



Granulated white sugar and sugar cubes are seen in this picture illustration. Our co-authors say sugar is one of those edible commodities - like coffee and cocoa - that carries power, symbolism and status, shaping not just diets, but also human migration and global politics. Picture: REUTERS

Sugar matters That's why we wrote a novel about it

WHEN did you last have a sugar-sweetened drink?

A recent report released in Australia urgently calls for the government to take action on sugarsweetened beverages to tackle the country's obesity and diabetes crisis. And yet, while Australians on average consume 1.3 times the recommended daily intake of sugar, research in the *Lancet* Central Region Health found that Fijians in the Central Division consume on average three times the ideal amount. Half of this intake is through drinking sweetened beverages including soft drinks and tea with added sugar. While sugar does not directly cause diabetes, consuming lots of sugar sweetened beverages can lead to gaining weight, which increases the likelihood we will develop diabetes and causes complications for those already living with the disease. Around a third of Fijians have type 2 diabetes, and this country has the highest rate of premature deaths from diabetes-related complications in the world. In Fiji's overwhelmed health system, three limbs are amputated because of diabetes every day, which is particularly alarming in this population of under a million people. Many of the amputees do not even know they have diabetes when they present to the hospital with an infection. Along with other nutrition-related diseases such as high blood pressure and heart disease, this crisis of obesity and diabetes means the current life expectancy in Fiji is estimated at a low of 67-69 years. This is over ten years less than the average Australian life expectancy - except for First Nations Australians who also experience high rates of diabetes and have a lower life expectancy.

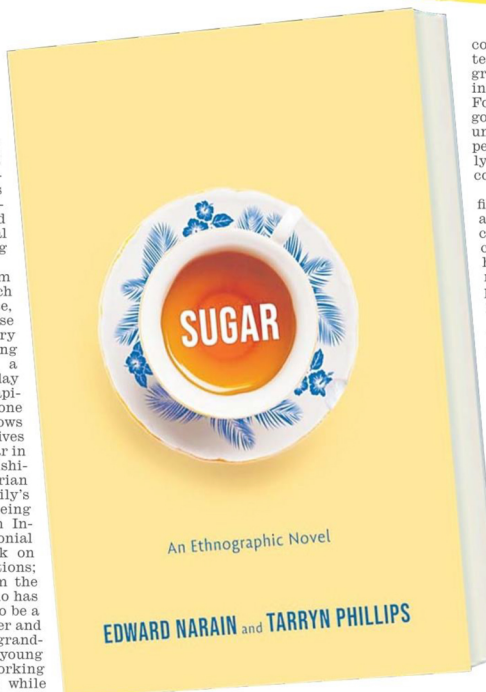
Fiji introduced an excise tax on sugar sweetened beverages in 2018. There is insufficient data to tell whether this has made a difference. Nevertheless, there remain many structural barriers to nutritional change both in Australia and in Fiji. This is what convinced us to write *Sugar*, a murder mystery that explores Fiji's historical, cultural, and economic relationship with this product. As co-authors, we were struck by the layers of significance that sugar has, from the country's colonial past to the contemporary diabetes crisis wreaking havoc in the lives of Fiji's poorest.

Much of the public discourse around diabetes suggests that it is about lifestyle "choices", and that Fijian diabetics are to blame for not making healthier decisions, or not taking care of themselves after

they are diagnosed. This veils the ways in which colonially entrenched inequalities and transnational capitalism continue to shape the import, sale and marketing of highly processed foods in Fiji, limit Fijians' access to nutritious fruits and vegetables, and influence cultural food practices, individual taste, and family eating habits.

Based on long term ethnographic research and lived experience, *Sugar* explores these themes through a story that is both a compelling murder mystery and a vivid portrait of everyday life in Suva, Fiji's capital. As a tropical cyclone looms, the story follows three strangers whose lives are entangled with sugar in very different ways: Rishika, an amateur historian grappling with her family's traumatic history of being forcibly migrated from India by the British colonial administration to work on Fiji's sugarcane plantations; Isikeli, a teenager from the informal settlement who has given up on his dream to be a professional rugby player and cares for his diabetic grandmother; and Hannah, a young Australian volunteer working on a diabetes project while leading a heady life of house parties and weekend getaways with other expats and volunteers. When a brutal murder causes their worlds to collide, this unlikely trio must work together to find answers in the cyclone-ravaged city. In doing so, they uncover some uncomfortable truths about development, its darker side, and their role within it.

Crucially, our book explores some of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which Australia has been complicit in perpetuating these inequalities. Australian compa-



Based on a combination of long-term research and lived experience, this compelling ethnographic novel reveals the hidden ways global inequality and violence play out in everyday lives. Picture: SUPPLIED

consequences. Meanwhile, many well-intentioned young Australian students and graduates travel to Fiji for volunteering, internships and exchange opportunities. For them, it is a good experience and looks good on their CV. And yet this kind of "voluntourism" has been critiqued for often perpetuating power imbalances, and rarely making a substantive difference to host communities in the long term.

We chose the medium of ethnographic fiction to trace this sugary history. It allows us the creative license to embed critical research insights in the lives of characters - who are flawed, endearing, human and relatable - in a way that will resonate with people emotionally and prompt readers to reflect on their own place in this system.

The taxi hurtles down the hill toward the small city centre with its handful of mid-rise buildings and a scattering of lights twinkling on the harbour. A lit-up billboard looms beside the road advertising the upcoming Fiji versus New Zealand rugby game. Handsome brown rugby players with their arms crossed look down at Hannah. "Island Cola: Taste the win," it says.

Sugar is one of those edible commodities - like coffee and cocoa - that carries power, symbolism and status, shaping not just diets, but also human migration and global politics. It provides a lens through which to examine how broader processes of structural violence become embodied in invisible, everyday ways. Something to think about, as you sip your next fizzy drink.

Sugar: An Ethnographic Novel is published globally through UTP and available at the Fiji Museum Sitoa. It is being launched by Allan Mua Ilingworth and hosted by Ginger Kitchen at the Fiji Museum Verandah - 5.30pm, Thursday, July 4th.

■ EDWARD NARAIN is an Indo-Fijian political analyst, researcher and author based in Melbourne.

■ TARRYN PHILLIPS is a medical anthropologist, writer and Associate Professor in Crime, Justice and Legal Studies at La Trobe University.

The views expressed in this article are not necessarily the views of this newspaper.