
AN INTRODUCTION TO *The Kid*

In the opening pages of *The Kid*, the follow-up to Sapphire's bestselling novel *Push*, Precious Jones dies of AIDS, leaving behind her nine-year-old son Abdul. With no immediate relatives to offer help, the disoriented child is placed in foster care. Abdul isn't there for long—vicious beatings at the hands of a fellow foster child land him in the hospital severely traumatized.

Abdul is then transferred to a Roman Catholic boarding school for orphans. At St Ailanthus, he's called J.J. and develops an interest in Shakespeare and science. With a good education and the encouragement of his teachers, Abdul plans to apply for a scholarship to college. When he's not studying, he wanders the streets of New York and at one point stumbles on a nearby dance class that captures his fascination.

Yet St Ailanthus is no safe haven. Abdul is sexually abused by the brothers who run the school. Longing for affection, closeness, and a sense of personal power, he replicates the abuse he has experienced on his younger and smaller classmates. When it happens, Abdul often dissociates and denies his actions to himself, and sometimes sees the events as dreams, as if he only imagined them. When outside authorities get word of the assaults, the brothers throw him out of the school and he is sent to live with his great grandmother—whose existence had been basically ignored by some members of the school—in her seedy, roach-infested Harlem apartment. Abdul has no tolerance for the filthy accommodations or for the old woman's shocking and frank stories of her own childhood of extreme poverty and abuse and her life as a prostitute in New York.

Violent and angry but desperate to still make something of himself, Abdul settles in with Roman, a gay dance teacher, who agrees to shelter and support him in exchange for sex. When Abdul is seventeen, he leaves Roman and joins an avant-garde dance troupe downtown and befriending the college-educated artist-activists who founded it. His talent is lauded by the press and he starts a relationship with one of the dancers, but even as his life seems to be coming together, Abdul's troubled past catches up with him.

Told through a virtuosic first-person narration that weaves together fantasy and memory, Abdul's harrowing tale chronicles a brutal cycle of violence and emotional devastation. Through Abdul, Sapphire has wrought a deeply conflicted protagonist whose own self-deceptions belie his remarkably persistent hope. Shocking, painful, and real, *The Kid* is simply unforgettable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sapphire is the author of two collections of poetry and the bestselling novel *Push*. The film adaption of her novel, *Precious* (2009), won an Academy Award for Best Screenplay and Best Supporting Actress. In 2009, she was awarded a United States Artist Fellowship. She lives in New York City.

A CONVERSATION WITH SAPPHERE

The Kid is, in some sense, a sequel to Push. What made you want to continue writing about this family?

First, the question of a "sequel": *The Kid* is not a sequel in a traditional sense in that we don't enter into and follow up on the life of Precious Jones. It is a sequel in that we are looking at the life of Precious's child, Abdul Jones, who is now an AIDS orphan. And it is a sequel in the sense it continues to look at the profound and devastating effects of AIDS on the African American community. One "character" that we are

introduced to in *Push* is the AIDS epidemic. At the time I was writing *Push*, gay white activist Andrew Sullivan declared that if there was to be a triage concerning antiviral drugs (and it seemed there might be!), these drugs should first go to gay white men who have contributed so much to society, and not to poor blacks who were so stupid they didn't even know what had hit them. Conversely some black activists and many church leaders labeled and stigmatized AIDS as a "gay disease" and denied and hid the extent of the AIDS epidemic in the black community. These two forces, racism and the homophobic stigmatizing of AIDS as a gay disease, conflated and created a situation where African American women like Precious, who were diagnosed with AIDS in the late '80s, were many times more likely to be dead within a couple of months of their diagnosis than white men who were diagnosed at the same time. Precious Jones represents the last and least served, due to the combined effects of racism and homophobia, when it came to receiving medications that might have saved her life. Precious's death in *The Kid* is as much an effect of these forces as it is of the abuse she suffered as a child. One reason I wrote *Push* was to show how "precious" those blacks *who didn't even know what hit them* might be if given the opportunity to live. *The Kid* resonates on many levels and has many reasons for being, and indeed one of them is to show the continuing impact of the loss of our precious one(s). Precious's death and the forces that contributed to it are the backstory with which we enter an entirely different character's life and circumstances.

So, while *The Kid* is not a sequel in the usual sense of the word, in that we don't follow the life of Precious on to further developments, it is a sequel in the sense it continues to look at the profound and devastating effects of AIDS on the African American community. And we *do* see Precious again! We see her through the pained and often distorted memories of her baby boy. He has been her pride and joy and the center of her life. The reader sees the triumph of a devoted motherhood in a child who at the age of nine reads better than his mother did at eighteen—in a child who has great expectations that are, despite repeated pitfalls and abuse to come, never entirely dashed. The readers see a boy who clings to the words of a mother who told him

he could and would be something, and strives as hard as any middle class or rich kid to do so. So while in *The Kid* we see the triumph of Precious Jones, we also see the tragedy, as her child is left alone and helpless on the occasion of her death and is repeatedly failed by the institutions of his city, state, and country—institutions that should have been in place to support him after his mother's death.

In answer to the second part of your question, "What made you want to continue writing about this family?" I felt Precious's ancestors, namely Toosie, and her descendant, Abdul Jones, were wonderful characters in and of themselves. I also felt they were excellent vehicles to explore such compelling social issues as nature versus nurture, the modern legacy of slavery, the crippling effects of poverty, the continuing AIDS epidemic, the ability of art to transform and transcend those situations, art's limitations to transcend or transform (think of Abdul's ballet teacher, who is an accomplished dancer but not so accomplished a human being). I also wanted to look at the situational aspects of mental illness. Critics and readers have often commented on Abdul's psychological adaption to racism and sexual abuse as a form of mental illness; some have, but most have not, looked at racism, negligence, and the tide of sexual abuse children are subjected to, and the subsequent denial of the culture that allows it (think Sandusky/Penn State), as forms of a societal psychosis. Perhaps Abdul's "mental illnesses" might indeed be important, though tragic, adaptive survival mechanisms.

Abdul's world, like his mother's, is a bleak one, and it's clear that his chances for survival are limited from the start. Where do you personally see redemption, if any, in his journey?

When I think of redemption I think of the saying by Carl G. Jung that, "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious." There are possibilities in this story for Abdul if he deals with his shadow and the huge shadow that's been cast upon him—just as there is a tremendous benefit to the society as a whole when we see our hidden landmines and our potential for devastation, as in Rwanda. Abdul takes the reader on a journey through the full cycle of abuse. It is a devastating and debilitating circle, but a

circle that is broken, as he is broken down. And with that break we have the possibility of a spiral out. There is a Zen saying: "When my barn burned down I was able to see the moon." By the end of the book Abdul is released from the hell that the actions of others, and *he himself*, have landed him in. And he, even if nobody else does, knows his name.

One of the most powerful scenes in the novel is when Abdul meets his great-grandmother and hears her story about how she came to New York. He has a violent desire to reject that history, but she continues on, forcing him to listen. What did this scene mean to you and what made you include it in the story?

Yes, as you said, she *forces* him to listen. In the allegory of Eloquence in Durer's *Kunstsbuch*, the persons who follow Ogmios are linked by chains that run from the god's tongue to their ears and can pull them into the underworld. This is what Toosie does in a way. She drags Abdul under and back in time. She herself is a Miss Havisham type character, in many ways arrested and defeated by the past, but not totally defeated in that she remembers the past and can construct a "story" from it. Although she is the first person outside of his mother who genuinely gives to Abdul (food, money, etc.) and expects nothing in return, it is this story which is her true gift to him. She knows for Abdul to be free, it will be necessary for him to reckon, to listen to his past, to his-story. He must listen to her or remain, despite his intelligence and fine body, without a history—a non-entity without the spiritual strength or necessary tools to become an artist.

One book I referred to before and while writing *The Kid* was *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* when talking about the symbolic meaning of the ear notes: "In Africa ears are always symbols of animal nature. To the Dogon and Bambara of Mali the ear is a twofold sexual symbol, the external ear being a penis and the auditory duct a vagina. This explains the comparison of words with sperm, both being verbal equivalents of the fertilizing water poured out by the Supreme Deity. . . . [The word] flows in at the ear, as sperm flows in at the vagina, to go spiraling down into the womb and make it fruitful" (*The Penguin*

Dictionary of Symbols, pp. 328–329). Of course Toosie's words are metaphorically "impregnating." Abdul's defense against this penetration of his ear is a dead literalness to her intense and vital words. But it is after his conversation with her that we see the first crack in his selfish and narcissistic armor. He who has lost almost everything—mother, toys, home, innocence, chance for a formal education—and has almost nothing of material worth, gives to his great grandmother one of his treasured possessions: his kaleidoscope, his "image maker." This happens for two reasons: one, because she has given him something more valuable than an image—she has given him, whether he likes it or not, "the word" (and he does *not* like it); and two, for the first time since his mother died he is on the same page with another person; he *hears* her.

The sense of hearing as an authenticating sense (as opposed to sight: mirrors, fashion, physical beauty, etc.) is an important theme throughout the novel. Abdul, despite his perfect body, fails at times to hear the beat in dance class; even his mother tells him as a child that he is hardheaded and doesn't listen. And of course it is his hearing that is damaged by the attack at the foster home. The one thing Dr. See demands of Abdul at the end of the book is, "Hear? *Hear?*"

Abdul's physicality—his pleasure from sex, his desire to dance—is central to his identity. Can you talk a little bit about how you developed this aspect of his character?

In one of James Baldwin's essays he criticizes black writing in general, Richard Wright in particular, for an empty space, a hole really, where sexuality should be (or could be) discussed. And while numerous heterosexual black male writers and critics have bemoaned the portrayal of a one-dimensional portrait of the black man as a victimizer, few have been interested in or had the courage to explore the obvious other end of the stick: the black male victim of sexual abuse.

In *The Kid* we see Abdul as a multifaceted sexual being. We see him attempt an equal and healthy relationship with his dancer friend; we see him as a coerced, but still willing, collaborator in his own oppression with an adult male, Roman—despite the problematic nature of a child making a "choice," Abdul chooses in some degree to be with this man,

and enjoys—in a limited way—sex with this "sugar daddy." We also see Abdul as a helpless victim of sexual violence, which he neither invites nor wants, and can't control. We are *in* there with him as his brain is being warped. And we're with him when, in the coldest turn of the novel, he appropriates the behavior of his perpetrators and becomes a sexual predator himself, who takes what he wants as it has been taken from him.

But Abdul's sexuality is not a series of sexual *acts*. Abdul's sexuality—his "anima," or soul, if you will—is positive, pulsating and *strong*. Nothing totally daunts his joie de vivre, his charisma, or his optimism (and of course the flip side of that optimism—his denial). He tells us he's "happy to be a boy!" He likes how he looks (unlike his mother, he likes and accepts his skin color) and he revels in his strength and intelligence. He can read and he does; he's awestruck by art and creativity in general. All this is part of his sexuality.

In this book I raise some questions about who these man-children, who populate our African American communities, are. What do they bring to us from their various places of incarceration: prisons, the bad dreams of childhood, mental hospitals, and their after-school programs with the Jerry Sanduskys of the world? J.J., Abdul, who is he? Why do we have the highest rate of HIV infection outside of Africa in the world? These are questions that can't be answered in an effete, sexually conservative, and "proper" fiction, or by nationalistic ranting about what the white man has done to the black man, or even by black feminist male-female dichotomizations. *The Kid*, among other things, begins an accurate portrayal of what happens to many young males who have been abused, and their sometimes hideous responses. Over the top? Maybe, maybe not? True? Absolutely.

The narrative, because it takes place inside Abdul's head, skillfully drifts along his stream of consciousness. How do you achieve this effect in your writing? Is this the way your prose naturally flows or is it something that comes with the draft process?

A lot of what happens in *Push* happens in community, in conversation, in a dialogue journal—it is the story of a woman who more than

anything wants to belong. Her faltering sense of self-esteem makes her take great strides and great risks to be accepted. That is not the case with Abdul. While Abdul seeks love and acceptance, he has absorbed the fact that he was loved and is a unique individual; his vital sense of self demands expression. Abdul's quest is to individuate, to "become somebody." His mother searched for people and community to affirm her self-worth; Abdul has goals. Part of the reason he is loyal to the Brothers at St Ailanthus, and doesn't tell anyone about the abuse he suffers, is because he feels his perpetrators will further his goals to be *somebody*.

Abdul's interiority needed to be expressed not through dialogue or third-person reflection, but as the propulsive thoughts of a brilliant man-child. I followed his flow to create a stream of consciousness narrative. I let that knowledge of him dictate to me as I created him.

Everyone is flawed in this book, including those who purport to be on Abdul's side. How might a person like Abdul ever find unconditional support and a more positive sense of self when surrounded by all of these negative influences?

Abdul, a flawed person himself, takes the best these people have to offer: Roman, a racially obsessed gay man (a dinge queen) teaches him the art of dance; the brothers at St Ailanthus give him a good education that sustains him and without which his future autodidactic impulses would not have been nearly as successful. He finds positive role models in flawed people, transferring his feelings of persecution to heroes like Charlie Parker, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Billie Holiday. And like most lonely children, he seeks healthy and nurturing relationships through reading. In a biography of the ballet dancer Nureyev, Abdul finds a touchstone, one he doubts he can ever touch, but a touchstone nonetheless. He seeks out work by the African American critic Greg Tate. He finds modern-day equivalents of Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday in musicians like Jimi Hendrix, Vernon Reid, and the outré R&B/jazz singer Eryka Badu.

This story goes into some excruciatingly dark places. What was your emotional experience in writing it? Were there moments when you wanted to

back away from the intensity of Abdul's life, and if so, what brought you back to the page?

I almost saw it as a political responsibility to go to this intense, dark place. No one else was doing it. We, the black community, were suffering intensely because of denial and a lack of certain kinds of examination and introspection. I wanted the text to be more than a catharsis. I wanted to show the domino effect of one person's hurt.

Being an artist means mapping dark and unknown territory often with no light but your own. Carolyn Forché wrote a poem called "The Colonel" about, among other things, the repressive regime in El Salvador. In the poem, the colonel spills a bag of severed ears onto a table in front of the poet. With this rendering of experience we are forced by Forché to focus on something that, were it outside the realm of art, would be more than most of us could bear. I believe this is what art is capable of: allowing us to see (and bear) what we might not otherwise be able to. I studied with Carolyn Forché in 1989. I came away from her workshop affirmed with the idea that art had a job and it wasn't to describe the sunset.

Abdul is ultimately hospitalized and declared insane in a Kafkaesque turn of events, but he finally has a chance to tell his story. The end feels like a cliffhanger. How did you arrive at this particular ending for the novel? Any plans for a sequel?

Actually, I don't see the last chapter or the ending as a cliffhanger, though it's not a happily ever after or he dies or is doomed, etc. The reader goes through a dark night of the soul with Abdul in a real or imagined place of ever-lit and blindingly bright darkness. With the help of Dr. See, Abdul confronts the only part of the vicious cycle of abuse he has total control over, that which he does to others. We never know what is the truth and what are his guilt-ridden, tortured imaginings. But a confession of sorts emerges, whether it is real or whether the events of his past have filled him with a need to construct a false reality in which he has the power to be as brutal to others as

they have been to him. We know, for instance, that he lied when he told his girlfriend, in a moment of bravado, that he'd "offed" someone he'd never touched. Here, Dr. See shows him how his lies might have alienated him from the one person he's been able to establish a real bond with since his mother's death.

Too much happens at the end of the book to talk about right now, but Abdul is freed from the real or imagined hell he finds himself in. One of his last acts before he is freed, inadvertent though it was, is to shatter the artificial lights (and those could symbolize almost any of the false gods he's been oppressed by) that have cut him off from nature, his own and the world's. When the book ends he's free to really be an artist—or anything else he wants to be—something his great grandmother "Slavery Days" and his mother never had a chance to do.

A sequel? Maybe. I'm working on something very different right now, but like the readers who have asked, I too would like to know what Abdul does with his life when that door opens for him.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Kid* is divided into four parts and follows the narrator from age nine to age eighteen. How does the writing style or voice evolve to represent the different phases of his life?
2. The narrator's name changes several times during the course of this story. What are his names and why do they change?
3. How does Abdul get lost in the social welfare system? What goes wrong? What could have been done differently?
4. Abdul seems to dissociate from reality during certain moments and can't distinguish between real life and his dreams. Why does this happen to him? As the reader, how did you interpret this part of the story? Did you believe him one way or another?

5. So many of the adults in Abdul's life play an ambiguous role—the people who claim to be helping him are often hurting him. Were there any adults whose actions surprised you? Were there any who could have truly helped him?
6. What is it that disturbs Abdul about his great grandmother? Should he have stayed with her? Why or why not?
7. The characters in this book have complicated and conflicting attitudes toward race—there's Brother John, the white priest who grew up in a black neighborhood; the teacher Roman, who fetishizes Abdul's blackness; and the young dancers who have their own liberal-minded prejudices. What is Abdul's own relationship with race? In what ways is it positive and in what ways is it negative?
8. What do you think about the novel's title? Is it fitting? Why do you think Sapphire chose this particular title?
9. Abdul is drawn, almost instinctively, to dance. What is it about this art form that attracts him and what does it allow him to express?
10. In the end of the book, Abdul seems to get one last chance to regain control over his life. What do you think he will do with it?

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