



Ramona Lofton (Sapphire)

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I go home. I'm so lonely there. I never notice before. I'm so busy getting beat, cooking, cleaning, pussy and asshole either hurting or popping. School I a joke black monster, Big Bertha, Blimp B54 where are you? 'N the TV's in my head always static on, flipping picture. So much pain, shame--I never feel the loneliness. It such a small thing compare to your daddy climb on you, your muver kick you, slave you, feel you up. But now since I been going to school I feel lonely. Now since I sit in circle I realize all my life, all my life I been outside of circle. Mama give me orders, Daddy porno talk me, school never did learn me.

— Push

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1950
- * African-American poet and novelist
- * Her first novel, *Push*, was published in 1996

Biography

Ramona Lofton, better known to her readers as Sapphire, was born in 1950 in Fort Orr, California. On the surface, her family was characterized as the normal, middle class family. Her father was an army sergeant and her mother was a member of the Women's Army Corps. As a child, Sapphire's family relocated several time to various cities, states, and countries. When she was only 13 years old, Sapphire's mother became the victim of alcoholism and eventually departed from her life. Her mother eventually died in 1983. In that same year, her brother, who was then homeless was killed in a public park.

This page was researched and submitted by: Shante' L. D. Harrell, Leticia M. Guice, and Nanette Ray.



Ramona Lofton (Sapphire)

Biography continued

Sapphire attended San Francisco City College in the 1970s majoring first in chemistry and then switching to dance. She soon dropped out to become a hippie and moved to New York in 1977 taking several odd jobs, including topless dancing and housekeeping. It wasn't until the early 1980s that she began writing poetry and reading it aloud at various Village venues including the Nuyorican Cafe. Sapphire eventually returned to school and graduated with honors in 1993 with a degree in modern dance. Upon graduation, she taught reading to students in the Bronx and Harlem and also enrolled in graduate school at Brooklyn College.

Vintage Publishing published her first book, *American Dreams*, in 1994. *American Dreams* is a combination of poetry and prose, and according to *Publisher's Weekly* it was "One of the strongest debut collections of the '90s." Each of the selections in this book tells the story of the cruel realities of inner city life in a brutally honest way. *American Dreams* contains one of her most controversial poems, "Wild Thing," told from the view of a 13 year-old rapist. The following excerpt taken out of context was sent to members of Congress during the Bush administration:

I remember when
Christ sucked my dick
behind the pulpit
I was six years old

Needless to say, the excerpt offended many people and even caused the dismissal of NEA chairman John Frohnmayer who argued that "Wild Thing" was "an important work of art." After the publishing of her first book, Sapphire was already being considered a serious writer and praised for her efforts. In 1994 she won the MacArthur Scholarship in Poetry and *Downtown Magazine's* Year of the Poet III Award. Her first novel, *Push*, was published in 1996. It tells the story of 16-year-old Precious Jones who is the victim of physical and sexual abuse by her parents and is pregnant with her father's child for the second time. Lee Siegel of *The Atlantic Monthly* says, "Sapphire's *Push* [is] a gritty, semiliterate novel praised almost without exception for its unsparing realism." *Push* has been highly praised by many, and in 1997 Sapphire won both the Black Caucus of the American Library Association's First Novelist Award and the Book-of-Month-Club Stephen Crane Award for First Fiction.



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Biography continued

Sapphire wrote a second book, a volume of poetry, entitled *Black Wings & Blind Angels*, which was published in 1999. In *Black Wings & Blind Angels*, Sapphire addresses a multitude of topics including police brutality, her relationship with her abusive father and alcoholic mother, and sexual identity. Sapphire has also had a number of works printed in several anthologies including *High Risk 2: Writings on Sex, Death & Subversions*, *Critical Condition: Women on the Edge of Violence*, and *Women on Women: An Anthology of American Lesbian Short Fiction*. In her writings, Sapphire attempts to grab her audience and bring them into a world that for many is an unfortunate reality. Through her work, she attempts to address what she believes are some of society's major issues while still entertaining her readers. In a recent interview in *Poets and Writers*, Sapphire said, "We're a culture that focuses on media phenomena, and I don't think that we can leave it to newspapers to incorporate our history. I think, as artists, our first job is art-- then we have our secondary agenda. And if you don't you're not being honest -- or maybe some artists don't."

Many fellow writers have praised Sapphire. Brenda Shaughnessy of *Village Voice* said, "Expressing the difficult locus where revelation meets revolution is her signature fusion, a fierce combination of confessional and metamorphoses." Richard Tayson of *Advocate* had this to say about the evolution of her work from *American Dreams* to *Black Wings & Blind Angels*:

"Now, in her second collection of poems, Sapphire's rage sometimes takes an introspective turn. While some poems are sequels to those in *American Dreams*, she also takes new risks in style and form. In the first book her voice is unyielding and hard-hitting; in the second she's quieter at times, steadier and more personal. This quieter voice opens out to a wider truth."

Sapphire's work is truly moving in so many ways. She allows us to put a face to those whose lives are unlike our own. Her hope is that her writing not only offends you but also moves you into action. Sapphire is currently working on her next novel that to date has not been titled.



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Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

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Works about the author

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