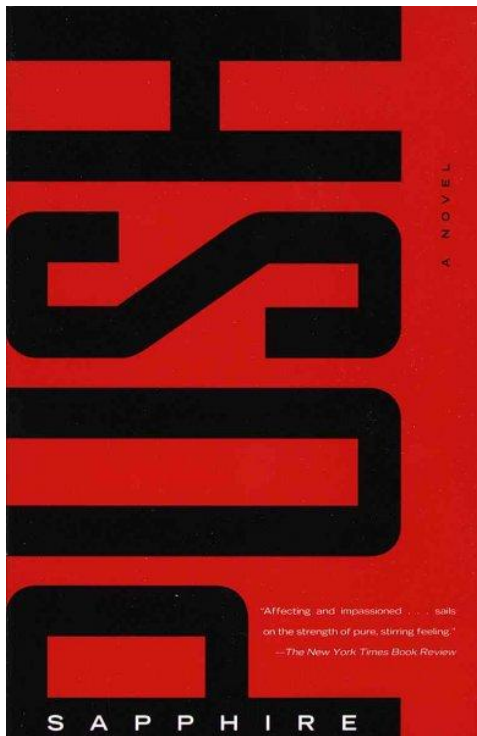


## About the Book...



Precious Jones, an illiterate sixteen-year-old has up until now been invisible: invisible to the father who rapes her and the mother who batters her and to the authorities who dismiss her as just one more of Harlem's casualties. But when Precious, pregnant with a second child by her father, meets a determined and highly radical teacher, we follow her on a journey of education and enlightenment as Precious learns not only how to write about her life, but how to make it her own for the first time.

## About the Author...



*Push* is Sapphire's first novel. She was born in 1950 and grew up on army bases in California, Pennsylvania, and Texas. She graduated from City College in New York, received an MFA from Brooklyn College, and taught reading and writing to teenagers and adults in Harlem and the Bronx for eight years. Sapphire is a performance poet and the author of *American Dreams*. She lives in New York City.

## From *Books & Authors*

Born Ramona Lofton, Sapphire grew up in a middle-class family in California. Both of her parents were in the military, and the family moved frequently within the United States and Europe during Sapphire's early childhood. When Sapphire was thirteen, they settled in Los Angeles, and Sapphire's mother left the family. After leaving high school and connecting with the black power movement and later with drugs, Sapphire adopted her new name. She told D.T. Max of *Harper's Bazaar*: "It was a New Age thing. I had read somewhere that the rays emitted by sapphires can change the molecular structure of other gemstones--and that was exactly what I wanted to do with my life." She studied chemistry, and then dance, at San Francisco City College before moving to New York in 1977.

Sapphire worked at a variety of odd jobs while starting to experiment with poetry and performance art in Greenwich Village in the early 1980s. But the decade was a difficult one for the writer. She reconnected with her mother in the late 1970s, but her mother died in June of 1986. That same year, Sapphire's brother, who was then homeless and suffered from schizophrenia, was murdered in a Los Angeles park. She also began to have memories of incest. She confronted her father with her suspicions that he had sexually abused her, but he denied it. Sapphire's sister, however, confirmed the events Sapphire remembered. Other friends died during the next three years, marking an intensely dark period in her life, but she later recalled that coming through that time was actually freeing. In *Harper's Bazaar* the author noted: "A shade opened up, and suddenly my life was rescued for me."

Sapphire's first major book, a collection of prose and poems, is called *American Dreams*. The writing is confrontational and the images the author presents are graphic. The work's opening poems chronicle a black middle-class family headed by an abusive father and passive mother, and continues with poems for Sapphire's deceased brother and that explore the ugly stereotypes of blacks and Africans in popular culture.

In her prose, Sapphire draws on her own childhood experiences as well as her time living and working with children in Harlem throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Talking to Mark Marvel in *Interview*, Sapphire said: "I saw a complete generation grow up while I was living in Harlem. I moved into a building in '83 and moved out in '93." Sapphire continued: "I saw girls who had their first babies at fourteen. I listened to someone I had gone over a little primer with talking about their friend who got shot." The author added: "I saw the way things get repeated." Discussing social themes implicit in *Push*, Sapphire told Gordon that while "there was an ... agenda-ridden part of me that wanted to talk about the welfare system," her primary aim was "to tell a really pure, unadulterated story about a girl." "I didn't want to preach," she continued, "but I did want to show

what was happening." Sapphire added: "I don't think there's anything wrong with that--that's history."

## Author Q&A

Listen to an interview with Sapphire by NPR's *All Things Considered!* The interview [5 min 9 sec] is called "Sapphire's Story: How 'Push' Became 'Precious'" and is available to play online at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120176695>

## Awards

*Push* won the Book of the Month Club's Stephen Crane Award for First Fiction, the Black Caucus of the American Library Association's First Novelist Award, and, in Great Britain, The Mind Book of the Year Award. *Push* was named by the *Village Voice* and *Time Out New York* as one of the top ten books of 1996. *Push* was nominated for an NAACP Image Award in the category of Outstanding Literary Work of Fiction.

## Reviews

### *Publishers' Weekly*

With this much anticipated first novel, told from the point of view of an illiterate, brutalized Harlem teenager, Sapphire (*American Dreams*), a writer affiliated with the Nuyorican poets, charts the psychic damage of the most ghettoized of inner-city inhabitants. Obese, dark-skinned, HIV-positive, bullied by her sexually abusive mother, Clareece, Precious Jones is, at the novel's outset, pregnant for the second time with her father's child. (Precious had her first daughter at 12, named Little Mongo, "short for Mongoloid Down Sinder, which is what she is; sometimes what I feel I is. I feel so stupid sometimes. So ugly, worth nuffin.") Referred to a pilot program by an unusually solicitous principal, Precious comes under the experimental pedagogy of a lesbian miracle worker named, implausibly enough, Blue Rain. Under her angelic mentorship, Precious, who has never before experienced real nurturing, learns to voice her long suppressed feelings in a journal. As her language skills improve, she finds sustenance in writing poetry, in friendships and in support groups—one for "insect" survivors and one for HIV-positive teens. It is here that Sapphire falters, as her slim and harrowing novel, with its references to Harriet Tubman, Langston Hughes and *The Color Purple* (a parallel the author hints at again and again), becomes a conventional, albeit dark and unresolved, allegory about redemption. The ending, composed of excerpts from the journals of Precious's classmates, lends heightened realism and a wider scope to the narrative, but also gives it a quality of incompleteness. Sapphire has created a remarkable heroine in Precious, whose first-person street talk is by

turns blisteringly savvy, rawly lyrical, hilariously pig-headed and wrenchingly vulnerable. Yet that voice begs to be heard in a larger novel of more depth and complexity.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

Poet Sapphire's slim first novel draws on her experience as a performance artist and literacy teacher: she tells her sad but sentimentally uplifting story in the voice of a 17-year-old illiterate from Harlem, and the result is more sociological (in the Ricki Lake mold) than literary. Clareece Precious Jones is a study in abuse. Continually raped by her father since the age of five, she's now pregnant for the second time with his baby, the first having been born with Down's syndrome when Precious was 12. Meantime, her mother is no help, calling the overweight girl a "fat cunt bucket slut," beating her at will, and satisfying her own bizarre sexual needs from her daughter. Schools have also all failed her; teachers find her "uncooperative," and she considers her last a "retarded hoe." Finally, Precious enrolls in a Harlem alternative school where she begins the tough climb out of illiteracy. No longer dreaming impossible ideas about rappers and movie star fame, she joins six others in a basic-skills class run by Blue Rain, a self-proclaimed lesbian who isn't afraid to editorialize in class. In short order, Precious discovers the joys of the alphabet and journal-writing, the pleasures of owning books and composing poetry. Although she raises herself to a seventh-grade level by narrative's end, she also finds out she's HIV positive. All of this is transcribed in a phonetic spelling that's supposed to reflect Precious's actual abilities, but seems condescending--and woefully unauthentic--since Sapphire often loses control of the voice. The homage to *The Color Purple* ("One thing I say about Farrakhan and Alice Walker they help me like being black") highlights Sapphire's commercial aspirations, as well as, by contrast, her technical inadequacies. A maudlin (at times pornographic) advertisement for the power of literacy and the value of recovery groups.

### *Library Journal*

Performance poet Sapphire unflinchingly probes the consciousness of an all-too-real teenager from a severely abusive household. *Push* opens to find Precious, fat, unloved, illiterate, deeply confused, routinely raped by her father, and physically and emotionally molested by her mother, enduring her second incestuous pregnancy. Crawling from self-hatred and violent loneliness to determination and, occasionally, hope, Precious enters a pre-GED program, learns to read, bears her second child, and breaks from her parents, all under the inspiration of Blue Rain, her steadfastly encouraging and apparently tireless new teacher. Precious's name loses its irony but soon takes on a dark new meaning as she learns the extent of her father's abuse. Written as an internal monolog and journal entries by Precious, with her rudimentary spelling skills and abrupt transitions, *Push* is compelling, graphic, and occasionally facile but disturbing and not soon forgotten.

### *Booklist*

Sapphire returns to the themes of incest and child abuse that were a part of her daring *American Dreams* (1984) but with a starkness that is truly horrifying and unforgettable, perhaps because of the horror. Precious Jones lives in a world worse than the one inhabited by the character Celie in *The Color Purple*. She, too, is a victim of abuse. At 16, Precious finds herself pregnant again by her father, untrained, uneducated, and unable to care for herself or her baby. She is astute enough to know that there is a better way to live but is clueless as to how to get there. Fortunately for Precious, she meets a black teacher, Ms. Blue Rain, who *pushes* her to change with encouragement and inspiration. Ms. Rain challenges Precious to learn to read and write and improve her way of life. In her literacy class, Miss Rain instructs all of her students to maintain a journal; readers experience Precious' transformation in her journal entries. Her development and growth are astonishing in the short period of time we share her writings. *Push* is an intense work, both heartbreaking and frightening.

### **Literary Criticism**

Title: A Cruel World, Endless Until a Teacher Steps In

Author(s): Michiko Kakutani

Publication Details: The New York Times. (June 14, 1996):

Source: ***Contemporary Literary Criticism***. Ed. Deborah A. Stanley. Vol. 99. Detroit: Gale Research, 1997. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Book review

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Full Text:

[(review date 14 June 1996) In the following review, Kakutani suggests that an ideological subtext diminishes the emotional impact of the narrative in *Push*, which makes it "disturbing, affecting and manipulative all at the same time."]

What do you get if you borrow the notion of an idiosyncratic teen-age narrator from J. D. Salinger 's *Catcher in the Rye* and mix it up with the feminist sentimentality and anger of Alice Walker 's *Color Purple*? The answer is ***Push***, a much-talked-about first novel by a poet named Sapphire, a novel that manages to be disturbing, affecting and manipulative all at the same time.

Like Celie in *The Color Purple*, the heroine of ***Push*** is the survivor of a brutal childhood and youth; at the age of 16, Claireece or "Precious" as she calls herself, has already had two children by the man she knows as her father. Her mother has not only allowed these rapes to occur, but also beats Precious for stealing her man. She, too, sexually abuses Precious, and treats her as a maidservant around the house.

It's hard to imagine how things could get much worse, but in the course of ***Push***, Sapphire throws a lot more misfortune Precious's way. Little Mongo, Precious's first child, to whom she gave birth at the age of 12, turns out to have Down's syndrome and is quickly taken away from her. A week after her second child, Abdul, is born, Precious finds herself out on the streets of Harlem, without a place to live. Not much later, she learns that her father has infected her with H.I.V.

Given these circumstances, it's no surprise that Precious often feels as if her mind has become a television set, playing and replaying videos that offer her a brief respite from the bleak realities of her daily life. In these daydreams, she is thin, not fat; white, not black; loved, not mocked.

***Push***, however, is not the story of a helpless or self-loathing victim. It's meant to be a story of female empowerment and triumph. Through the help of a gifted teacher named Rain, Precious learns to read and write. She learns how to write down her own experiences and turn them into poetry. She also gets hooked up with an incest survivors' support group, and a H.I.V.-positive support group. She gains friends, self-respect and the hope of one day going to college. "Push," the paramedic says to her when she's giving birth. "Push," says her teacher, when she despairs of making anything of her life.

What prevents all this from sounding as cloying as the characters' names is Precious's street-smart, angry voice, a voice that may shock readers with its liberal use of four-letter words and graphic descriptions of sex, but a voice that also conjures up Precious's gritty, unforgiving world. Sapphire somehow finds lyricism in Precious's life, and in endowing Precious with her own generous gifts for language, she allows us entree into her heroine's state of mind.

Precious talks of the neighborhood addicts with "kraters like what u see wen you look at spots on the moon" on their arms, and girls in her incest support group who sit in a circle with "faces like clocks, no bombs." She speaks of time seeming "like clothes in the washing machine at laundry mat--round 'n round, up 'n down," and the television in her own head, "always static on, flipping picture."

"I'm walking across the lobby room real real slow," Precious recalls. "Full of chicken, bread; usually that make me not want to cry remember, but I feel like crying now. My head is like the swimming pool at the Y on one-three-five. Summer full of bodies splashing, most in shallow end; one, two in deep end. Thas how all the time years is swimming in my head. First grade boy say, Pick up your lips Claireece 'fore you trip over them."

Although the reader comes to feel enormous sympathy for Precious, one is constantly aware of the author standing behind the scenes, orchestrating her heroine's terrifying plummet into the abyss and her equally dramatic rescue. The first time we see Precious with a book at school, she is having difficulty sounding

out the words in a picture book and learning the alphabet. Only pages later, her teacher is trying to get her to read *The Color Purple* in class.

For that matter, Alice Walker 's ghost hovers more and more insistently over **Push** as the novel progresses, lending Precious's story a blunt ideological subtext. We learn that white social workers are foolish, patronizing liberals, and that men are pigs who only think about sex. Though it's easy to understand how Precious might hold all of these views, it soon becomes clear that Precious's creator, Sapphire, is also stacking the deck.

In a lengthy postscript in which Precious's classmates tell the story of their lives, we are treated to a recitation of crimes committed against women by men. Rita's father kills her mother in front of her eyes, and Rita begins working as a hooker at the age of 12. Rhonda is raped by her brother, then thrown out of the house by her mother; when she gets a job taking care of an old white man, he asks her for sexual favors. Jermaine is molested by a boy at the age of 7, then raped by a friend's father a few years later; at 19, she is assaulted by six men.

No doubt this rapid-fire sequence of horrifying stories is supposed to mean that Precious has finally found a community of friends with shared experiences. Instead, they leave the reader with the feeling that one has abruptly exited the world of the novel and entered the world of a support group. In trying to open out her heroine's story and turn it into a more general comment on society, Sapphire has made the tale of Precious decidedly less moving than it might have been.

### **Source Citation**

Kakutani, Michiko. "A Cruel World, Endless Until a Teacher Steps In." *The New York Times* (14 June 1996). Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Deborah A. Stanley. Vol. 99. Detroit: Gale Research, 1997. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 31 July 2011.

### **Discussion Questions (<http://vintage-anchor.knopfdoubleday.com/2009/09/24/what-to-watch-precious-based-on-the-novel-push/>)**

1. What does this story tell us about the inadequacy of ordinary schools to deal with students' problems and with their resulting learning handicaps? "I got A in English and never say nuffin', do nuffin'" [p. 49], Precious says. Precious's principal in effect tells her teacher to give up on her, saying, "Focus on the ones who can learn" [p. 37]. Is this an understandable or forgivable attitude? How would you describe Mr. Wicher and his teaching methods? Is he merely a coward or is he trying his best?

2. "The tesses paint a picture of me wif no brain," says Precious. "The tesses paint a picture of me an' my muver—my whole family, we more than dumb, we invisible" [p. 30]. In what way are Precious and her family members invisible to the larger world? If you have read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, can you compare the way the two authors use the metaphor of invisibility for their characters?
3. During the course of the story, Precious is obliged to confront her own prejudices and modify or reject them. Her experience with the Hispanic EMS man makes her look at Hispanics for the first time as human beings like herself; her friendship with Ms. Rain and Jermaine makes her reexamine her knee-jerk homophobia. Early in the novel she says, "I hate crack addicts. They give the race a bad name" [p. 14], but later she questions that uncompromising position. In an interview, Sapphire said of Precious that "she doesn't know that hating gay people or hating Jews or hating foreigners is detrimental to her" (Interview, June 1996). Why is it detrimental to her? Why is it imperative that she lose her prejudices before she, herself, can be helped?
4. How would you describe Precious's self-image at the beginning of the book, and how would you describe it at the end? How have her friends and supporters succeeded in helping to alter her view of herself?
5. What is Precious's attitude toward Louis Farrakhan and his movement at the beginning of the story? How does this attitude change during the course of her education? Why have Farrakhan and his opinions become such a vital part of her worldview? What do you deduce the author's attitude toward him to be?
6. A famous—or perhaps infamous—Labor Department study, the Moynihan Report, blamed the absence of fathers and the dominance of women (rather than economic and racial inequality) for the problems confronting the African American family. Many black scholars and activists have argued against the report's conclusions. Which side of the argument do you believe Push to support?



7. Push presents what one reviewer called “one of the most disturbing portraits of motherhood ever published” (*City Paper*, November 1996). How would you explain or interpret Precious’s mother’s behavior?
8. “Miz Rain say we is a nation of raped children, that the black man in America today is the product of rape” [pp. 68–69]. What does Ms. Rain mean by this metaphor, and does it strike you as an accurate one?
9. Precious tells Ms. Rain that the welfare helps her mother, to which Ms. Rain responds, “When you get home from the hospital look and see how much welfare has helped your mother” [p. 73]. What does this novel indicate about abuses and inadequacies in the system? How might an ideal system be constructed?
10. Precious’s file reflects the government “workfare” point of view, that Precious should already be earning her own living, possibly as a home attendant. Precious objects violently to this idea. Can you understand the social worker’s point of view? Have Precious’s and Jermaine’s arguments [pp. 121–123] changed any opinions you previously held on this subject?
11. “Miz Rain say value. Values determine how we live much as money do. I say Miz Rain stupid there. All I can think she don’t know to have NOTHIN” [p. 64]. Which opinion do you agree with, or is there something to be said for both? What answer, if any, does the novel offer?
12. “One of the myths we’ve been taught,” Sapphire has said, “is that oppression creates moral superiority. I’m here to tell you that the more oppressed a person is, the more oppressive they will be” (*Bomb*, Fall 1996). How does the novel illustrate the concept of the cycle of abuse? How does Precious break that cycle, and what aspects of her own character enable her to do so?
13. Push has been called a Dickensian novel, to which Sapphire has responded, “Part of what’s so wrong in this story is that we’re not in a Dickensian era.

Those things shouldn't be happening in a post-industrial society" (*Bomb*, Fall 1996). She sees the novel as "an indictment of American culture, which is both black and white" (ibid). What aspects of our culture have enabled the inequities described in the novel to develop? Would you say that contemporary American cities consist, as Dickens's London was said to, of two entirely different cultures, the rich one and the poor?

14. Why do you think Sapphire has chosen to end the story where she does? Does the book end on a sad or hopeful note? What sort of future do you envision for Precious?
  
15. What is the significance of the novel's title, *Push*? At what points in her life is Precious enjoined to "push"? What is meant by this word, and how does Precious respond to the injunctions?

## Multimedia

"Sapphire's Story: How 'Push' Became 'Precious'" Available through National Public Radio: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120176695>

## Further Reading

Sapphire has also written:

### *American Dreams*

A collection of poetry which was cited by *Publishers Weekly* as "one of the strongest debut collections of the 90s." *Library Journal* describes the book as a series of "riveting vignettes--some are poems, others short prose works--offer a real voice speaking on topics too often distorted by media hype: sexual abuse, prostitution, racial and sexual violence, lesbian love, and mother-daughter relations."

### *Black Wings & Blind Angels*

Sapphire became a semi-celebrity for the harsh poems of abuse and recovery in her first book, *American Dreams*; she then made waves for the huge advance on her novel *Push*. This second volume of verse finds her less aggressive, mixing her hostilities and anxieties with a newly bemused nostalgia.

## Read-Alikes

*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

Celie is a poor black woman whose letters tell the story of 20 years of her life, beginning at age 14 when she is being abused and raped by her father and attempting to protect her sister from the same fate, and continuing over the course of her marriage to "Mister," a brutal man who terrorizes her. Celie eventually learns that her abusive husband has been keeping her sister's letters from her and the rage she feels, combined with an example of love and independence provided by her close friend Shug, pushes her finally toward an awakening of her creative and loving self.

*Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Call number: 921 Lorde, Audre)

Audre Lorde's prose masterpiece, examines a young black woman's coming to terms with her lesbian sexual orientation. An autobiographical novel, *Zami* has earned a reputation as much for its compelling writing as for its presentation of a coming-of-age story of a black lesbian feminist intent on claiming her identity.

*She's Come Undone* by Wally Lamb

In this engaging first novel, narrator Dolores Price recounts her life story from age four to age 40. The troubled product of a stormy marriage, she is already sipping Maalox in grade school. Then her father walks out on her mother, who suffers a nervous collapse, and Dolores moves to her repressive grandmother's house in Rhode Island. By the time she reaches eighth grade, she has only one friend: a boarder who eventually rapes her. Anesthetizing herself with junk food and soap operas, Dolores becomes an obese, isolated young woman who attempts suicide during her first semester in college and spends seven years in a mental institution. Oddly enough, this relentless parade of disasters makes for interesting reading.

*Afrekete: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Writing* (Call number: Black Studies 810.809 Af)

In the vast and proliferating area of both African-American and lesbian and gay writing, the work of black lesbians is most often excluded or relegated to the margins. *Afrekete* meshes these seemingly disparate traditions and celebrates black lesbian experiences in all their variety and depth. Elegant, timely, provocative, and inspiring, the fiction, poetry, and nonfiction in *Afrekete* -- written in a range of styles -- engage a variety of highly topical themes, placing them at the center of literary and social discourse.

## **Watch-Alike**

*Precious* (Call number: DVD Drama *Precious* and Blu-ray Drama *Precious*)

This film, based on *Push*, was released in 2010. *Precious* won the 2009 Grand Jury Prize and Audience Awards in Sundance film competition. In 2010, Mo'Nique received Oscar and BAFTA awards for Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of

Mary, Precious's mother, and writer Geoffrey Fletcher won Oscar and BAFTA awards for Best Screenplay Based on Material Previously Produced or Published.

### **Further Watching**

You can watch Sapphire reading from Push at the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival, at which the film Precious, based on Push, won the 2009 Cadillac People's Choice Award! The video clip is available to play instantly on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdy8wfDFEbY>.



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