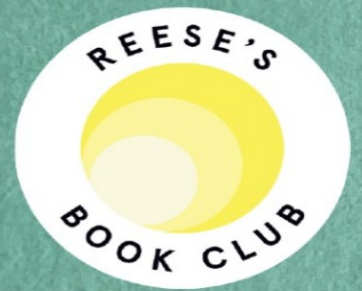


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CHERYL STRAYED

Bestselling author of **WILD**



tiny
beautiful
things



ADVICE *from* DEAR SUGAR

WITH NEW MATERIAL

Praise for DEAR SUGAR

“These pieces are nothing short of dynamite, the kind of remarkable, revelatory storytelling that makes young people want to become writers in the first place. Over here at the *Salon* offices, we’re reading the columns with boxes of tissue and raised fists of solidarity, shaking our heads with awe and amusement.”

—Sarah Hepola, *Salon*

“Sugar doesn’t coddle her readers—she believes them, and hears the stories inside the story they think they want to tell. She manages astonishing levels of empathy without dissolving into sentiment, and sees problems before the reader can. Sugar doesn’t promise to make anyone feel good, only that she understands a question well enough to answer it.”

—Sasha Frere-Jones, *The New Yorker* critic

“Powerful and soulful, *Tiny Beautiful Things* is destined to become a classic of the form, the sort of book readers will carry around in purses and backpacks during difficult times as a token or talisman because of the radiant wisdom and depth within.”

—Aimee Bender, author of *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*

“Sugar is turning the advice column on its head.”

—Jessica Francis Kane, author of *The Report*

“Sugar’s columns are easily the most beautiful thing I’ve read all year. They should be taught in schools and put on little slips of paper and dropped from airplanes, for all to read.”—Meakin Armstrong, *Guernica* editor

“Dear Sugar will save your soul. I belong to the Church of Sugar.”

—Samantha Dunn, author of *Failing Paris*

“Charming, idiosyncratic, luminous, profane.... [Sugar] is remaking a genre that has existed, in more or less the same form, since well before Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* first put a face on the figure in 1933.... Her version of tough love ranges from hip-older-sister-loving to governess-stern. Sugar shines out amid the sea of fakeness.”

—Ruth Franklin, *The New Republic*

Cheryl Strayed

TINY BEAUTIFUL THINGS

Cheryl Strayed is the author of the number-one *New York Times* bestseller *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, which has sold more than four million copies worldwide and was made into an Oscar-nominated major motion picture. *Tiny Beautiful Things* was adapted as a play that has been staged in theaters across the country and as a Hulu television series airing in 2023. Cheryl is also the author of *Brave Enough*, which brings together more than one hundred of her inspiring quotes, and the debut novel *Torch*. She has hosted two hit podcasts, *Sugar Calling* and *Dear Sugars*. She lives in Portland, Oregon.

Cheryl Strayed is available for select speaking engagements. To inquire about a possible appearance, please contact the Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau at speakers@penguinrandomhouse.com or visit www.prhspeakers.com.

ALSO BY CHERYL STRAYED

Brave Enough

Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail

Torch

TINY
BEAUTIFUL
THINGS

Advice from Dear Sugar



Cheryl Strayed



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*For Stephen Elliott and Isaac Fitzgerald
And for all the people who wrote to me*

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PREFACE TO THE VINTAGE BOOKS TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION (2022)



I've long believed literature's greatest superpower is how it makes us feel less alone. Across generations, cultures, classes, races, genders, and every other divide, stories and sentences can make us think, *Oh yes, me too. That is precisely how it feels to love and lose and triumph and try again.* The only thing I ever hope to do as a writer is to make people feel less alone, to make them feel more human, to make them feel what I have felt so many times as a reader: stories have the power to save us by illuminating the most profoundly beautiful and terrible things about our existence.

That I've had the opportunity to do so very directly in my work as Dear Sugar was a lucky surprise. When I took on the unpaid gig of writing the column anonymously for *The Rumpus* in early 2010, I'd recently completed the first draft of my second book, *Wild*. I said yes to writing the Dear Sugar column because I thought it would be fun. It didn't take long to see I'd been wrong. It *was* fun, but also so much more than that. This work that began as a lark quickly took on real meaning. It became something I gave everything to.

And, eventually, it also became a book—which, over this past decade, has inspired a podcast, a play, and a television show, as well as this expanded tenth-anniversary edition that includes six new columns.

All along the way I've never forgotten that none of it would've been possible without all the people who wrote to me. In an age when there is much discussion about the disconnection that comes from the Internet, the pandemic, the fallout of too much of life lived on screens, Dear Sugar has always been, quite simply, about one person writing a letter to another. In pain and courage and confusion and clarity. In love and fear and faith. Dear Sugar has always been about connecting. It has always been about believing that when we dare to tell the truth about who we are and what we want and how exactly we're afraid or sad or lost or uncertain that transformation is

possible, that light can be found, that courage and compassion can be mustered.

To be part of that has been among the greatest privileges of my life.

Cheryl Strayed

November 2022

INTRODUCTION

|||||

I Was Sugar Once: Lessons in Radical Empathy

Long ago, before there was a Sugar, there was Stephen Elliott. He had this idea for a website, which sounds pretty awful, I admit, except that his idea was really to build an online community around literature, called *The Rumpus*. Being a writer himself, and therefore impoverished, Stephen prevailed upon his likewise impoverished writer friends to help.

And we, his friends, all said yes, because we love Stephen and because (if I may speak for the group) we were all desperate for a noble-seeming distraction. My contribution was an advice column, which I suggested we call Dear Sugar Butt, after the endearment Stephen and I had taken to using in our email correspondence. I will not belabor the goofy homoeroticism that would lead to such an endearment. It will be enough to note that Dear Sugar Butt was shortened, mercifully, to Dear Sugar.

Handing yourself a job as an advice columnist is a pretty arrogant thing to do, which is par for my particular course. But I justified it by supposing that I could create a different sort of advice column, both irreverent and brutally honest. The design flaw was that I conceived of Sugar as a persona, a woman with a troubled past and a slightly reckless tongue. And while there were moments when she felt real to me, when I could feel myself locking into the pain of my correspondents, more often I faked it, making do with wit where my heart failed me. After a year of dashing off columns, I quit.

And that might have been the end of Sugar had I not, around this time, come across a nonfiction piece by Cheryl Strayed. I knew Cheryl as the author of a gorgeous and wrenching novel called *Torch*. But reading this

essay, a searing recollection of infidelity and mourning, filled me with a tingling hunch. I wrote to ask if she wanted to take over as Sugar.

It was an insane request. Like me, Cheryl had two small kids at home, a mountain of debt, and no regular academic gig. The last thing she needed was an online advice column for which she would be paid nothing. Of course, I did have an ace in the hole: Cheryl had written the one and only fan letter I'd received as Sugar.

* * *

The column that launched Sugar as a phenomenon was written in response to what would have been, for anyone else, a throwaway letter. *Dear Sugar*, wrote a presumably young man. *WTF, WTF, WTF? I'm asking this question as it applies to everything every day.* Cheryl's reply began as follows:

Dear WTF,

My father's father made me jack him off when I was three and four and five. I wasn't any good at it. My hands were too small and I couldn't get the rhythm right and I didn't understand what I was doing. I only knew I didn't want to do it. Knew that it made me feel miserable and anxious in a way so sickeningly particular that I can feel that same particular sickness rising this very minute in my throat.

It was an absolutely unprecedented moment. Advice columnists, after all, adhere to an unspoken code: focus on the letter writer, dispense the necessary bromides, make it all seem bearable. Disclosing your own sexual assault is not part of the code.

But Cheryl wasn't just trying to shock some callow kid into greater compassion. She was announcing the nature of her mission as Sugar. Inexplicable sorrows await all of us. That was her essential point. Life isn't some narcissistic game you play online. It all matters—every sin, every regret, every affliction. As proof, she offered an account of her own struggle

to reckon with a cruelty she'd absorbed before she was old enough even to understand it. *Ask better questions, sweet pea*, she concluded, with great gentleness. *The fuck is your life. Answer it.*

Like a lot of folks, I read the piece with tears in my eyes—which is how one reads Sugar. This wasn't some pro forma kibitzer, sifting through a stack of modern anxieties. She was a real human being laying herself bare, fearlessly, that we might come to understand the nature of our own predicaments.

* * *

I happen to believe that America is dying of loneliness, that we, as a people, have bought into the false dream of convenience, and turned away from a deep engagement with our internal lives—those fountains of inconvenient feeling—and toward the frantic enticements of what our friends in the Greed Business call the Free Market.

We're hurtling through time and space and information faster and faster, seeking that network connection. But at the same time we're falling away from our families and our neighbors and ourselves. We ego-surf and update our status and brush up on which celebrities are ruining themselves, and how. But the cure won't stick.

And this, I think, is why Sugar has become so important to so many people. Because she's offering something almost unheard of in our culture: radical empathy. People come to her in real pain and she ministers to them, by telling stories about her own life, the particular ways in which she's felt thwarted and lost, and how she got found again. She is able to transmute the raw material of the self-help aisle into genuine literature.

I think here of the response she offered a man wrecked by his son's death, who asked her how he might become human again. "The strange and painful truth is that I'm a better person because I lost my mom young," she wrote. "When you say you experience my writing as sacred what you are touching is the divine place within me that is my mother. Sugar is the temple I built in my obliterated place."

In this sense, *Tiny Beautiful Things* can be read as a kind of ad hoc memoir. But it's a memoir with an agenda. With great patience, and eloquence, she assures her readers that within the chaos of our shame and disappointment and rage there is meaning, and within that meaning is the possibility of rescue.

* * *

It is striking that Sugar was born on the Internet, that shadow world to which people apply with a need to escape from their true selves, to remake their identities on the cheap, to shine their buttons in public. The Internet can be many things, of course. Too often it's a cesspool of distraction, a place where we indulge in the modern sport of snark and schadenfreude, building the case for our own bigotries, where we mock and thereby dismiss the suffering of others.

But the lurking dream of all us online lurkers is that we might someday confess to our own suffering, that we might find someone who will *listen* to us, who will not turn away in the face of our ugliest revelations. That someone is Sugar.

There's nothing you can tell Sugar that doesn't strike her as beautiful and human. Which is why men and women write to her about intimacies they can't share with anyone else, unspeakable urges, insoluble grief. She understands that attention is the first and final act of love, and that the ultimate dwindling resource in the human arrangement isn't cheap oil or potable water or even common sense, but mercy.

With each of her pieces—I hesitate to use the word "columns," which seems to cheapen what she does—she performs the same miraculous act: she absorbs our stories. She lets them inhabit her, and thinks about the stories they evoke from her own life. She also recognizes that there's another, truer story beneath the one we generally offer the world, the stuff we can't or won't see, the evasions and delusions, the places where we're simply stuck. Sugar may be tender, but she doesn't sugarcoat. In this sense,

she offers what we wish every mother would: enough compassion to make us feel safe within our broken need, and enough wisdom to hold on to hope.

I ask you, brave people: Who else is doing this work today? Not the fame merchants of Hollywood, with their explosions and shiny tits, not the for-profit demagogues of the Fourth Estate, and not the politicians who murder morals on behalf of the corporate sponsors and call it policy.

Sugar does this work. It's what makes her an artist.

* * *

Cheryl Strayed was an artist long before she became Sugar. Those of you fortunate enough to have read Cheryl's novel, *Torch*, or her memoir, *Wild*, already know this.

It's been tricky for Cheryl to negotiate the business of leading two lives: one as an anonymous columnist with a huge cult following, and the other as writer and mother and wife trying to make ends meet. Critics and Internet snipes will have a good time fulminating on this Cheryl/Sugar dichotomy. But the name on the byline is never what matters to readers. What matters to them are the words on the page.

Tiny Beautiful Things will endure as a piece of literary art, as will Cheryl's other books, because they do the essential work of literary art: they make us more human than we were before. We need books, and Cheryl's books in particular, because we are all, in the private kingdom of our hearts, desperate for the company of a wise, true friend. Someone who isn't embarrassed by our emotions, or her own, who recognizes that life is short and that all we have to offer, in the end, is love.

Radical empathy isn't the fashion of the day. Late-model capitalism works overtime to keep us focused on the product, not the people. That's why we need Sugar so badly right now. You'll see what I mean when you turn the page.

Run toward the darkness, sweet peas, and shine.

—Steve Almond

PART ONE

IT WAS ALWAYS ONLY US

What is this book?

It's a selection of Dear Sugar columns. Many were originally published on TheRumpus.net. Others appear here for the first time. The letters in this book were emailed to Sugar via an anonymous form on *The Rumpus* or mailed directly to Sugar's email address. Most people who sent me letters didn't know I was Cheryl Strayed and likewise most of the letter writers were entirely anonymous to me. This book is a collection of intimate exchanges between strangers.

Did you change the letters before publishing them?

In some cases I lightly edited the letters for length and/or clarity, but most appear exactly as they were written by people who felt moved to write to me.

What sorts of letters do you answer?

All sorts. Some are about romance and love, others are about grief and loss, and others still about money or family troubles. My criteria for selecting letters to answer in the Dear Sugar column are highly subjective: I'll answer anything, so long as it interests or challenges or touches me.

What sort of advice do you give?

The best I can think of.