

CATHERINE ADEL WEST

Author of *SAVING RUBY KING*

a novel

THE
TWO LIVES
OF SARA

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Behind the scenes

I knew I wanted to write about Sara before I finished the end of my debut novel, *Saving Ruby King*. As I composed the scene where Sara sits with a young Lebanon on the pews of Calvary Hope Christian Church, I wondered what happened to her in Memphis, Tennessee. What changed her so thoroughly in those short years that she never fully recovered? What was Sara like apart from her trauma? What made her laugh? What did she want to do with her life?

Who was Sara King?

The answers to these questions formed the beginnings of *The Two Lives of Sara*. Who knew a few lines of backstory could transform itself into a whole book?

When my curiosity finally got the better of me and I wrote a few pages, I was scared. Scared of Sara and her anger. How can someone so guarded see the world as a hopeful place? But I pressed on and in doing so found a lot to admire and love about Sara. Other times she frustrated me greatly. I also found the courage to write a story that doesn't have a happy ending. That's not always needed because, in life, that's not always what we get.

The real struggle was finding the right characters for this book, but it was enthralling to create them! Writing Jonas almost broke me. It was a crazy tightrope to walk. I needed to write someone who is good, but not unbelievably perfect. Someone with his own difficult past, yet still able to see the potential in the world and the people in it, despite the things around him sometimes proving otherwise. Someone who was strong but didn't see his strength as a weapon. Simply put, I needed to create someone human, not a fantasy. Besides, Sara didn't need a knight in shining armor. She needed a partner, and someone who wasn't afraid of her prickliness and temper but saw it for what it was—a defense mechanism to previous trauma.





Behind the scenes

I'll admit Mama Sugar and Mr. Vanellys were easier to write. I didn't have to create them from scratch like I did Jonas. Mama Sugar was essentially a collection of personalities from my grandmother and older women at my church. Mr. Vanellys represented my great-uncle and older men at my church. So many of the sayings and euphemisms I grew up with were things my granny said off the cuff. Most of what she said I found hilarious, but there was always wisdom in things she and my elders told me. My great-uncle was always a kind man, gentle and nothing really rattled him.

But there were also always secrets. And I could never breach those depths, not in my youth. And now, as a woman, I don't really think the secrets they kept, or things they kept from me, were meant to be inherently deceptive. In withholding, I believe my elders sought to protect me, and protect others from pain—theirs, others, the world's. And as foolhardy and selfless as this intention was, it was still harmful. However, I can't force anyone to become unburdened. And since a lot of those people are gone now, Mama Sugar and Mr. Vanellys are my way of keeping my grandma, my great-uncle and other elders with me. It's a loving kind of selfish.

So much research went into writing *The Two Lives of Sara*. Books, newspaper articles, Google (of course), and, most importantly, physical interviews. What was going on both nationally and locally during the early 1960s?

I spent the better part of two months figuring out exactly where in Memphis this story would take place (eventually settling on the community of Hyde Park because my city, Chicago, has a community of the same name, and I took it as a good omen).

Originally, I planned on traveling to Memphis, Tennessee, so I could get a proper feel for this phenomenal city, the people, and eat some great barbecue (just sayin'). However, a pandemic put an end to that plan, so I learned to pivot. If I couldn't roam the streets, if I couldn't interact with people face-to-face, if I had to forego delicious food, then what else was possible? I spoke with a fellow author who lived in Memphis and was put in touch with some wonderful native Memphians. And we talked, and talked, and talked some more! They shared their stories, opened parts of their lives to me and spoke about Memphis—the history of the city that didn't come in the books and articles I read. And my story was so much richer for it. I will be forever grateful to them.

Behind the scenes

Food is another big part of this book. It's expression. It's freedom. It's love. It's asking forgiveness without saying "I'm sorry." Food is an unspoken language because sometimes words aren't enough, but a good meal, one made with precision and passion, can say what we cannot.

On the advice of my super-wise editor, Laura Brown, I trimmed some of the scenes in the kitchen between Sara and Mama Sugar. In those scenes, I went through meticulous detail about food preparation, how to cook certain traditional Southern dishes, baked goods and more. It was...a lot. In hindsight, she was right. I had to shore up those scenes to keep the momentum of the book steady.

I vigorously and intentionally inundated *The Two Lives of Sara* with culture and blackness and laughter amongst some tears. Music. Literature. Fashion. Art. I want readers to discover or reacquaint themselves with the poems and books and essays of Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston and many more literary icons. Finding and referencing the right music was one of the more fun aspects of my research because it basically involved me listening to Sam Cooke, Nina Simone, The Marvelettes, Bobby Bland, Solomon Burke, The Flamingos, etc. I want readers to feel as if they're sitting around the table at The Scarlet Poplar eating delicious food while listening to amazing music.

I took such pleasure incorporating HBCUs (Spelman College, Morehouse College, Howard University, etc.) and their history into the lives and backgrounds of my characters. I'm telling a story about black people apart from the proximity of whiteness. Our lives are not defined by the racism around us. The ability to express joy and love and happiness; anger and tragedy and sadness without it being about race and racism was paramount. Black people are more than their struggle. Sara represents more than her struggle!

Most importantly, I want people to see Sara truly and fully. In the moments of happiness (however fleeting) and in her somber moments (no matter how deep), Sara is a fierce and independent woman. And yes, that sometimes means she's messy and petty and cruel, but she's also vulnerable and brave and deeply loving. She is all these things, but the characters in this book love her all the same. And I love her with my whole heart.

I hope you will love her, too.





THE TWO LIVES OF SARA

Character Profiles

Sara Michelle King

Chicago born and raised, prickly, bold and isolated, Sara now finds herself a young mother living in Memphis, Tennessee, at The Scarlet Poplar, a boardinghouse. Sara works as a cook and assistant to Mama Sugar, the owner. Running from her past, Sara is nonetheless haunted by it, but can a new city and possibly new love help her heal old wounds or will opening up lead to more tragedy?

Jonas Coulter

Jonas passionately works as a teacher at Hyde Park Elementary School. A fierce advocate of black literature, he's taken Will, Mama Sugar's grandson, under his wing and tutelage. Jonas loves photography and writing poems, and now finds himself both frustrated and intrigued by newcomer Sara. Can he push past her defenses and show her neither he nor the city is something to run from?

Mama Sugar

Though her name is Lennie Mae Blanchette, everyone knows her as Mama Sugar, the fiery yet compassionate owner of The Scarlet Poplar, a haven for black travelers during the tumultuous 1960s. Mama Sugar welcomes almost everyone into her home, but behind her kind eyes and wise words are long-kept secrets that may cause her and the people she loves to lose the things they hold dear.

Cora Morgan

Cora seems practically perfect to those around her. A graduate of Spelman College. The wife of a doctor. An impeccable dresser. The organizer of community and church events. Cora's life appears almost dreamlike. She tirelessly tries to befriend Sara with her every attempt completely rejected. Cora always presents herself as cheery, but there are things smiles hide. And Cora, though warm and helpful, keeps so much behind that perfect smile.

Character Profiles

Dr. Lawrence Morgan

From delivering babies to mending broken bones, Dr. Lawrence Morgan is the one people call in their most joyful or tragic moments. Married to Cora and best friends with Jonas, Lawrence's calm demeanor is always a welcome presence in his community. Lawrence does his best to service those around Memphis as one of the few black doctors in the city, but his diligence to preserving life sometimes comes at the cost of his own.

Will Blanchette

Will, Mama Sugar's grandson, is one of the few to almost immediately break through Sara's hardened demeanor. Lonely, smart and sensitive, Will devours the books given to him by Jonas, but sometimes worries too much is expected of him, and Will doesn't want to let anyone down, especially Sara.

Mr. Vanellys

Patient and gentle, Vanellys Blanchette is Mama Sugar's husband and one of the few who calls her "Lennie Mae." Mr. Vanellys owns the local garage and is blindly loyal and supportive of his wife. Though not overbearing, he considers himself a father figure to Sara, but she doesn't immediately return his affections and prefers to be left alone. He doesn't take it personally because all people need is time to heal and find mercy, and Mr. Vanellys knows he has plenty of both.

Amos Blanchette

Everyone's on this earth to have a good time, consequences be damned! Amos drinks, gambles and ignores his son, Will. Despite repeated warnings from Mama Sugar, Amos knows he's only one good hand away from riches. If he can just get some luck going, he can make everything up to his son, to Mama Sugar and everyone else.

Lennox Black

Known as "Lucky" to those in the fine city of Memphis, this small-time gambler and sometimes loan shark does a little bit of everything to get what he believes he deserves. Unapologetic and effortlessly cruel, Lennox has serious scores to settle with Mama Sugar and her family. But even deeper than his love of power and money, is his love for his only child, Diane. And he'll do *anything* to protect her.



THE TWO LIVES OF SARA

Book Club Questions

1. The opening line of the book is "It's the heat you never get used to." What is Sara referencing here? Why do you think the author began *The Two Lives of Sara* with this sentence?
2. *Georges* by Alexandre Dumas is repeatedly referenced throughout the novel. Have you read this book? Why do you think the author chose to have this book appear throughout the story?
3. There are many complex characters in *The Two Lives of Sara*. Who was your favorite character, and why?
4. The written word is a motif throughout the book; William and Jonas bond over literature, Jonas writes Sara poetry, William is an aspiring writer, and Sara ultimately reconnects with her past life by finally writing a letter to Violet. What purpose does the act of writing serve in the story?
5. A pivotal moment is when Lennox Black burns The Scarlet Poplar to the ground. Can you think of other instances when fire is referenced in the story? What do you think fire symbolizes in the book?
6. When Sara finally decides to open herself up and receive love, her husband is taken from her. How has the presence and subsequent loss of Jonas changed Sara?
7. The city of Memphis appears to be its own character in the novel. When Sara explains to Cora that she is leaving Memphis with Lebanon, Cora replies, "What about Lebanon? He needs to know his sister. Jonas. Us. Memphis." What role does Memphis play in *The Two Lives of Sara*?
8. Do you think Lawrence and Cora will eventually tell Sophia that she is adopted? Why or why not?
9. On the bus to Chicago, a stranger asks Sara if she's going home and she replies, "I was just there, but I can't go back." Do you think Sara will eventually return to Memphis? Why or why not?
10. Discuss the title *The Two Lives of Sara*. What do you think the two lives are referring to for Sara?
11. Sara exhibits both personal growth and regression multiple times throughout the book. Out of the two, which one do you think prevails at the end of the story? Why?

THE TWO LIVES OF SARA

Playlist

1. "Last Night" **The Mar-Keys**
2. "Plain Gold Ring" **Nina Simone**
3. "Hound Dog" **Big Mama Thornton**
4. "It's Gonna Work Out Fine" **Ike and Tina Turner**
5. "One Mint Julep" **Ray Charles**
6. "Please Mr. Postman" **The Marvelettes**
7. "Raindrops" **Dee Clark**
8. "He Needs Me" **Nina Simone**
9. "Try Me" **James Brown**
10. "Hideaway" **Freddie King**
11. "I'll Take Care of You" **Bobby Bland**
12. "Wonderful World" **Sam Cooke**
13. "The Twist" **Chubby Checker**
14. "I Only Have Eyes for You" **The Flamingos**
15. "Black Swan" **Nina Simone**
16. "Cry to Me" **Solomon Burke**
17. "Bring It On Home to Me" **Sam Cooke**

THE TWO LIVES OF SARA

Non-Dry, Super-Moist Pound Cake

Ingredients

3 cups flour
3 cups sugar
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
2 cups softened butter
6 eggs
8 ounces sour cream
2 teaspoons vanilla extract

Instructions

1. Preheat your oven to 350 degrees.
2. Coat Bundt cake pan with baking spray of your choosing.
3. Mix butter, sugar and eggs in one bowl.
4. Whisk the flour, baking soda and salt in another bowl.
5. Combine both wet and dry ingredients.
6. Add in the sour cream and vanilla extract. Mix everything until fully incorporated.
7. Bake at 350 degrees for one hour or until a toothpick inserted into the cake comes out clean.

And then you'll have a beautiful, delicious pound cake!

Mama Sugar's Pineapple Upside-Down Cake

Ingredients

Topping

½ cup unsalted butter, melted
1 cup brown sugar
(light or dark doesn't matter)
1 20 oz. can pineapple slices, drained
1 small jar maraschino cherries,
drained (remove stems)

Pineapple Cake

¾ cup unsalted butter, softened
¾ cup granulated sugar
½ cup sour cream
3 large eggs
1½ cup all-purpose flour
½ teaspoon nutmeg
1 teaspoon baking powder
¼ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
2 tablespoons rum

Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Coat cake pan with the baking spray of your choosing.
3. Drain the pineapple slices and cherries. Place the pineapple and cherries on paper towels to remove moisture.
4. Melt ½ cup of butter and pour into the cake pan.
5. Add brown sugar and spread it evenly across the pan.
6. Arrange the pineapple slices around the cake pan and place cherries in the middle of the pineapple rings.
7. In one bowl, cream together the butter and sugar by hand. Then add sour cream and eggs.
8. In another bowl, add the flour, nutmeg, baking soda, baking powder and salt. Whisk to combine.
9. Add wet mixture to dry mixture and stir until batter is uniform and no dry pockets remain.
10. Pour in the vanilla extract and rum, and mix until fully incorporated with the rest of the batter.
11. Carefully pour batter into the cake pan.
12. Bake cake for 45–50 minutes or until a toothpick inserted into the cake comes out clean.
13. Remove cake from oven and let sit for about 10–15 minutes and then invert cake onto a platter.

Get ready to enjoy some wonderful pineapple upside-down cake!

Praise for
THE TWO LIVES OF SARA

“A stunning journey of a mother’s love and sacrifice.”

—Nancy Johnson, author of *The Kindest Lie*

“In this utterly absorbing and dazzling novel.”

—Nancy Jooyoun Kim,
New York Times bestselling author of *The Last Story of Mina Lee*

**“A wondrous journey that combines
everything I adore in a story—
resilient Black women, hope, and love!”**

—Jamise Harper, co-author of *Bibliophile: Diverse Spines*

“A rich story filled with warmth, faith, and hope.”

—Maisy Card, co-author of author of *These Ghosts are Family*

“Vibrant, gut-wrenching, and hauntingly beautiful.”

—Taj McCoy, author of *Savvy Sheldon Feels Good As Hell*

**“A gripping reflection on our need to be loved
and our fear of rejection.”**

—Lane Clarke, author of *Love Times Infinity*



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