



Push

Sapphire

ABOUT THE BOOK

At sixteen Precious Jones, an abused Harlem girl, is pregnant - for the second time - with her father's child. She is regularly beaten and ordered around by her jealous, reclusive mother. Though she dutifully sits in class every day she has remained completely illiterate. Her life seems set to repeat the self-destructive pattern of her mother's, until her principle sends her to an alternative reading class where, with the help of a dedicated teacher and fellow students who have undergone experiences as harrowing as her own, she begins an intoxicating discovery of words, friendship and herself. Precious's voice, stark and crude yet filled with intelligence and humour, demands to be heard, and, once heard, proves unforgettable.

'Ultimately uplifting...with the power and vehemence of rap: ugly only because it points to ugliness, crude in its denunciation of crudity, brutal in its defence of the vulnerable'
- Suzi Feay, *Independent on Sunday*

'A buoyant, cresting wave after voluble wave of splendid, turbulent, bracing language...A voice to remember, all in a novel which promises quakes. Stand by for the tremor'
- *Scotland on Sunday*

'Rawly authentic, sardonically in defiance of its own limitations and the catalogue of horrors depicted' - *Guardian*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sapphire was born in 1950 and spent her first twelve years on army bases in California and Texas. As a teenager she lived in South Philadelphia and Los Angeles. She graduated from City College in New York and received a MFA from Brooklyn College. From 1983 to 1993 she lived in Harlem, where she taught reading and writing to teenagers and adults. Sapphire's poetry was first published in feminist journals and anthologies in the late 1970s. Since then, she has continued to confront the issues of race and sexual identity through poems and dance. This is her first novel. She lives in New York City.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Q: What were you trying to do, as a writer and as a political person, with this story?

A: As a political person I was really trying to paint a picture of a person who I feel is the object of almost genocidal neglect and genocidal assault in terms of the removal of services that someone like Precious would need. Right now in our culture we are seeing the dismantling of the welfare system, the dismantling of the affirmative action system, a reordering of the medical system. Not that any of these things have worked so well, but to totally remove them from people... It's almost unbelievable. Talk about "family values" and in the same breath talk about "we will be withdrawing welfare checks from women with more than one child."

Q: How did you find Precious' voice?

A: I think Precious' voice was... um, channeled, if you will. So it wasn't like...I just quieted my own voice, shut my own voice up and shut everybody else's voice up. Which you know some people have a problem with in the novel...that other characters are not as developed as her. But you know, that wasn't what I was trying to do. But basically it was just about trying...about being very, very still and open to her, really just trying to be open and let her come out and speak. And she did. She did. So it wasn't like I had to find her voice or create it. I mean, I had real difficulty...real difficulty in trying to convey her process of literacy accurately. You know, like, the first couple of things -- trying to convey her writing -- were easy. But then after that it was really, really hard. That was really hard. But actually her actual voice was overwhelming. And I feel it is a very voice-driven novel. And I think her voice almost always rings true.

STARTING POINTS FOR YOUR DISCUSSION

1. What does story tell us about the inadequacy of ordinary schools to deal with students' problems and with their resulting learning handicaps?
2. 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?
3. What is Precious's attitude towards movement at the beginning of the story? What do you deduce the author's attitude to him to be?
4. *Push* presents a disturbing portrait of motherhood - how would you explain or interpret Precious's mother's behaviour?
5. 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?
6. Why do you think Sapphire has chosen to end the story where she does? Does the book end on a sad or hopeful note and what sort of future do you envisage for Precious?

OTHER BOOKS BY SAPPHIRE

American Dreams

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

The Joy Luck Club ~ Amy Tan

The Bluest Eye ~ Toni Morrison

Black Boy ~ Richard Wright