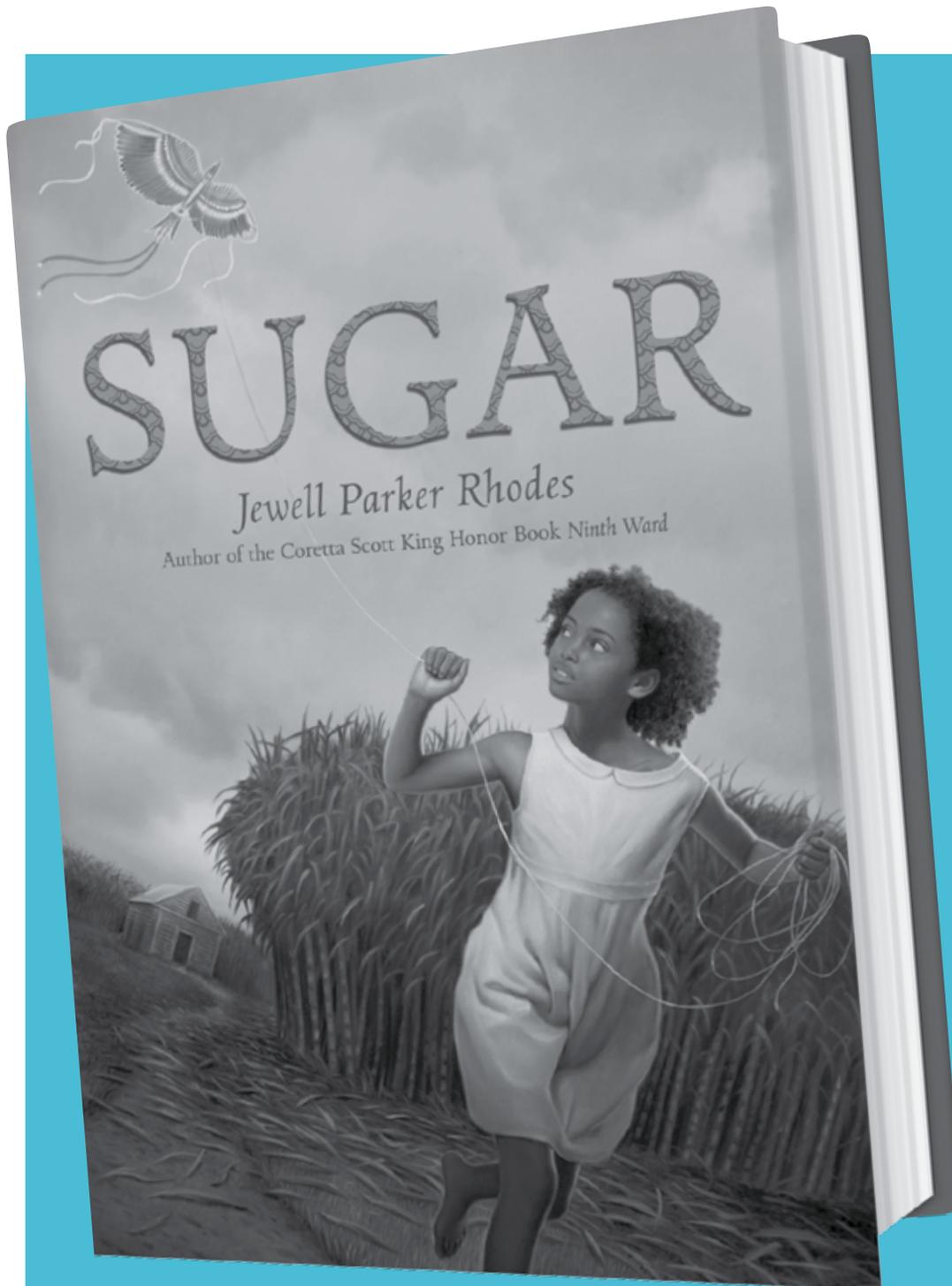


# SUGAR



## curriculum connections

- ❖ African American Heritage
- ❖ History
- ❖ Post-Abolitionist Era
- ❖ Immigration

Grades: 3 - 7

by Jewell Parker Rhodes

## READING DISCUSSION GUIDE

### I (Winter 1870)

#### River Road Plantation

Ma says, “Most folks think sugar is something in a tin cup or a china bowl. They don’t know sugar is hard.” What does she mean by this? Use evidence from the text to explain your answer.

The author vividly describes River Road Plantation through the eyes of the main character. What specific details are used to help readers picture the setting? How is it described?

After the Civil War, slavery was abolished, but the main character and her mother did not leave the plantation. Why? She also does not feel completely free. Explain why she feels this way.

#### Harvest is Done

What is special about the end of harvest? How do the field workers celebrate? Use details from the story to explain your answer.

What is Lizzie like? In what ways has she changed?

What is the main character’s name? How does she feel about her name? What evidence supports this conclusion? Why do you think the author waited until the end of the second chapter to share the name of the main character?

#### Freedom

In what ways are Billy and Sugar alike? How are they different? Use details from the chapter to support your answer.

What secret does Billy tell Sugar? Why do you think Sugar is scared?

#### Pirate Captains

While floating on the raft, Sugar says, “I think this must be what freedom is.” What does she mean? What does the word “freedom” mean to you?

When Lizzie confronts Billy, ready to kick him, Billy seems to change. Who does Sugar compare him to?

Sugar reflects on her time on the river with Billy. When they were sailing as pirates she and Billy were the same. What has happened to change her thoughts about this?

#### A Story for Ma

What was Sugar’s first big secret? Why did she have to keep this secret?

What story does Sugar tell on the second anniversary of Ma’s death? Why do you think she chose this story?

#### Left Behind

How does Mister Beale feel about stories? How does Missus Beale feel about stories? Use details from the text to support your thinking.

Where is Lizzie going? How does Sugar feel about this?

#### Okra for the Chinamen

Sugar expresses her frustration and sadness with a tantrum; she jumps and stomps, blurting out many questions and complaints. She refers to these as “How comes.” What are some of the “How come” questions she asks? Have you ever felt frustrated like Sugar? What “How comes” have you had that might help you understand Sugar’s feelings.

At the end of this chapter, Sugar says, “When the Chinamen come, I am going to give them nasty okra. What does she mean by this?”

#### In the Briar Patch

How does Sugar trick Missus Beale? How is this acting like Br’er Rabbit?

What do the adults seem worried about? How can Sugar tell they are worried? What actions help her infer what they are feeling?

#### Pebbles Punishment

Why do you think Sugar throws the pebbles? What happens after she does this? Do you think there will be consequences for her actions? What do you think might happen? Why?

## Punishment

Why does Mister Wills visit Mister Beale? What does Mister Beale do?

What does it mean to be “spunky?” Why did Mister Beale lose his spunk? Do you think he likes Sugar’s spunkiness? Explain.

What is Sugar’s punishment for breaking the window?

## Eagle Bright

Why does Sugar want to climb 15 trees? How did she arrive at this number?

How does Sugar feel when she sees the eagle? Why do you think she feels this way?

## II (Planting 1871)

### Knee-How

How does Mister Beale react when he sees the Chinese men in chains? How does Mister Wills react? How does The Overseer react? Compare and contrast their reactions.

Mister Beale won’t let Sugar visit the Chinese men. How do Mister Beale’s views about Sugar’s friendship with Billy and his feelings about the Chinese men begin to change the way Sugar sees him?

Why does Sugar go to the middle of the yard? What stops her from going all the way over to the other porch?

### Planting Day

How does Sugar’s planting song make a difference?

Why does Sugar say, “They don’t know the Chinamen are kind?” Use specific examples to explain your answer.

## 糖

Mister Beale says, “Folks get along best with folks like them.” Sugar thinks this is cowardly and goes against what the Reverend has always preached. Why do you think Mister Beale feels this way? How does he explain his opinion?

What does Sugar learn from her visit with the Chinese men?

Why does Beau have Sugar name the cat? What does she

name him? Why do you think she chose this name?

## Tricksters

How do the River Road folks and the Chinese men show their unity? Why does Sugar compare their actions in the cane field to Br’er Rabbit?

Why does Missus Beale say Sugar threw her in the briar patch? What does she mean by this? What is the result of Sugar’s actions?

After hearing about how Beau, Master Liu, and Mister Zheng came to America, Mister Beale says, “You’re the wave, Sugar.” What does he mean? Use examples from the book to explain your answer.

## Another Secret

Why does Sugar tell Billy they can’t be friends anymore? Who is she trying to protect? What reasons does she give Billy?

## Chinese New Year

In several places in the story, Sugar mentions some of her mother’s last words: Do, See, Feel. At the gravesite, though, she adds that her mother’s final word was “Survive.” Why do you think this final word was so important? In what ways has Sugar followed her mother’s advice? Give specific examples to support your answer.

## Fever

How does Sugar get past the adults blocking the door in order to see Billy?

Why do you think Missus Wills changes her mind and lets Sugar stay?

How does Billy get treated when he is sick? How is Sugar usually treated when she is sick?

What specific events lead to Sugar and Billy becoming friends once more? How does Billy’s mother react?

## III (Harvest 1871)

### Billy Cuts Cane

What does the phrase, “times are changing” mean? What does Billy do that supports this idea?

Why is Sugar afraid of Overseer Tom?

### Kite Day

How does Sugar feel about the kite? What does Billy do? What do the adults think about the kite? Use examples from the story to support your answers.

After Beau, Sugar, and Billy walk away from Overseer Tom, Billy is disappointed in Beau. Why did Beau make the decision to walk away? Do you think this was a cowardly or wise decision?

### Family

How would you define family? In what ways have Sugar and Beau become like family? Use specific examples from the story and from your definition to support your answer.

What gift does Beau give to Sugar? Why is this so meaningful?

### Almost Done

What is Billy like as an Overseer? In what ways is he like the former Overseer? In what ways is he different?

### Happy?

When Billy and Sugar share the dragon, they are able to make it seem like it is alive. Sugar says, “Me and Billy make the best dragon.” What does she mean by this?

When Sugar goes to look for Jade, what does she discover? Describe what happens.

### Bad Dreams

When Sugar opens her eyes, she thinks Billy looks much older. Billy tells her his Pa said, “The world is upside down.” What did he mean? What is Billy’s Pa struggling to understand?

### Changes

What changes are coming to River Road Plantation? What does this mean for Billy? What might it mean for Sugar?

### The Wave

After Beau tells Sugar he will be leaving, he gives her some advice. He says, “You, fix.” How does Sugar “fix” things? How will this change life for Mister and Missus Beale?

### Spring

The last two words in the story are “I’m free.” Why does Sugar finally feel free? Explain.

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

### Building Background

#### *Tri-Color Thought Maps*

Before reading, write the word “sugar” on chart paper. Then, ask students to list words they associate with it. Write these words using one color of marker. Next, show a short video or read informational text about how sugar cane is harvested and processed. The American Sugar Cane League has a video called “Raising Cane” that can be downloaded from their website: <http://www.amscl.org/RaisingCane.htm>. It talks about the history of sugar cane production in Louisiana and then shows some more modern methods. (It will be important for students to understand that it may present information that is designed to persuade people to think of sugar in a positive light.) After watching the video or reading other informational text, use a new color of marker, and have students add to the list. Finally, after reading *Sugar*, choose one last color to write down words the main character, Sugar, would associate with it. Look at the thought map and discuss how students’ understandings and associations with the word “sugar” changed over time. As a culminating activity, ask students to write about how sugar can mean different things to different people.

#### *What We Knew/ What We Know Chart*

If students are unfamiliar with United States history, then they may have a difficult time understanding the events in *Sugar*. Begin by asking students to share what they know about the Civil War and slavery. Then, talk about what happened after slavery was abolished. Create a chart to show what students know about post-Civil War reconstruction. Then, depending on what students know already, read aloud picture books and informational text to help students understand the time period. After each reading, have students add to the chart about what they know. After reading *Sugar*, they may want to return to the chart to talk about how this information helped them have a better understanding about Sugar’s life, and the lives of her parents.

## Comprehension Connection

### *Connections Journal: Comparing and Contrasting*

Making connections to other books, life experiences, and the world around us is how good readers make meaning. It is also how Sugar makes sense of her life and the stories she is told by her Chinese friends. She uses these connections both to explain things to others and to more deeply understand new information. Help students see how Sugar uses the known to make sense of the unknown by having them keep a “Connections Journal.” As students read, have them record how Sugar uses comparing and contrasting to help her explain or understand new experiences. Have students record how she compares physical characteristics (such as pigtailed and eyelashes), places (rivers), food, stories, animals, experiences, and personalities. Ask students to record examples that fit into each of these categories as they read. They should record page numbers, briefly tell what Sugar is comparing and contrasting, and be prepared to share evidence from the story to support their thoughts. After reading, have students share their “Connections Journals.” How did Sugar’s use of comparing and contrasting help her understand new ideas or experiences? How does comparing and contrasting help readers understand new information?

### *Connecting Texts*

As students read, they may find the characters remind them of characters from other stories. Although the setting may be different or the problem in the story may not be the same, seeing how characters in different stories are the same or different can help deepen students’ appreciation for literature in general, and their understanding of this story in particular. Have students think about other books they have read, choose one or two characters from that book, and then compare and contrast them with one or two characters in *Sugar*. If students have read *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*, by Grace Lin, they may want to compare Missus Beale with Ma or Mister Beale with Ba. As an extension, challenge students to think about WHY the characters they chose may be the same or different. Are they facing similar problems? Do they have similar backgrounds? How do life experiences affect the characters?

### *Zodiac Connections*

The stories told by Beau refer to the animals of the Chinese zodiac. Each of the animals is associated with a particular year and specific personality traits. Sugar is a monkey, Beau is an ox, Master Liu and Mister Beale are horses, the Reverend is an ox, and Missus Thornton is a rooster. Have students research the personality traits associated with each of these animals, and then explain why or why not the animal’s personality is a good match for the character in the book. They should use evidence from the story to support their answers. After they have completed their research, have them research the personality of the zodiac animal for their own birth year. Do they think it is a good match for them? Why or why not? Again, ask them to share specific examples that support their opinion.

## Summarizing

### *Setting: Design a Quiz and Web Page Literacy*

The characters and the setting are equally developed in this book. In fact, the setting functions almost like a character because it is so rich and integral to moving the story forward. Help students explore the importance of the setting in *Sugar* and expose them to different types of text by exploring the website about the plantation that inspired the creation of fictional River Road Plantation. The author, Jewell Parker Rhodes, shares in her author’s note that River Road Plantation is modeled after Laura Plantation in Louisiana. Have students visit [www.lauraplantation.com](http://www.lauraplantation.com) to see pictures of the plantation and read about what life was like on the sugar plantation. Briefly review how to use website features to locate information, and then ask students to work together to create a short quiz to test their classmates. Guide them by suggesting their questions should require classmates to use the maps, photographs, diagrams, and written information. Remind students that their questions should be a combination of “right there” questions, those that can be answered by finding a specific answer on the website, as well as inferential questions that require deeper thought. Depending on students’ prior experience with this type of activity, they may require more or less guidance. Once each group has written their quiz (and created an answer key) students can test their classmates.

After all of the quizzes have been taken, connect back to *Sugar* by talking about what students learned about plantation life and how this information can help them more fully understand the book. Reflect as a class on the experience of creating a quiz, gathering information from a website, and the skills involved in creating and answering higher-level questions.

### *Chapter Title Summaries*

Unlike many books, the chapters in *Sugar* are not numbered. Instead, they are given titles that seem to make the most sense only after reading the chapter. After reading the book, give students a list of the chapter titles. Assign each student several chapter titles to explain in the context of the whole book. They should explain the chapter title by providing evidence from the book and discuss how it relates to the rest of the story. Students can provide their explanations in writing, and then present them orally. Discuss as a class how the chapters connect to one another and how the chapter titles help tell the story too.

## Vocabulary

### *Vocabulary Show and Tell*

*Sugar* is full of rich vocabulary words, especially nouns that introduce students to new kinds of food or cultural practices. Help students develop a deeper understanding of the book and the meaning of the words by having them participate in a vocabulary show and tell. Begin with a list of nouns that students may not know. This may include: pralines, okra, machete, cane, and ginger. Have students guess the meaning of each word. Then, after the pre-test, ask groups of students to choose several words, look up their meanings, and bring in examples, pictures, sound bites, or video clips to help them teach their words. For example, students may want to bring in okra for the class to try or pralines to sample, others may want to bring in a picture of an unfamiliar object or the object itself. Have each group present their vocabulary show and tell. After all groups have presented, let students see for themselves what they learned by giving them the same vocabulary quiz. Discuss how experiencing the words helped them learn the meanings. How does having these experiences help them better understand the book?

### *Comparative Trickster Tales*

Br'er Rabbit stories, known as Compair Lapin tales in Louisiana, are trickster tales that are thought to be adaptations of West African folktales. These stories were an important part of *Sugar*'s world, but trickster tales are found in many cultures. Ask students to read trickster tales from different cultures, and then ask them to compare and contrast the tales. They may want to explore trickster tales from Africa, Native American Culture, South America, or Asia. What type of animals are the tricksters? Do they have similar character traits? Are the events in the story similar? What is the same? What is different? Ask students to extend their thinking by talking about why some characters may be quite similar to one another.

### *Figurative Language*

There are wonderful examples of similes and metaphors throughout *Sugar*. Some describe the sun as “a wobbly egg yolk in the sky” or talk about “sugar teeth” that cut and bite. *Sugar* makes sense of her world through comparisons, and Jewell Parker Rhodes uses similes and metaphors to help readers visualize how *Sugar* sees her world. Have students collect examples of similes and metaphors as they read the book, and then create a bulletin board to display the examples they find.

## SCIENCE

### *Backyard Astronomy*

Billy talks to *Sugar* about his plans to leave the plantation and sail across the ocean, using the stars as a map. Introduce students to basic astronomy by asking them to learn about the stars in the night sky. Have them learn about the stars that should be visible in their area at this time of year and draw a map of the stars. Discuss how sailors used the stars to navigate. As an alternative, some students may want to use an app such as “Star Walk” to help them locate the stars found in the sky above.

## SOCIAL STUDIES

### *Celebrating the New Year Around the World*

*Sugar* has the opportunity to learn about the special foods and traditions associated with Chinese New Year because

she celebrates with her friends. While some people celebrate the lunar New Year (China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Mongolia) there are New Year celebrations in many cultures that may occur according to a different calendar. Have students work with a partner to select a country or culture and research when and how they celebrate. Have students share a few traditions or special foods associated with that celebration. Students may be surprised to learn about lunisolar new year celebrations if they choose to research Burmese, Thai, or Cambodian traditions.

### *Geography Scavenger Hunt*

When Beau shows Sugar a map, the world suddenly seems like a new place full of endless possibilities. Give students the opportunity to discover more about the places mentioned in *Sugar* with a scavenger hunt map activity. Using either a world map or an online map, such as Google Maps, have students locate: Africa, New Orleans, Louisiana, St. Louis, Louisiana, Waipahu, Hawaii, British Guiana (present day Guyana), Chengdu, China, Chang Jiang River (Yangtze River), and the Mississippi River. Working with a partner, have students discuss the importance of each of these places in *Sugar*. Have each set of partners choose one of the places to learn more about, and ask them to share what they learn with the class.

## ART

### *Making a Chinese Finger Trap*

The Chinese finger trap is a treasured gift that Billy shares with Sugar. It is a woven tube that tightens as it is pulled in opposite directions and loosens when both ends are pushed inward. They are often very colorful, and can be purchased as novelties from party supply stores. Students may want to try making their own, though. In its simplest form, the Chinese finger trap can be made with 4 strips of stiff paper (2 different colors) or ribbon (about 12 inches long), a thick marker or dowel, and clear tape. Begin by attaching the ends of two of the strips of paper or ribbon (two different colors) to one another in order to form a 90 degree angle. Follow this same procedure for the two remaining strips or ribbons. Then attach the taped ends of the paper strips to the top of the marker. The pointed, taped ends should be pointing up toward the top of the marker, and the loose

ends should trail downward. Attach each pair of ribbons to opposite sides of the marker. Then, braid the strips into a lattice pattern. This can be an excellent partner activity, since it helps to have one person braid, while the other person holds the marker, turning it as it is braided. Braid the strips all the way down the marker. Gently detach the tube from the marker, then cut the strips and secure the ends with clear tape. This is a simple Chinese finger trap. Students may want to experiment with different color schemes, materials, or number of strips used to make their own designs.

### *Kite Design Activity*

When Beau brings out a kite, it is exciting for Sugar and Billy, but also for the adults in the story. Kites come in many shapes, sizes, and colors. Ask students to study different kite designs, and then apply what they learned by designing their own. They could design it on paper, or try to make a kite that really flies. Students may want to explore more about kites by visiting the website for the Weifang Kite Museum in China. The website ([www.wfkite.com](http://www.wfkite.com)) has information about the history of kites, as well as photographs of the exhibit halls.

## MUSIC

### *Working Music*

Music helped Sugar and the other cane workers keep pace while cutting sugar cane. Using music or a beat to keep time or to keep a large group of people synchronized is not unique to field workers. Drummers have been used in armies to help soldiers stay together, the coxswain often uses a beat to keep rowers in time, and dancers use the beat of music to stay together. Introduce students to the idea that music plays an important role in keeping people synchronized, by completing a simple experiment. First, ask students to perform a repetitive task, such as a “squat thrust.” (Ask them to bend over, touch the ground, extend both of their feet behind them, pull both of their feet back in, and then jump up.) Have students keep track of how many they can do in a minute. Next, rhythmically chant the directions, step by step, and ask students to complete each action in time to your voice. Practice this a few times, ask students to count how many they complete, and record

the results. They should all have the same number if they are staying with you. Next, increase the pace of the chanting, and see how the number increases for the whole class. Finally, slow the pace of the chanting and record these results. Ask students to discuss this experiment and apply it to their understanding of the events in *Sugar*. As an extension, ask students to research other ways music has been or is used to help people complete a task.

## CHARACTER EDUCATION

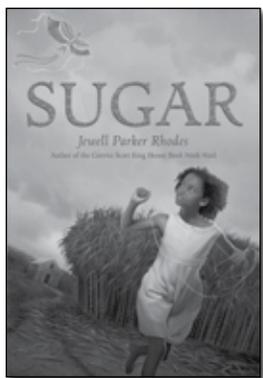
### *Building Bridges*

*Sugar* crosses the yard to meet the Chinese men. This is a first step toward bridging differences. Soon, both communities are sharing stories, language, food, and traditions. Students can take the first step toward bridging differences too. Ask each student to make it a goal to reach out to someone who is different from them. There may be obvious differences, such as someone who speaks another language, comes from another country, or practices another religion, but they might also consider someone who is from a different generation or even slightly older or younger. Have students plan an activity, outing, or visit with the person (or family) they chose for this bridging activity. Have students ask questions and practice active listening during their visit. Then, ask students to write a reflection about their experience. How did this small experiment change their perspective? What did they learn? What might they change if they did this again? If students are comfortable, they could share their thoughts with the class.

## about the author



Jewell Parker Rhodes is the Piper Endowed Chair and founding artistic director of the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing at Arizona State University. She has won numerous awards for her books for children and adults. *Ninth Ward*, her first novel for young readers, was named a Coretta Scott King Honor Book, a Notable Book for a Global Society, and a *Today* show Al's Book Club for Kids selection. You can visit Jewell online at [JewellParkerRhodes.com](http://JewellParkerRhodes.com)



### About *Sugar*

ISBN: 9780316043052

Ten-year-old Sugar lives on the River Road sugar plantation along the banks of the Mississippi. Slavery is over, but laboring in the fields all day doesn't make her feel very free. Thankfully, Sugar has a knack for finding her own fun, especially when she joins forces with forbidden friend Billy, the white plantation owner's son.

### Also by Jewell Parker Rhodes



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