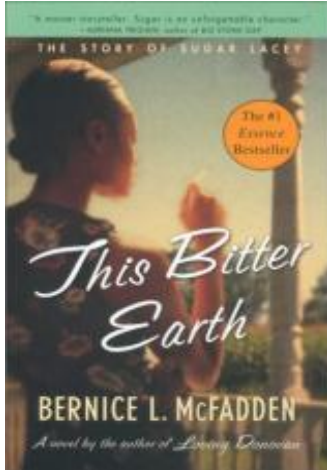


# This Bitter Earth: The Story of Sugar Lacey, a Novel

by Bernice McFadden

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## About the Book

Terry McMillan hailed **Sugar** as "one of the most compelling and thought-provoking novels I've read in years." Toni Morrison called *The Warmest December*, her second novel, "riveting...searing and expertly imagined."

**This Bitter Earth** picks up where **Sugar** left off?on the dirt road leading to Sugar's childhood home in Short Junction, Arkansas. Here, Sugar hears a shocking revelation about unrequited love, and about one man's hatred?and the black magic that has cursed generations. Her travels take Sugar to St. Louis, where the bonds of an old friendship test the limits of her courage and compassion?and the sacrifices she will make for another young woman in desperate need of a caring friend.

Filled with the lyrical language, haunting imagery, and compelling voice that imbued **Sugar** with its power and grace, **This Bitter Earth** is a novel about the inexorable power the past exerts over us and our ability to triumph over adversity and sorrow. Earthy and richly evocative, it is a testament to the ultimate triumph of the human spirit.

## Discussion Guide

1. What is the significance of the title, **This Bitter Earth**?
2. The novel is told in third person rather than first person narrative. What does this form of narration achieve? How would it have been different had Sugar or another character told the story?
3. Both Sugar and Pearl are haunted by the memory of Jude. Why is it that Jude comes to them in their dreams?

4. Why does Sugar want to die after Pearl and Joe try so hard to save her? What makes her finally decide to live?
5. Why is it that Sugar never gives up on helping Mercy? Even during those times that Sugar wants to leave, she finds she cannot. Why do you think this is?
6. When Mercy is going through withdrawal, she is depicted as numb and mute. It is also mentioned that Mercy has forgotten aspects of her past. Why is it that JJ (Joe Jr.) seems so familiar to her? What reason or reasons lie behind this connection?
7. Joe holds back from Pearl two significant secrets. What does Joe hope to achieve by not telling them to Pearl? Is he successful?
8. The first time that Sugar is in town, the citizens chastise her for her chosen lifestyle, never welcoming her to their little town. Why is it that when they hear her sing they change their prospective of her? Does the fact that they like her voice erase her past?
9. During the fourteen days of rain, when all the bodies were raising from the grave sites, why does it not bother Pearl to see her daughter's body in front of their house?
10. Grace and her mother both seek to marry men with money. How does a mother justify telling her daughter to marry for money rather than love?
11. Grace tries very hard to hide the fact that she is from the south, going so far as to lose her accent and telling others that she was born and raised in New York City. What is it that makes Grace so ashamed to admit her southern heritage?

## Author Bio

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 is the author of three novels?the national bestsellers,**Sugar**, **The Warmest December**, and the sequel to **Sugar**, entitled **This Bitter Earth** (all available in trade paperback from Plume) . Her fourth novel, **Loving Donovan**, will be available from Dutton in February 2003. Bernice was recently awarded the Zora Neale Hurston Society Award.

## Critical Praise

"At times dark and haunting but ultimately hopeful, **This Bitter Earth** is a riveting tale of courage and triumph."

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### **This Bitter Earth: The Story of Sugar Lacey, a Novel**

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**Publication Date:** December 31, 2002

**Paperback:** 288 pages

**Publisher:** Plume

**ISBN-10:** 0452283817

**ISBN-13:** 9780452283817