

Potent poetry ; The words and images favored by Sapphire are not ornate and polite but shocking and outrageous. When the activist writer puts them to work, however, they become moving, too.; [FINAL Edition]

Jean Patteson, *Sentinel Staff Writer*. **Orlando Sentinel**. Orlando, Fla.: Jul 14, 2005. pg. E.1

Abstract (Document Summary)

[Sapphire] touches UCF students with her works. 'She is so out-of-the box,' says one. PHOTOS BY ROBERTO GONZALEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL Sapphire shares her poems with UCF students and a few visitors in an African-American studies class. Her controversial novel, 'Push,' 'inspired me to want to teach,' says one student. [Rosemary Banks] of New Jersey reads to the class from a book she is writing about the challenge of a single mom raising an autistic child. The books 'American Dreams' and 'Black Wings & Blind Angels' are collections of Sapphire's poetry. 'Push' is a novel.

Full Text (1245 words)

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The poetry of Ellis Marsalis. Page E3

Inspiration comes in many guises. On Monday, in an African-American studies class at the University of Central Florida, it came in the form of poetry.

Not "poetry," all fanciful and flowery.

But "Poetry" -- bold, shocking, real.

Reading the poetry is Sapphire, the activist black writer from New York who burst onto the literary scene in the mid-1990s. She reads from her anthology, *American Dreams*, and from her acclaimed but controversial novel *Push*.

Reads about being black, poor, oppressed.

Reads about rape, incest, AIDS, poverty, illiteracy.

It's definitely not prettily "poetic." But through the magic of language, often harsh, in-your-face language, it has the power to inspire.

"She is so out-of-the-box," says Kemba Pinkston, a 22-year-old senior.

"What she writes about is more concrete than most poetry. This can be applied to real life. Now I know I must go to an artists' colony. I must work on my craft. I must pursue what makes me happy."

All that from just listening to a poet read a few poems.

Inspiring.

WHAT DID SHE SAY?

When she reads, Sapphire holds her book in her left hand and at arm's length -- a comfortable distance for 55-year-old eyes.

She leans into her words, reinforcing their impact with fluid gestures of her right hand. Her voice crackles with life as she reads from her poem "Boys Love Baseball."

It tells of a father and son driving to the ballpark on a Sunday afternoon. An iconic, American-as-apple-pie image. Then comes the shocker, the oh-my-God punchline.

The passive student audience snaps to attention: Did we just hear what we think we heard? Did that father really molest his boy?

This is strong stuff.

Sapphire, who uses just one name, knows how to work a crowd. She has had 20 years of practice -- as a modern dancer, a teacher in Harlem, a war protester. And now as a poetry reader.

"I wrote this in graduate school at Brooklyn College," she says, introducing her next poem, "The Feminist Photographer."

"It's about the objectification of women and black men, and how they oppress each other."

It's rough. Rough, but real.

To lighten the mood, she reads "Leave the Lights On." It takes courage, she asserts, to be naked under bright lights when you're over 40 and saggy.

She is rewarded with applause and laughter.

Next she reads from Push, the disturbing story of Precious Jones, a brutalized, inner-city teenager, twice pregnant, whose life is transformed when she learns to read and write.

"I met incredible, courageous young women when I was a literacy teacher for seven years in the Bronx, in Harlem and Brooklyn," she says. "Precious is a composite. All the things that happen to her, happened to one or other of my students."

Some of the things -- the abuse, the incest -- also happened to Sapphire when she was a girl.

She begins reading, slipping easily into the Harlem dialect:

"I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver. That was in 1983. I was out of school for a year. This gonna be my second baby. My daughter got Down Sinder. She's retarded. I got left back in the second grade too . . ."

The class -- about 30 students, a few faculty members and visitors -- is riveted.

"I read that book and it inspired me to want to teach," says Carole Conroy, a 23-year-old senior. "I want to inspire students the way the teacher in Push inspires Precious."

WRITERS ARE DIVERSE

This month, Sapphire is conducting a writers' workshop at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach. The eight writers she selected for the course make up a diverse group: young and middle-aged, straight and gay, white and black. Especially black.

"It's part of my politics," says Sapphire. "I will not teach all- white groups. I must have diversity."

Her UCF audience meets her definition of politically correct.

Most of the writers in her workshop have accompanied Sapphire to UCF in the Atlantic Center's minibus. She invites each to read a poem or prose passage to the class.

First up is Rosemary Banks, 52, a single mother from Clementon, N.J. She reads from the book she is writing about her struggle to raise her 11-year-old twins, one of whom is autistic, on the meager salary of a substitute teacher.

It's a short passage, but Banks' conflict between love and frustration, despair and determination is palpable.

"I was told by some of the students that I was an inspiration to them," says Banks. "But they were such an inspiration for us artists, the way they received us with such enthusiasm."

Glenis Redmond, 41, of Asheville, N.C., is next. By coincidence, she also is the single mother of twins. She always wanted to be a poet, Redmond says, but for years was not brave enough to give up her career as a psychological counselor.

"Then one day I had a conversation with God," she says. "I said, 'If you want me to be a poet, make it happen.'"

It happened. For 10 years, she has been writing poetry, mostly about her experience as a black woman in the South. It hasn't made her rich, she says, but she and her 15-year-old daughters get by.

She reads "Lineage," her poem inspired by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

I dream a dream too, she writes. She dreams of the women behind King and his brotherhood:

These women: Alberta, Coretta, Etta, Eula, Bessie Mae, Hattie, Thelma

Louvenia, Corinne, Basheba, Bethula,

Ruby, Lila Beth, Doretha, Lucinda . . .

As Redmond continues to chant names, Sapphire claps to the rhythm, a quiet, steady drumbeat. The class is mesmerized.

Finally, Palm Coast poet Cheryl Hemmerle, 43, a former executive with the United Methodist Church, steps forward. She offers a witty, provocative riff on the biblical Tower of Babel. Titled "21st Century Babble," it takes aim at Nextel, T-Mobile, Sprint, et al. They are, she says:

The present-day Nimrods prostituting their wares,

Exploit the human hunger for companionship,

Promising allover, rollover, anytime, global, unlimited, fair and flexible.

Can you hear me now?

The class hears her, loud and clear.

Listening to Sapphire and her associate poets "was inspiring," says Shalanda Faulk, 19. "You had to be asleep not to feel something when they were done."

"When Glenis [Redmond] talked about how it hit her what she really wanted to do was write, I started thinking about how I like to write," says Faulk.

"It was one of my dreams, but I kind of put it aside. Now I'm thinking of doing it again. Of maybe declaring a new major geared more toward creative writing."

The poetry reading was an "affirming" experience, says Faulk. Which is just another way of saying inspiring.

[Illustration]

PHOTO: Sapphire touches UCF students with her works. 'She is so out-of-the box,' says one. PHOTOS BY ROBERTO GONZALEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTO: Sapphire shares her poems with UCF students and a few visitors in an African-American studies class. Her controversial novel, 'Push,' 'inspired me to want to teach,' says one student. PHOTO: Rosemary Banks of New Jersey reads to the class from a book she is writing about the challenge of a single mom raising an autistic child. PHOTO: The books 'American Dreams' and 'Black Wings & Blind Angels' are collections of Sapphire's poetry. 'Push' is a novel.

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