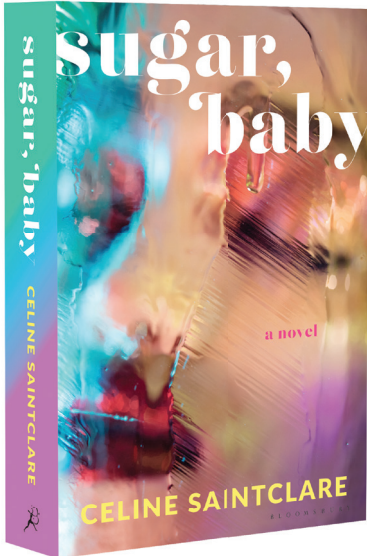


# sugar, 'baby' CELINE SAINTCLARE

## Questions for Discussion



1. The book moves through a variety of different settings, from The Wasteland, to London, to Paris, to Miami, and to Rome. What effect does each locale have on Agnes? How does she change as she moves from each place?
2. “I know I still have damage from the whole blonde-is-better, Abercrombie-&-Fitch propaganda I was subjected to as a teenager, but anyone can see that Emily is the Dreamgirl, the beautiful blonde protagonist of every American teen film I watched growing up” (8). Consider the novel’s examination of traditional beauty standards as perpetuated by popular culture and the effects they have on Agnes, as well as other characters.
3. Consider Agnes’s love of Marilyn Monroe and the other female sirens who are referenced in the book, from Lana Del Rey to Holly Golightly. What role do these starlets occupy in popular culture? Why might Agnes revere them? What do their images and iconographies suggest about female sexuality?
4. “The thing about being raised in a strict religious household is that no matter how hard you resist it, a part of you will always see things as split in two. Good versus evil. Pure versus impure. Madonna versus whore. You’re not a saint so you must be a demon” (29). Discuss how these dichotomies and others feature into the novel. How does Agnes navigate their binaries?
5. Emily implores Agnes to adopt a “brand” when sugaring: “Your aesthetic, your character. It makes it easier for the men to compute” (39). Agnes adopts a Femme Fatale role, while Emily is The Princess, and Kiki, The Bombshell. What other such archetypes can you think of that are often assigned to women and female characters, in the novel and in broader pop culture? What do you make of Emily, Agnes, and the other girls consciously assimilating to these roles when sugaring—is it empowering, subversive, or pernicious?



6. Emily describes sugaring as a “mutually beneficial relationship.” Consider her choice of words. Do you believe her description is accurate? How do power dynamics manifest in such relationships, as compared to regular relationships?
7. At one point, Emily asserts that she and her flatmates are “family” to Agnes, “basically sisters,” which makes Agnes think of her real sister, Marlana. Compare the relationship Agnes has with the flatmates to her relationship with Marlana. What role does Marlana play in the novel? What does she bring out in Agnes?
8. The novel is divided into three sections: “Ingénues”; “Stars”; and “Icons.” How do you see each of these labels applying to the events of their respective section? How does Agnes herself progress from an Ingénue to an Icon?
9. Consider the dissolution of Agnes’s relationship with Matthew. “Emily drummed this into me from the beginning—*stay in character, always stay in character, men fall in love with concepts, with ideas*—but I somehow managed to screw it up” (170). How does the fallout from the Paris trip affect the course of the rest of the novel and Agnes’s subsequent decisions?
10. Consider the dissonance between Agnes’s Instagram posts (on both her regular account and the secret sugar baby account) and her ambivalence about sugaring. What role does social media play in the novel?
11. “There’s maybe three people I really trust in the world and Jess is one of them” (187). Do you think Jess is a good friend to Agnes? Why or why not?
12. “The woman is me but sharper, wilder, darker” (207). Discuss the dream Agnes has in chapter 18. How do you think it corresponds to her transformation at that point in the novel? What does it portend?
13. How does Agnes’s relationship with religion transform throughout the course of the book? How does this relationship parallel the one between herself and her mother, Constance? How might it parallel the relationship between herself and her body?
14. In Rome, Maria asks Agnes if she celebrates her “name day” and goes on to tell the story of Saint Agnes: “I think the point is to show that purity doesn’t protect you,” says Maria (271). How does the legend of Saint Agnes correspond to Agnes’s own story?
15. What do you think ultimately makes Agnes give up sugaring and turn back to what she once called a “humdrum” life?

