



Sapphire (Ramona Lofton) at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2009. Photograph by Flickr contributor McNeil21. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.0 license.

Sapphire (Ramona Lofton) (b. 1950)

by Claude J. Summers

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Bisexual African-American novelist, poet, and performance artist Sapphire came to public attention with works that focus on the harrowing realities of inner city existence. She depicts the lives of her protagonists not only with brutal honesty, but also with a compassionate faith in the possibility of transformation and transcendence.

She reveals the humanity of individuals who are too often treated merely as statistics or only as examples of social pathology.

Born Ramona Lofton on August 4, 1950 in Fort Ord, California, Sapphire was the second of four children of military parents. Her father was a sergeant in the U.S. Army and her mother a former nurse in the Women's Army Corps. As an "army brat," she lived in several cities and countries during her childhood.

Although her family maintained a façade of middle-class, church-going normality, it was riven by internal divisions and emotional tensions. When she was thirteen, her father decided to settle in Los Angeles after his military career. Her mother, who was battling alcoholism, refused to join them, and eventually abandoned the family.

In the 1970s, Sapphire attended San Francisco City College, where she studied chemistry and dance. She received an Associate's degree, but decided to forego her plans to pursue a medical degree.

After dropping out of school, she immersed herself in the Bay Area's lively counterculture. She flirted with the Black Power movement and experimented with drugs. She also began writing poetry and performing public readings of her work.

It was at this time that she adopted the name Sapphire. She chose the name because Sapphire in African-American culture signified a belligerent, overbearing black woman. That stereotype, she told an interviewer, "was somehow attractive to me, especially because my mother was just the opposite. And I could picture the name on books."

In 1977, Sapphire relocated to New York. She supported herself by taking jobs ranging from housecleaning to topless dancing. On occasion, she worked as a prostitute, but she never lost sight of her goal, which was to become a writer.

She became a visible presence in New York City's lesbian community. She joined an organization named United Lesbians of Color for Change Inc., which met on West 4th Street.

Sapphire resumed her college education by pursuing a degree in modern dance at City College of New York. After graduating in 1983, she took a job as a parent-child mediator for the Children's Aid Society and later worked as a remedial reading teacher in Harlem and the Bronx, teaching students primarily from poverty-stricken backgrounds.

The year 1986 was a difficult one for Sapphire, but pivotal in her development as a writer. Not only did her mother die in 1986, but she also lost her brother, who was murdered in Los Angeles. Other friends succumbed to AIDS. "Those were really dark years, '86 to '89 or so," she confided to *Newsweek's* Jeff Giles, and added, "But it was then that my writing started to change."

In 1988, she underwent an intense examination of her life and her family. She came to the conclusion that she had been sexually molested by her father when she was a child. Her sister revealed that their father had also abused her. In addition, Sapphire came to suspect that her father also molested one of her brothers. (Their father, who died in 1990, denied the accusations.)

While group therapy also helped Sapphire cope with the psychological stresses she experienced during these years, she credits her writing with helping her retain her sanity. "Had I not been able to write, I think I would have lost my mind," she told a *Harper's Bazaar* interviewer.

In the 1980s, Sapphire published poetry and short prose pieces in lesbian journals, but decided that they were best suited to poetry readings delivered in her own voice. She thus became a participant in the "slam poetry" movement just as it was getting underway. She performed her work at such venues as the Nuyorican Poets Café and Gap Tooth Girls.

In 1987, Sapphire self-published her first book of poetry, *Meditations on the Rainbow*, which received very little attention. But she was soon thrust into the literary limelight when a poem she published in a small glbtq journal, *The Portable Lower East Side Queer City*, in 1992, became a central exhibit in the conservative assault on the National Endowment for the Arts.

"Wild Thing" was inspired by the rape of a white female jogger in Central Park by a group of African-American youths, who later admitted that they were out "wilding" (i.e., looking for trouble). In her poem, Sapphire adopts the voice of Leroy, a 13-year-old rapist. She depicts the anger, ignorance, and despair of an abused ghetto youth whose sexuality erupts as a violent expression of rage.

The poem is deeply disturbing, and in its technique and subject matter it anticipates the work that would later bring Sapphire acclaim. However, when lines were taken out of context and distributed to members of Congress as part of homophobic Senator Jesse Helms's attack on the National Endowment for the Arts, it sparked outrage and brought her notoriety rather than fame.

The lines in question reveal that Leroy had been molested by a clergyman:

I remember when
Christ sucked my dick
behind the pulpit,
I was 6 years old
he made me promise
not to tell no one.

Since *The Portable Lower East Side Queer City* had received some modest support from the NEA, the incendiary lines were held up as an example of anti-Christian art funded by American taxpayers. NEA chair

John Frohnmayer defended the poem and attempted to place the lines in their proper context, but he soon submitted his resignation.

Sapphire herself was a casualty of the ruthless campaign against the Endowment. As she told Owen Keehnen, "It was a drag. It was a real disservice to me. My work was used against me and I was painted as a pervert playing into the sexual exploitation of women. I spent so many years of my life undoing the effects of my own sexual abuse as a child, trying to help my students with this, and be an advocate in my own community with stopping rape, denouncing incest, and exposing the sexual exploitation and victimization of women. Then to have someone parade the material like that was very harmful."

In 1993, Sapphire enrolled in graduate school at Brooklyn College, where she studied with Allen Ginsberg and Susan Fromberg Shaeffer. The next year she published a collection of poetry and short prose pieces, *American Dreams*.

American Dreams established Sapphire as a literary talent to be watched. The collection, which contained "Wild Thing," was well received. The reviewer for *Publisher's Weekly* described the book as "one of the strongest debut collections of the 90s," while warning readers that "Sapphire's imagery is so fierce that readers will want to spread out the book over several sittings."

The reviewer for *Booklist* noted the work's mixture of the ugly and the beautiful: "Sapphire's stomach-turning recollections of brutal sexual abuse by her father intermingle with clinical notes from the autopsy of a man beaten to death, a daughter's betrayal of her mother with the mother's lover, prison lovers yearning for a glimpse of the moon. These harsh but sometimes beautiful pieces may be seen as barbaric yawp howled Ginsberg-like into the wind, but their words and the images they evoke are hard to dismiss."

Jeannine DeLombard in *The New Times Book Review* also commented on the juxtaposition of contrary emotions in the work, remarking that "this angry yet hopeful collection of poetry and prose speaks not of dreams deferred but of nightmares lived."

American Dreams brought Sapphire to the attention of the literary public. She won several awards for the book, including the MacArthur Scholarship in Poetry and *Downtown Magazine's* Year of the Poet III Award.

Hence, it was no surprise that news of a novel in progress sparked interest among publishers. In 1995, agent Caroline Sheedy championed the manuscript and submitted the first 100 pages to a publisher's auction. The result was that Alfred K. Knopf paid \$500,000 for the rights to publish the book, *Push*, which was issued in 1996, in a first printing of 150,000 copies.

Written as an internal monologue spoken by its half-literate protagonist, the novel--in unadorned, often ungrammatical, yet powerful and moving prose--tells the story of Claireece Precious Jones, an obese, HIV-positive Harlem teenager who was repeatedly raped by her father and who gave birth to a child with Down's Syndrome when she was twelve. Her mother, who brutalizes Precious and steals the welfare checks that come in the mail for Precious and her daughter, kicks her out of her home when she again becomes pregnant by her father when she is sixteen.

The hope in the novel comes from the help Precious receives in a remedial reading program and an incest survivors' group. With the aid of a sympathetic teacher, she learns to decipher the words on the pages of books and also to discover her own voice.

Despite the harrowing incidents recounted in the book, the novel is an optimistic story of transformation. After having been abused by her father and mother and failed by the educational system and other social structures, Precious is ultimately saved by learning how to read and by the good offices of concerned and

helpful individuals.

When Owen Keehnen asked Sapphire what she hoped to convey in *Push*, she replied:

"The power of intervention in a human being's life who is troubled. While I show a very destroyed family system I also show an extended family that rises up to help Precious. When one structure has fallen another appears--there's an alternative school, there's a halfway house, there's people who have learned that all children belong to us. I wanted to show those interactions in a distressed community. I also wanted to show the power of the human soul and what can be done when a person makes up their mind with what they want to do with their life."

Although some critics accused Sapphire of sensationalizing ghetto life and of contributing to negative views of African-American culture, she vigorously defended the accuracy of her novel. "This novel isn't conjecture, or some studies I read. This is life as I observed it," she told *Newsweek*; and explained to Keehnen that Precious is "a composite of many young women I encountered when I worked as a literacy teacher in Harlem and the Bronx for 7 years. Over and over I met people with circumstances similar to hers, many with her amazing spirit."

Although some critics thought that the novel's redemptive message was too facile and others complained of the work's explicit language, most reviewers hailed *Push*, and it garnered Sapphire the Black Caucus of the American Library Association's First Novelist Award. Most critics agreed that in Precious Sapphire had created an unforgettable heroine.

Several reviewers noted Sapphire's indebtedness to Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, a debt that the writer has freely acknowledged. But, although Sapphire's work needs to be seen as part of a long tradition of African-American literature, and Walker's *The Color Purple* plays a crucial role in *Push*, Sapphire also has been influenced by a number of other traditions, including poets as diverse as Judy Grahn and Allen Ginsberg.

In response to a question from Keehnen about the political impulse of her writing, Sapphire pointedly recalled the influence of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which she read as a child: "I read the story of this girl who would have been lost to history and humanity had she not written this diary. Even though I didn't start writing then, I saw it had something to do with coming out of invisibility. Documenting our lives is the one act that almost everyone can do based on their ability and scope."

Given the commercial success of the novel, many readers and critics expected that it would soon be made into a film. Sapphire, however, was wary of filmmakers and extremely protective of her work, especially her protagonist. She told *Newsweek*, "I don't want a filmmaker to come in and make Precious look pathetic." She reportedly turned down several offers to buy the film rights.

In 1999, Sapphire returned to poetry by issuing *Black Wings & Blind Angels*, a collection of 48 poems. Although the book did not receive anywhere near the attention that *Push* received, it confirmed Sapphire as a writer with a distinctive voice and a characteristic intensity.

After being in the limelight in the late 1990s, Sapphire retreated into relative obscurity, declining requests for interviews and jealously guarding her privacy.

In 2009, however, the writer returned to public visibility as she helped promote Lee Daniels' film entitled *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire*, which received enthusiastic reviews and awards on the film festival circuit, including at Cannes and the Sundance Film Festival. (The film was originally entitled *Push: Based on the Novel by Sapphire* but later changed to avoid confusion with the action film *Push*, also released in 2009).

Sapphire entrusted Daniels, an openly gay African-American director and producer, with the project only after she became convinced that he shared his respect for her protagonist. As for his part, Daniels has said that the book became a part of his DNA and that he was determined to bring it to the screen as authentically as possible.

The film has received glowing reviews, especially for its cast, which includes newcomer Gabourey Sidibe as Precious, Mo'Nique as the mother, and Mariah Carey as the teacher.

Sapphire lives and works in New York City.

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About the Author

Claude J. Summers is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has published widely on seventeenth- and twentieth-century English literature, including book-length studies of E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, as well as *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* and *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. He is General Editor of www.gltq.com. In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.