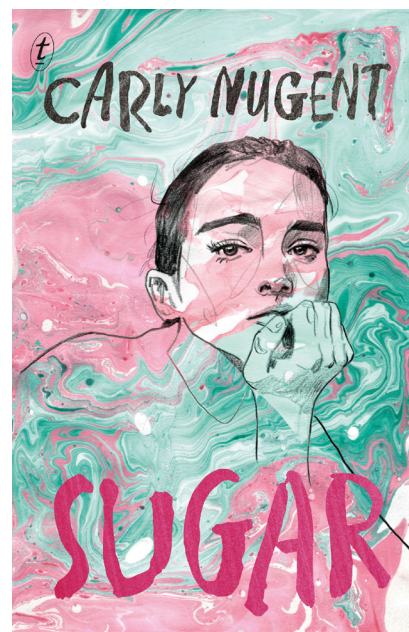
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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 16+

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning and connect it to an audience, purpose and context. They encompass a range of forms with a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they promote the integration of ICT and life skills.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Credit: © Julia Hollow

Carly Nugent lives in Bright in Victoria. Her short fiction has featured in numerous publications, including the *Bellevue Literary Review* and *Award Winning Australian Writing*. Her first novel, *The Peacock Detectives*, won the Readings Children's Book Prize, was a CBCA Honour Book, and was shortlisted

for the Text Prize, the Australian Book Design Awards and the Sisters in Crime Davitt Awards. *Sugar*, inspired by her own experience of having diabetes, is her first book for young adults.

SYNOPSIS

Persephone Nedra is dangerously close to losing control. Her father is dead, she's close to being kicked out of school, and she's reckless with her sugar levels, convinced that her diabetes is a punishment from the universe. Her life is measured against blood glucose levels and last year's calendar. This time last year Persephone was another teenager whose life was about to explode. It's about to explode again.

First, Alexander Mason calls Persephone the most offensive word in the English language, which she responds to by punching him in the face. 'What do you want?' asks Principal Keleos, before placing Persephone on a week-long suspension.

Persephone doesn't know what she wants, or what her plan is. Self-destruction? Sit back and wait for the world to end? She wants answers to questions that don't make sense. Like, why did Alexander Mason, who she barely knows, call her a cunt? And did her dad drive off the road on purpose? Is it all her fault?

When she finds the body of a dead girl in the bushes near the creek, Persephone is convinced that there's a meaning to her death that will make everything make sense. She becomes obsessed with learning about the dead girl, Sylvia MacKenna, hacking into her Facebook profile and befriending her best friend, Erin. But the deeper Persephone digs, the more confused she becomes. She thinks that Sylvia can't have just died from unexpected heart failure—after all, bad things only happen to people who deserve them, don't they?

Sugar is a novel about grief, trauma and learning to live with things that don't make sense.



BEFORE READING

1. Read and discuss the myth of Persephone. Identify the main elements of the myth and discuss some of the ways they might be interpreted in a contemporary story?
2. What do you know about diabetes? Make a list of all of the things you (think you) know about diabetes and people with diabetes and then, as you read, compare these with Persephone's lists on pages 33-34.
3. Read this description of the book in small groups: <https://www.textpublishing.com.au/books/sugar>. What is the 'complex interconnectedness of the universe'? Discuss the way you see your own place in the world. How do you make sense of things? How is your way of understanding your place in the universe similar or different to others in your group?

WHILE READING

1. When Persephone says that 'being alone is easier' (p. 10), do believe her? Why/why not?
2. How does Persephone describe the feeling of managing her illness?
3. How does the novel explore the theme of death and dying?
4. Persephone has a list of apocalypse scenarios. What does her list include? What else would you add to it?
5. What does Persephone say that she wants (p. 13)? What do you think she really wants?
6. What is the significance of the word *sugar* to the story?
7. Why does Persephone feel that she 'deserves' her diabetes? Are chronic illnesses a punishment? Do people deserve them? Discuss the way that some sicknesses are seen as being a moral failing while others are not. How can we avoid these stigmas in our communities?
8. What are the ethics of Persephone pretending to be Sylvia online? Do you think her friendship with Erin will last?
9. What does Persephone have in common with Alexander?
10. 'This is the way the world ends/not with a bang but a whimper. Not with a bang, but a bird.' (p. 23) What do the lines from the original poem mean? What do you think the additions mean?
11. What happens at the end of the novel that gives you hope for the future of these characters?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. Persephone thinks of her own character traits in terms of the meaning of her name. Read pages 8 and 335. How does her way of seeing herself fit with the definition of her name on page 8? Why does she choose the meaning she does on page 335?
2. Is anyone in the story really fulfilling their potential? What is stopping, say, Demi from fulfilling her potential, or Steven?
3. What does Daria represent for Persephone? Does Persephone deserve her forgiveness?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. The writer uses the landscape as a metaphor for the emotional state of the characters (for example, the stone sinking to show Persephone's inability to move forward). Find three other examples of environmental metaphors in the novel and discuss the way they're being used. What does the pomegranate tree mean for Demi?
2. What do the numbers represent at the beginning of each block of text? Describe how Persephone's blood sugar levels reflect her thoughts and behaviour. What is the significance of the bushfire updates being added in the second part of the novel?

THEMES

Trauma

1. Why does Steven stop being obsessed with getting sick once he moves back in with Kurt and starts enacting his 'master plan'? What does this suggest his obsession with sickness was really about?
2. How does Persephone feel to hear Ms Hardstark voicing her questions about the night her dad died? Why do you think she's unable to ask these questions herself? Does it matter what the answers are?
3. How do the characters in the novel respond to external crises (e.g. the bushfires) and internal crises (e.g. diabetes/grief)? Discuss the way that their experiences help them to understand each other better, or cause them to push each other away.

Meaning and connection

1. Persephone is convinced that she is somehow connected to Sylvia MacKenna. Why does she need to find meaning in Sylvia's death? Are they really connected?
2. 'If I couldn't fill in her blank, if I couldn't finish the pattern, then the universe became random.' (p. 211) Does the universe need to make sense to have meaning?



3. What does 'the Goldilocks Zone' refer to? How does Persephone apply her understanding of this concept to her understanding of herself and of other people and places in the novel?

Family

1. Persephone sees herself and Demi as two halves of the one whole (p. 8). What is their relationship like? What do they have in common with each other? Do you agree with Persephone's view of herself and Demi?
2. Why is Persephone so resistant to calling Iris her aunt? Is being biologically or legally related the only valid way to be a family? How do Demi and Iris act as a family to each other?
3. 'She's been my mum for sixteen years, but she's been a woman called Demi for forty-six years' (p. 19). How are Demi and Iris defined by or against their role as mothers in the novel? Compare this to the way that mothers are written in other novels.
4. Persephone's accounts of her interactions with her dad reveal a difficult relationship. How does Persephone's perception of her relationship with her father affect her experience of grief? How would you describe their relationship? Is there more to it than the story Persephone presents?

Language

1. Persephone is interested in words: what they mean and where they come from, their power and their inadequacies. 'Screamed wasn't the right word either. It was more of a yelp, mixed with a gagging sound, mixed with a sort of animal growl. But I sensed Keleos wasn't interested in discussing the inadequacies of the English language. *Screamed* would have to do.' (p. 4) Find examples in the text of words having great power and other words that are inadequate. What makes the difference? Does it depend on more than the words themselves?
2. 'Cunt is a word I deserved. Search *the worst of the worst*. There I am. But Alexander Manson had no right to say it to me.' (p. 11) Why does Persephone feel that she deserves to be called this word? If not Alexander Manson, who does she feel had the right to say it to her? Does he say it with the same intention as the way she takes it? Does that matter?
3. Persephone believes that language has 'the power to explain everything' (p. 40). What does she think the word *cunt* explains about her?
4. Is *cunt* truly the worst word in the English language (p. 153)? Where does it get such power from? Make a list of other words in the book that are weaponised in a similar way.

RESPONDING

1. It only takes a few descriptive details to create a memorable character. Consider this description of Steven—'Steven Slaine is small for a twelve-year-old. Thin limbs that seem brittle like bird bones, cheeks like shoulder blades.' (p. 13) What does this sentence tell you about Steven (both literally and metaphorically)? Find at least two other sentences that capture similar details about one of the other characters in the book. Come up with three interesting details about someone you know that you might use to turn them into a character.
2. Last year's calendar on the wall acts as a constant reminder of the way things were before. Choose one of the lines beginning with 'this time last year', and use it to write a scene from Persephone's life in the past. Was she happier? How different were things then?
3. The physical landscape of the novel is significant—the bush acts as a metaphor for the characters' emotional journey, it provides the physical tension and trauma of the drought and bushfires, and it is a place where things are hidden and revealed. If you were to write a story, where would you set it? What would the landscape say about your characters? How would they interact with it? Describe something that could be hidden in this place, and something that could be found.
4. What is Erin looking for when she messages Sylvia? Does she find it in her interactions with Persephone? Imagine, instead, that Persephone is able to have one conversation with Sylvia—what would they say to each other? Write the conversation as dialogue.