

Winter With the Writers Presents: Sapphire

By Anna Keeler

The 2015 season of the Winter With the Writers literary festival began with poet and novelist Sapphire, author of the critically acclaimed novel *Push*, which was later made into the Oscar award-winning movie *Precious*.

Her visit began on Wednesday, February 4, with a reception followed by a screening of *Precious* at the Enzian Theater in Maitland, Florida. The event attracted many people and brought the chance for people to see her work on the screen as well as give them a chance to speak with her.

Thursday, February 5, was the master class at 4 p.m. that took place in the Bush Auditorium featuring Sapphire talking with five of the Winter With the Writers interns about their work in front of an audience. Mattie Scull, Anna Keeler, Natalie Smith, Alexandra Mariano, and Micah Bradley presented their poems or short stories, and Sapphire provided both insightful praise and helpful criticisms of the works before inviting the audience to comment on the pieces as well.

After a short break, the festivities resumed at 7:30 in the Bush Auditorium, where Sapphire gave a reading of excerpts from her second novel, *The Kid*, following the story of *Precious*' son, Abdul, following her death from the AIDS virus. She read various passages from differing sections of the novel, each reading bringing life to these multi-dimensional characters, fully immersing the audience in the rough and very real struggles young Abdul faces, including sexual abuse, violence, and racism.

After that, Sapphire joined festival director Carol Frost for a question and answer session, with questions asked by members of the audience. Though the session was brief, Sapphire gave very thoughtful and insightful answers to the questions asked, whether it be about her specific novels or the craft of writing itself. The event concluded with a book signing, where the audience and the interns had a chance to speak with the writer.

Sapphire's work is gritty and wholly realistic, which draws criticism from some reading her work. She addressed this during the question and answer portion by saying "It's not an artist's job to give people what they're ready for, it's for them to give us what they have. It's up to us to get what they're doing." This sentiment carries into how she carries herself and her work; the stories she tells are not necessarily the stories that people want to hear: however, they are stories that are very real and need to be told.

The reverence she has for her craft shows in how she talks about it – that her characters are real people and not just characters in a story and that the stories have a depth that needs to be shared with everyone. She is a very wise and intelligent woman who treats writing like the art it is. She was a wonderful writer to have at this year's festival and a great start to the 2015 session of Winter With the Writers.