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1. AT A GLANCE – THE MOST IMPORTANT POINTS

This study guide to Sindiwe Magona's novel *Mother to Mother* is designed to provide an easy-to-use overview of the structure, context, themes and characters of the novel. Here is a quick rundown of the most important points.

Part 2 takes a brief look at **Sindiwe Magona and her career.**

⇒ p. 9

→ Magona was **born in 1943** in the village of Gungululu in South Africa. She has written a multi-volume autobiography, novels, short stories, poetry and biographies.

⇒ p. 11

→ *Mother to Mother* is a semi-autobiographical fictionalised account of the **murder of a white american girl** (Amy Biehl) and describes the era and aftermath of apartheid in South Africa.

Part 3 offers analyses and interpretations of the novel.

***Mother to Mother* – Origins and sources:**

⇒ p. 31

The novel is set in places where Magona lived and during a time when she was also living there. It draws heavily on her own life and experience, and looks at the lives of Xhosa people in the townships of South Africa.

Summaries:

⇒ p. 37

The narrator is a mother of three called Mandisa. Her eldest son Mxolisi has been involved with a group of student protesters in the township of Guguletu, near Cape Town. In August 1993 he gets caught up in a mob which assaults and kills a white girl in a car.

The novel is in the form of Mandisa's address directly to the dead girl's mother. She tells the story of her life and how she had

2.1 Biography

2. SINDIWE MAGONA: LIFE & WORKS

2.1 Biography

YEAR	PLACE	EVENT	AGE
1943	Gungululu (village in what is now called the Eastern Cape, formerly Transkei), South Africa	27 August: Sindiwe Magona is born, eldest of eight children	
1962	Gugulethu	She works for years as a junior school teacher.	19
1966	Gugulethu	Already the mother of two children, Magona is now pregnant with a third when her husband leaves the family.	23
1981	Gugulethu	Completes a graduate degree (her third academic degree) from Columbia University (USA) via post.	38
1980s–2000s	New York, USA	Magona moves with her family to New York to work at the United Nations.	Late 30s–60
1993	New York	Awarded an Honorary Degree in Humane Letters by Hartwick College in Oneonta (New York State, USA).	50
Up to 1994	New York	Works for the UN, presenting anti-apartheid radio programmes.	51
1990	Cape Town, South Africa	Publication of the first part of her autobiography <i>To My Children's Children</i> .	47
1998	Cape Town	<i>Mother to Mother</i> was published.	55
2003	New York/Cape Town	Magona has been working for the UN's Public Information Department before retiring in 2003 and moving back to South Africa.	60



Sindiwe Magona (*1943)
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AGENCY

2.2 Contemporary Background

2.2 Contemporary Background

- *Mother to Mother* is set in the Western Cape province of South Africa and covers a period from the early 1970s up until 1993.
- The book describes the era and aftermath of apartheid in South Africa and is the real world backdrop to the murder of Amy Biehl in August 1993.

SUMMARY

Mother to Mother is set in the **Western Cape province** of South Africa and covers a period from **the early 1970s up until 1993**. The story is largely situated in a black township near Cape Town called **Guguletu**. Other locations include the squatters' settlement of Blouvillei, where Mandisa grew up, and her ancestral village Gugululu, where her grandmother still lives. All the African characters in the novel belong to the Xhosa people, and we see many examples of tribal customs and traditions.

The book describes the era and aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, a period of extreme **racial oppression, state neglect, police brutality and political turmoil and violence**. This is the real world backdrop to **the murder of Amy Biehl in August 1993** (see p. 32); the novel is a fictionalised account of the killing.

Apartheid system
in South Africa

Geography

Guguletu

The majority of the book – and the entirety of its present-day time frame, in 1993 – is set in the township of Guguletu, which is 15 kilometres outside Cape Town, in the Western Cape province of South Africa. Today Guguletu has a population of over 98,000, and **more**

2.2 Contemporary Background

Education and politics

“Boycotts, strikes and indifference have plagued the schools in the last two decades. Our children have paid the price.”

(Mandisa, p. 72)



Poster from 1985 protesting and demanding reform of the education system.⁵

The combination of inadequate education, social neglect and bad politics (at once irresponsible, oppressive politics proved to be explosive in the immediate aftermath of the apartheid regime. **The protests and explosions of violence** which Sindiwe Magona talks about in *Mother to Mother* were shocking to many – to locals and neighbours as well as outsiders and foreign observers.

The apartheid system influenced education as well as every other aspect of life in South Africa. From the early 1980s, black schools were legally required to conduct the majority of their lessons in English and Afrikaans, with the native languages only allowed to be used for subjects like art and music. The government's goal was to make sure that all black people in South Africa knew how to communicate with white people in “white” languages. There were widespread and at times violent protests against this, as many students didn't want to speak Afrikaans. There were strikes and boycotts of schools throughout the townships.

5 http://www.saha.org.za/imagesofdefiance/education_charter_campaign_transvaal_launch_forward_to_a_peoples_education.htm

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

SUMMARY

Sindiwe Magona has written a two-volume autobiography (the first part of which was her first published work), a biography of Archbishop Ndungane, as well as short story collections, poetry and novels. She has also written more than 100 books for children – we won't be looking at these in this study guide, however.

Novels

The novels

PUBLICATION DATE	TITLE
1998	<i>Mother to Mother</i>
2006	<i>The Best Meal Ever</i>
2008	<i>Beauty's Gift</i>

Mother to Mother was Magona's first published novel, and it remains her most famous and successful work. ***The Best Meal Ever*** is set in a South African township and is about a girl having to look after her younger siblings. ***Beauty's Gift*** is a novel about a group of women and how they deal with the HIV/AIDS-related death of one of their circle of friends.

Short stories

Short story collections

PUBLICATION DATE	TITLE
1991	<i>Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night</i>
1996	<i>Push-push! And Other Stories</i>

3.2 Summaries

8 (p. 115)

This lengthy chapter focuses on the past, specifically Mandisa's life from the confirmation of her pregnancy to the birth of her third child, Siziwe. In covering this period of her life the reader is also shown more of Mxolisi and his development as a child.

A week after the village midwife had confirmed her pregnancy, Mandisa returns to Cape Town with her mother, where she finds that she has become “a prisoner in my home” (p. 117). Her mother even takes time off work to be able to monitor her all day long and doesn't go to church on Sunday. Her father ignores her completely. She is of course forbidden to have any contact with China, and her mother tells her that her father and uncles will be going to see China's father to discuss “payment of damages” (p. 119).

Back in Cape
Town

Mandisa has just sent a secret message to China when he comes to the house to see her. When he sees that she is pregnant and she tries to talk to him, he is cold and angry and refuses to accept that he is the father. He tells her he wants to go to boarding school to get a better education, and seems more interested in his future plans than in the pregnancy. She is furious at his self-involvement and refusal to accept responsibility, and she chases him out of the house.

Sad meeting with
China

Six months into her pregnancy, Mandisa is taken by her uncles to China's house to discuss the situation with China's family. China's relatives are surprised by the news that Mandisa is still technically a virgin, and although they don't refuse to accept responsibility, they say that they will get back in touch once they have talked within the clan.

3.4 Characters

joint operation involving the police and the military, and **forced to relocate to the township of Guguletu**, near Cape Town.

She marks 1972 as the year which “definitely delivered more than I had bargained for” (p. 88). Mandisa became pregnant in a freak accident – she remained technically a virgin – involving her boyfriend China. She was 15 at the time (in 1973), and the child was Mxolisi. She and China were **forced by their families to marry**, but China ran away, leaving her alone with a baby (p. 143). Mandisa was to have two more children by two different fathers.

Present day: 1993

By the year 1993 (which in *Mother to Mother* is the present day), Mandisa is living with her family in Guguletu and is working as a maid for a white family in Cape Town. Her husband Dwadwa, father of her youngest child, her daughter Siziwe, also works all day. She is unable to look after her own children as much as she would like, and only sees them briefly in the mornings and in the evenings.

She learns of the disturbances surrounding the killing of the white girl from her white employer, Mrs Nelson, and when she is back in Guguletu **her home is raided by the police**, who are looking for Mxolisi.

Mxolisi had been involved with youth gangs and anti-apartheid activist groups, and Mandisa is led by a series of activists to the place where her son is hiding from the police. He admits to having been involved in the white girl’s death.

Hopes and dreams

Mandisa is **an ambitious, bright and strong-willed woman** whose expectations, hopes and dreams have been suffocated by the world around her. She intended to study when she was a girl, but her unwanted pregnancy at age 15 made this impossible. Two further pregnancies kept her in a state of perpetual motherhood, where she had to constantly work to keep her family going, and had less and less time and energy for herself.

3.5 Themes

TEXT	REFERENCE (PP.)	NOTES
That is what the white woman I work for calls me: Mandy. [...] Says she can't say any of our native names because of the clicks. My name is Mandisa. MA-NDI-SA. Do you see any click in that?	20	Here is an example of the petty and constant racism of a segregated society. Mrs Nelson refuses to call Mandisa by her real name, giving her instead a kind of pet name. This is humiliating and patronising: It puts Mandisa on the level of a child or an animal, and indicates that Mrs Nelson doesn't see her or want to treat her as an adult woman and an individual worthy of respect.
Fear. Shame. Anger.	113	An unwanted teenage pregnancy, an unmarried girl: Mandisa's initial reactions to learning that she is pregnant are overwhelmingly negative. She sees that in the society in which she lives she will lose everything – not just the opportunities she wanted to study, to make a better life for herself as a black person in a white-dominated, racist society, but also the rejection and humiliation she will experience in a community in which women are subject to very strict expectations.
My whole world had simply collapsed and was no more.	114	
I shrunk; because he was.	142	
How could it possibly be my fault that China had taken himself wherever it was he had gone? But his father was not quite done with me. [...] "I leave you here with my son," he said. "And now, I find him gone. He is not here. But you are still here, with your son [...]."	143	Mandisa feels that China's family, in particular his father, blame her for China having left. In a patriarchal society like this, the women are subject to much stricter rules governing their behaviour. The situation is common: When things go wrong, the women are the first to be blamed.

3.5 Themes

thoughts about her own life and on the history of her country as a whole.

In addition there is the complex and painful push-and-pull relationship Mandisa has with her son Mxolisi. She loves him and resents him, celebrates him and hates him for having destroyed her life; she grieves for what she lost when he was born; she expresses desperation at the unfairness of having become pregnant in such a freak accident, and she feels guilt and grief for what happens in 1993.

TEXT	REFERENCE (PP.)	NOTES
Our parents believed that education would free us from the slavery that was their lot as uneducated labourers.	88	Mandisa and her brother are supposed to do well at school, which they do – and then go on to educate themselves further in order to improve their position, earn more money, and generally speaking have a better life than their parents. Both children want to pursue this goal. Unfortunately Mandisa becomes pregnant with Mxolisi when she is 15 and all hopes of her bettering herself disappear. Even once she is married to China and living with his family, there is no chance for her to go back to school, as the men in China's family don't think it would proper for a young mother.
Look what the children have done! [...] The one who is dead. Poor child. And her parents. I feel for her parents. For the parents of this poor child, killed by our children. My heart sorrows for them. For her mother.	73	At this point Mandisa knows nothing of Mxolisi's involvement. She only knows that a white girl has been killed in Guguletu. She expresses her sympathy for the grief of the girl's parents, and there is also an indication of guilt ("our children").