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Awfully dark

The Kid

Author: Sapphire
Publisher: Penguin Press,
384 pages

Review by CRAIG SELIGMAN

THE kid in Sapphire's (the author goes by the single name) latest novel *The Kid* is Abdul Jones, son of Precious Jones, the staggeringly beleaguered heroine of Sapphire's previous novel, *Push*, which became the 2009 movie *Precious*.

Push ended on a hopeful note, with Precious freeing herself from the abuse that had deformed her young life – she was raped and twice impregnated by her father – and determined to do better by her children.

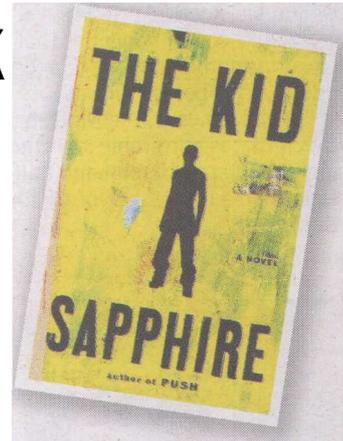
At the beginning of *The Kid*, we find out just how successful she was. Once illiterate, she buckled down and made it into college. She became a lovingly stern single mother.

And then her sad past caught up with her, and she died from HIV/AIDS complications.

We see her funeral through the bewildered eyes of nine-year-old Abdul, whose first stop on his journey to hell is a foster home where he's raped and beaten so badly that he has to be hospitalised. He spends the next several years as the sexual plaything of Catholic priests and learns, in his turn, to abuse smaller kids.

It's hardly surprising that an African-American novelist should feel drawn to themes of victimisation, but Sapphire embraces them with a relish that borders on the unseemly. The sex is explicit, though it's too humiliating to be a turn-on.

Nor is Abdul the pure victim his mother was. For one thing, he becomes a victimiser himself. Moreover, he's a natural aristo-



crat. Unlike *Precious*, he's strong and beautiful, and he uses his beauty to get money from older men.

He's also a gifted dancer, as he starts to discover when he stumbles, by accident, into an African dance class. The most absorbing parts of the novel track Abdul's artistic growth, as he's taken up (pedagogically and sexually) by an ageing ballet teacher and then flowers as a performer in a downtown troupe.

But triumph isn't Sapphire's territory. *The Kid*, like *Push*, is an interior monologue, and after you spend a few pages inside Abdul's head you can tell he isn't headed anywhere you want to go.

He's in denial (understandably) about his origins, and his sexuality is (also understandably) badly confused. He's vile to the people who try to help him, and while his reasons for hating are all too just, but they don't make his hatred attractive.

Sapphire, who has published two collections of poetry, uses a lot of dream imagery, and in long swatches of this longish book she recounts Abdul's (usually awful) dreams. I zone out when my own friends insist on telling me about their fascinating dreams. I found myself fighting the same impulse during much of *The Kid*.
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