



# SUGAR TOWN QUEENS

MALLA NUNN

**August 2021**  
**ISBN 9781760526832**  
**Format: Paperback**  
**Recommended for 13 to 18 year olds**

## Summary

Fifteen-year-old Amandla's mother has always been strange. For starters, she's a white woman living in Sugar Town, one of South Africa's infamous shanty towns. She won't tell anyone, not even Amandla, about her past. And she has visions, including ones that promise the return of Amandla's father as if he were a prince in a fairytale, but their hardscrabble life is no fairytale.

Amandla knows her father is long gone – since before Amandla was born – and she's pretty sure he's not a prince. He's just another mystery and missing piece of her mother's past, and one of the many reasons people in Sugar Town give them strange looks – that and the fact that Amandla is black and her mother is not.

Lately, her mother has been acting even more strangely, so when Amandla finds a mysterious address at the bottom of her mother's purse along with a large amount of cash, she decides it's finally time to get answers about her mother's life. With her best friends by her side, Amandla is ready to take on the devil himself, and as she confronts devastating family secrets and pain that has lasted a generation, taking on the devil is exactly what she must do.

## Themes

Female empowerment, hope, family, friendship, racism, prejudice, secrets, romance, truth and class.

## Suggestions for Classroom Discussion and Application

### Before reading

- Divide your class into small groups and assign each group with one of the following topics to research:
  - Apartheid in South Africa
  - Townships (description and original purpose)
  - Nelson Mandela (an overview of his life and achievements)
  - Why South Africa is described as the ‘Rainbow Nation’
  - South African social and economic change since 1994
  - Racism in contemporary South Africa [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55333625>]
- After completion ask each group to present five key facts about their topic to the entire class.
- Now examine the book’s cover and title *Sugar Town Queens* and explain that the book is set near Durban, South Africa’s third largest city. Encourage discussion about what students think the book might be about and the clues in the cover that make them think that.
  - How would you describe each of the three girls on the cover?
  - What in the illustration of them suggests this is a contemporary story?
  - What is the most likely socio-economic position for these girls in contemporary South Africa?
  - How does referring to them as ‘Queens’ fit with the answer to the previous question?
  - What do you think the ‘Sugar Town’ of the title might refer to?

### Ubuntu

*‘Neighbours help each other, Amandla.’ . . . ‘That’s Ubuntu.’*

*Ubuntu. We learned about it in primary school; the Zulu idea that a person is a person through other people. We are all interconnected in a living, breathing ocean of compassion and humanity. (Page 14)*

*It’s a miracle that we are all here with Mrs. M, Uncle Julien, and the boys. Mrs M pats Sam’s hand and he leans his head against her shoulder for comfort. We are separate individuals joined together by our loss and our compassion for each other.*

*This, I think, is Ubuntu. (Page 286)*

- The concept of Ubuntu appears early in the novel, as well as in its closing pages. How is the concept explored during the events of the novel? In your answer consider not only Amandla’s relationship with the Bollards but also her relationship with Mrs M, Lil Bit and Goodness.

## Friendship

*'Move out of the way or we will move you. Take a good look at me and my sisters. We are Sugar Town Queens and Sugar Town Queens never back down from a fight.'* (Page 239)

- What is the significance of this scene to the narrative arc of the girls' friendship?

## Growth

*'It's a fairy lights chilli.' Mayme names it right away. 'Snip off whatever you like, Amandla. Seeds are for sharing'*

*Mrs M will dry the seeds out and, when the plants are full grown, she'll set out a basket of fresh chillies for the people on the lane to choose from.* (Page 71)

- Why do you think that Malla Nunn decided to make both Mayme and Mrs M. avid lovers of plants and flowers? [Hint: the first time the reader meets Mrs M she is scooping seeds from a small green eggplant, the first time the reader meets Mayme she is in a room surrounded by flowers.]

## Economic disparity

*The houses have dogs and razor wire, alarms, guards... Man this country is screwed up. Nelson on the water tower changed the segregation laws so that all people could be free, but money, or the lack of it, keeps us in our separate boxes, fighting.'* (Page 105)

*Neville's grand white house dwarfs the Dumisa's redbrick home, and their redbrick house dwarfs our shack in size and comfort. We live on the bottom run of a long ladder that drops farther down to Hopetown's mud floors and dust-bowl gardens.* (Page 130)

- *Sugar Town Queens* examines the economic gulf that exists today both between the white and black populations of South Africa, and between inhabitants of the predominantly black townships. Discuss.

## Coda

- Which character do you think changes the most during the course of the novel: Amandla, Annalisa or Mayme? Describe the changes this character underwent and the events that lead to this change.

## Art imitating life

- Consider the scene where Amandla threatens Neville with a handgun in his office, followed by Amanda taking back control of the family corporation and forcing her husband to resign. In what way do the events of the book mirror the events leading up to Nelson Mandela's presidency and more recent developments in corporate South Africa?

## Point of view

- Try retelling Amandla's story from the POV (point of view) of Sam, and then Neville. Compare and contrast the differences between these two retellings.

## Resolution

- What is the significance of ending the novel with Father Gibson and Sam joining in the Zulu cleansing ritual at the beach? In your opinion is this an optimistic ending for the novel? Why/why not?

## YA fiction

- If all YA fiction is about the search for identity, to what extent would you say that *Sugar Town Queens* is a YA novel?

## About the author

Born and raised in Swaziland on the far edges of the British Empire, Malla Nunn attended a boarding school specially set up for 'mixed race' children. The students at the school spent their time learning the Bible, breaking the rules, and then lying about it. In common with most colonial institutions, stealing, fighting, and violence were common. It was in this charged atmosphere that Nunn developed a fascination with bad behaviour, risk and punishment.

After her family migrated to Australia to escape apartheid, Nunn graduated with a double degree in English and History and then earned a Master of Arts in Theater Studies from Villanova University. Faced with a life of chronic under-employment, she dabbled in acting and screenwriting. She wrote and directed three award-winning films, including *Servant of the Ancestors*, which won Best Documentary awards at film festivals in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Zanzibar, and was shown on national television in Australia. *When the Ground Is Hard* is Malla's first book for young adults. She married in a traditional Swazi ceremony. Her bride price was eighteen cows. She now lives and works in a weatherboard house with a tin roof and an olive tree in the garden in Sydney, Australia.

## In the author's own words

'The story was inspired by the women in my family who lived through hard times in South Africa and survived with their good will and humour intact. The book is written for a YA audience but can easily be read by adults who enjoy a pacey tale of friendship, adventure and first love. The inspiration for *Sugar Town Queens* came easily but the writing came hard. My first draft was a tangle of a dozen story lines and silly action sequences. How about a cow dung fight in an alley and an evil bully with a missing tooth who stalks the main character for no apparent reason? Yes, I had both those things and plenty more. It took another two drafts to filter out the noise and to find the true heart of the story.'

– Malla Nunn