



## The Sugar House

*Antonia White*

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## **The Sugar House** Antonia White

The year is 1920. Clara Batchelor, the heroine of *The Lost Traveller*, is now an actress with a touring repertory company and is passionately in love with the wholly unsuitable Stephen Tye. When Stephen betrays her, Clara betrays herself by agreeing to marry Archie, the fiancee she discarded four years before. A friendship but not a love match, the marriage is a desperate attempt by Clara to rekindle the safety of childhood. But neither of them are children any more and their dream sugar house begins to dissolve.

*The Sugar House* is the second in the trilogy sequel to *Frost in May*, which began with *The Lost Traveller* and continues in *Beyond the Glass*. Although each is a complete novel in itself, together they form a brilliant portrait of a young girl's journey to adulthood.

## **The Sugar House Details**

Date : Published August 3rd 2006 by Virago (first published 1952)

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Author : Antonia White

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## From Reader Review The Sugar House for online ebook

### Ali says

The Sugar House is the third novel in Antonia White's Frost in May quartet. At the end of The Lost Traveller, Clara Batchelor had just freed herself from an impetuous engagement to Archie Hughes – Follett. As The Sugar House opens, Clara is about to embark on a tour of a play with a theatrical company. She is head over heels in love with Stephen Tye, a fellow actor who will be touring with a different company.

“At last the whole company stood yawning and shivering on York platform. In the murk under the sooty roof on which rain drummed steadily, it was hard to realise that it was half past four on a summer morning. Everyone was longing for a cup of tea, but no buffet was open at that hour”

As Clara endures a series of drab provincial boarding houses, sharing a room with the irrepressible Maidie, a fellow catholic, she dreams of meeting up with Stephen, determined to marry him even if, as she suspects, he makes her unhappy in the process. Clara receives a letter from her father, informing her that Archie is back from South America and wants to see her, she prepares herself to see the man she jilted four years earlier, the man who can't but help remind her of the tragedy that had preceded it.

Following their awkward meeting in Birmingham, Archie, cynical and drinking too much, hooks up with Clara's theatre company. Archie is often childlike, his enthusiasms and sulks extreme and often unrealistic. He still loves Clara, declaring he would still marry her – on any terms. Despite being twenty-three – Archie's family money is held in trust for another two years – he is hopeless at managing his allowance and is constantly looking around for a quick money making scheme. When Stephen betrays Clara, reeling and hurt Clara marries Archie, much to her father's delight and her mother's dismay. Taking a tiny house they can ill afford in a Chelsea populated with artists, Clara is desperate to find the safety she once knew in childhood and to win her father's approval. Archie and Clara are like children playing at house. Clara comes to think of her dream house as a sugar house, like that of Hansel and Gretel. However they are not children anymore, and the realities of their situation and the world they live in starts to turn to a nightmare.

“Now!’ said Archie, in a tone of immense satisfaction. She opened her eyes. Spread out on the floor were two magnificent Bassett-Lowke model engines; a tail of coaches for each; stations, signal boxes and a glittering heap of rails. She could do nothing but stare open mouthed.  
‘Thought that would knock you flat,’ said Archie, grinning with pleasure.”

Judging by other reviews I have seen of this book, The Sugar House may be the least popular of the four novels. Having loved The Lost Traveller so much when I read it a couple of months ago – I was looking forward to this novel, and for me it didn't disappoint, although The Lost Traveller is still my favourite to date. I loved the first half of the novel, with Clara touring with the theatrical company. Antonia White brilliantly depicts the life of provincial boarding houses and the actors that made their living by going from town to town on late night trains. There is much less emphasis on Catholicism in this novel, although Clara's religion still helps guide her through her life and marriage. As this novel ends Clara is still only twenty-two – and I long to know what life holds in store for her.

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### Danielle Lentz says

Wonderfully sad story-I loved it. I want to see what is going to happen to Clara in the next book!

### Anne says

This was an intense read, and not as charming as *The Lost Traveller*, but I really enjoyed it thoroughly. Looking forward to the next one!

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### Alessandra Gad says

i had an incredibly hard time rating this book. while it had it's lines, i couldn't help but sometimes feel it was too dated—or simply a waste of time to have read (yet short enough to have read quite easily). also, the particular way she used catholicism to drive the plot (which i know is extremely autobiographical) was tiring to me.

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### Zen Cho says

See review for *Beyond the Glass*!

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### Canadian Reader says

*The Sugar House*, the third novel in Antonia White's *Frost in May* quartet, picks up four years after the events of *The Lost Traveller*. It can be read as a stand-alone; however, the context the previous book provides is useful. Now 21, Clara, having recently completed training at The Garrick School of Drama, is working as an actor with a travelling theatre troupe. She believes herself to be in love with an older actor whom she met at drama school, a WWI vet with a drinking problem, and she seems unaware (or unwilling to accept) that Stephen Tye mainly likes the reflection of himself he sees in her naïve, young eyes. When the relationship with Stephen—if you can call it that—does not work out, Clara allows dissolute oddball Archie Hughes-Follett back into her life. She had been on the brink of marrying him four years earlier, but her mother had been able to talk some sense into her. Now, Clara makes the fatal error she'd earlier avoided. With the urging and approval of two ardent Catholics—her father and Lady Theresa Follett, whose ten-year-old son accidentally died when Clara was his governess—Clara marries Archie.

Archie is from an extremely wealthy old Catholic family, and he is to come into his full inheritance at the age of 25. Until that time, his father's will dictates he is under the guardianship of his uncle. Archie believes this is due to pure malice on the part of his father, whose hatred of Archie prevails beyond the grave, but everyone else is aware that Archie is an impractical misfit, full of dreams and unworkable schemes. For now, he receives an allowance, most of which he fritters away on drink, for Archie has an even more serious problem with booze than Stephen. Though I know that social awareness of alcoholism (and addiction in general) in the time White is depicting (the 1920s) was not what it is today, I was still slightly taken aback that two adults who ought to have known better would've encouraged Clara in making such a marriage.

Most of *The Sugar House* tells the story of Clara's—and Archie's, too—entrapment in an absolutely disastrous marriage. Although Clara experiences a certain sexual revulsion towards Archie, she hadn't quite bargained for him falling into bed completely sloshed on their wedding night (and many nights thereafter)

either. The fact is: Archie is asexual—something noted very early in the book by Clara's fellow actor and roommate, Maidie. (In fact, the marriage is never consummated.) At one point, Clara's domineering and controlling father blames her for Archie's problems, which makes for some pretty enraging reading. Otherwise, the overbearing *pater familias*, Claude, plays a far less significant role in this book than the one that preceded it.

While I enjoyed this novel, I found that it lacked the narrative momentum of the other two I've read in the quartet. The reader knows from the start that Clara's marriage doesn't stand a chance; therefore, its unravelling is not overly compelling. Characterization, however, remains a real strength.

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### **Llyn says**

Interesting in the same way that Knausgaard is today. A life as a novel. Well done.

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### **Gabi Coatsworth says**

Fairfield

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### **Sherah says**

This was the most harshly reviewed of all White's books by contemporary critics. However, its portrayal of despair and impending madness is as poignant as her other more highly praised book, *Beyond the Glass*.

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### **Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says**

There may be some consensus that this is a low point of the four.\* And I'll go along with that. Some theater culture stuff followed by some unfortunate marriage stuff which involves some useless business dealings and some alcoholism. Not nice stuff, but also not terribly engaging stuff. One almost misses the religion saturated earlier stuff. Be that as it may. A whole is a whole, no matter what you think of a weak link. Looking forward to the fourth novel in which a loss of sanity plays some role.

Genre note :: this sequence (of 1+3, see asterisks below) is auto-fiction, and should probably be included in those lists which include KOK, Ferrante, Richardson, et al.

\* "the four" ; I still don't quite know how to tag this set of four novels. The most precise way is to say that there is a novel, *Frost in May*, followed by a trilogy=sequel whose three novels almost stand on their own but clearly gain as a whole. So, in short, it's a 1+3.

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## Roman Clodia says

This is the 3rd book in White's Frost in May Quartet (Frost in May, The Lost Traveller, Beyond the Glass), and is perhaps the most painful and claustrophobic to read. Clara, now a travelling actress, falls painfully in love and after her inevitable betrayal, retreats to the safety of marriage with Archie. She likes him but feels nothing more, and the burden of his adoration push her closer to the edge. The sheer stifling claustrophobia of her life is so palpable in this novel that I kept wanting to go outside! And you just know that something dreadful is going to happen in the next book...

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## Solveig says

I did not enjoy this book as much as Frost in May and The lost traveller. Never a great fan of books where I find characters a bit annoying. I will however without a doubt read the next and final in the series.

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## Paul says

3.5 stars rounded up

This is the third in a series of four which started with Frost in May and continues the story of Clara Batchelor, based loosely on White's own life. As the series goes on comparisons for me are drawn with Richardson's Pilgrimage series. Whilst White is good, Richardson is exceptional and this one feels a little like a link novel to the final part of the series.

The first part of the novel sees Clara acting with a travelling theatrical troupe and in love with another thespian in a different travelling troupe. There is a portrayal of the life of a travelling actor in a variety of digs. Archie turns up again and when her lover betrays her she agrees to marry Archie.

Clara and Archie Hughes Follett marry with Catholic pomp and move into a very small house in Chelsea, The Sugar House, because it reminds Clara of the one in Hansel and Gretel. Archie isn't the person he was previously:

"Archie had certainly changed. She remembered him as an odd creature, clumsy and kind, who did not fit into the grown-up world. Often he had sulked like a schoolboy but never had she seen him in this mood of aggressive bitterness. Tonight he had hardly smiled: in repose, his face was set in lines of angry discontent. She felt a pang of guilt."

White weaves a claustrophobic picture of the marriage, Archie is clearly an alcoholic and they run into serious debt very quickly. The marriage is also unconsummated; an important detail if you are a Catholic. This is an account of White's marriage to Tom Hopkinson and of her attempts to start to write.

The second part of the book is a description of the disintegration of the marriage as Archie's alcoholism becomes a factor as does their increasing debts.

I can see why this is seen as the weakest of the four books; it continued the story, I felt it lacked a little focus; but the descriptions of the life of a travelling actor was interesting.

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## Diane says

"The Sugar House" finds Clara, in 1920, as a young actress with her first repertory company and madly infatuated with older

actor Stephen Tye. She has grown up a lot in the down to earth theatrical digs, an occupation she found in much the same way she had decided to be a governess - because someone suggested she'd be good at it!!

A very compelling description of just what it must have been like in a 2nd (or even 3rd) rate company touring the midlands in the early 20s, Clara having lived a privileged though claustrophobic lifestyle now has to sleep sardine style in trains, scramble for awful accommodation, hope that the mysterious bites that keep her awake at night are fleas and not bed bugs as well as laughing at lewd jokes she doesn't understand and wondering at Peter and Trevor's very close friendship.

It's clear that Stephen is only interested in the main chance and that Clara is a pleasant interlude who, unfortunately, reminds Stephen of his lost youth etc. His actions propel Clara back into the arms of Archie. "The Lost Traveller" ended with Clara leaving Archie at the alter but a few years have past and Archie now has serious emotional problems - he's a very heavy drinker whose life revolves around opening times!! Marrying Archie is a disastrous mistake but foolish Clara lives for the times when at tea with her parents, she now believes she has her father's unconditional love. Once again her mother, who in modern times comes across as such a sympathetic character, just can't break the stronghold set up by Claude and Clara.

Maidie hits the nail on the head by saying that she feels "Starchy" (her nickname for Archie) has never really lived life - and four months after the wedding Clara's hysterical behaviour when an amorous painter tries to seduce her has him putting two and two together!! In an effort to please everyone around her Clara has wrecked her life - being a Catholic, divorce seems out of the question although Marcus (the painter) cautions as long as she doesn't take a lover an annulment should be no trouble - even if it takes years!! One of my favourite parts happens at the end.

Archie who by following Clara around falls into acting as well but unlike Clara is a huge success. Clara is now looking at unemployment while Archie has scored a featured part in the new musical "Sally" - he sings her his part from "The Church 'Round the Corner", cueing while Maidie sings her part, it seems so obvious from that little scene that the author has definitely been around theatre people. "The Sugar House" is the name for the almost impracticable doll's house that Clara falls in love with. They are right royally conned by their shifty landlords and even forced to employ a char who charges them the earth and doesn't even bother to come on the appointed days. Clara is right - they are like Hansel and Gretel living in a sugar house and their non existent coping skills with finances bring down the transparent walls.

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