

PRECIOUS.

A film based on the Novel *Push* by Sapphire.

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Precious, a black American teenager, appears to have everything going against her. She is obese, illiterate, dirt poor, and living in seedy flat in Harlem with a mother from hell. She is expecting her second child. Her first child (she calls “Mongol”) has Down’s syndrome. Both children were conceived from incest with her father. He has now pushed off, having repeatedly abused his daughter for several years. Her peers bully her, and her mother (Mo’Nique) regularly but randomly hurls objects or insults at her. How bad can it get? And yet, despite all these disadvantages, Precious has some things going for her. She is good at maths, and her maths teacher, a decent white man she is infatuated with, has noticed this, and tries to encourage her. She also has a knack for creating positive healing fantasies, even at – or particularly at – times when she is being subjected to unbelievable cruelty. This creative gift carries a medical term, but in essence it allows her to transcend her suffering and protects her from disintegration. In these fantasies she is a famous star smiling to cheering crowds, or adults are kind and supportive towards her. She can have moments of anger when, like an angry bear, she thwacks a peer who is causing a disturbance in her maths class, or who makes a snide reference to her fatness. But there is no malice in her actions, and in general she passively submits to humiliation. She is expelled from her school owing to her pregnancy, but the head teacher manages to inform her of a special school catering for young misfits like Precious. This proves to be her salvation. Her new teacher, Blu Rain (Paula Patton), attractive and authoritative, perseveres in helping Precious to learn to read and write and gain in confidence. Her relationship with her classmates is edgy and rough-edged, but shows an authentic solidarity. They all come to the hospital after she has given birth (no sign of mother). The male midwife is affectionate and admiring of Precious, much to the amusement and envy of her friends. After the birth she radiates serenity and fulfilment. One shares the midwife’s admiration as one watches her tend to her baby with natural grace –looking much more self-assured than many an educated and privileged mother.

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But once back at home, she is confronted by her mother’s jealous rage. In a terrifying flash, she realises that her baby is in real danger as he is thrown to the ground. She flees, holding her son protectively, as her mother throws a television set at her down the stairs. She is alone with nowhere to go, or so it seems. But then she manages to smash into the school office where her teacher finds her, helpless and desperate, her child in her arms. After staying in her teacher’s house, Precious is then rehabilitated in a reasonably civilised hostel for teenage parents. She continues with her classes. Her young white social worker (Mariah Carey) tenaciously continues to meet up with her. Their communication is strained by the unbridgeable gulf between their utterly different worlds. Eventually Precious meets up with her mother in the social worker’s

office and, in a chilling scene, we discover the full extent of the abuse, causing the social worker to weep silently. Her mother, brilliantly acted by Mo'Nique, seems utterly incapable of recognising the harm done to her vulnerable daughter; rather she views her as a rival to her partner's affection and as someone who should now be taking care of her. Precious vows never to see her mother again. She does so, in fact, on one occasion, when her mother delivers yet more bad news. In the final scene, we witness Precious striding cheerfully and purposefully with her two children, her future uncertain, but her dignity triumphant.

This is a film that left me initially feeling profoundly depressed. The atmosphere is dark, threatening and terribly claustrophobic. The future for young people like Precious seems so unremittingly bleak, the social inequities so entrenched, the cruelty that parents can inflict on their children so damaging and bewildering, that one is overwhelmed by the sheer hopelessness and awfulness of it all. And yet, after the raw impact of the film has subsided, one realises that this film is, in fact, about redemption. It is a story of resilience, of hope, and of the extraordinary capacity of people to overcome adversity. It does this without sentimentalism or artificiality. In fact, the director, Lee Daniels, tells us that 'He is Precious' and that he too suffered abuse, cruelty and poverty as a child. And yet he has made an astonishingly successful film that has allowed the lead actress (Gabourey Sidibe) to enact Precious's recurrent dream: standing in her shimmering dress, she smiles and waves to an adulatory audience. If you haven't seen it – do. It offers us a glimpse of a dark world that remains hidden to most of us. It gives a voice to the unglamorous, the marginalised and the dispossessed – a voice too often forgotten or ignored.