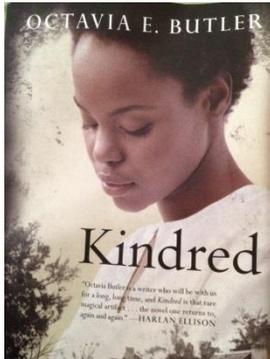


The Kindred

By Octavia Butler



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Dana, a modern black woman, is celebrating her twenty-sixth birthday with her new husband, when she is abruptly snatched from her home in present California and transported back to the antebellum South. Rufus, the white son of a plantation owner, is drowning; and Dana has been summoned across the years to save him. After this first summons, Dana is drawn back again and again to the plantation to protect Rufus and ensure that he will grow to manhood and father the daughter who is to become her ancestor. Each time, however, the stays grow longer and more dangerous until it is uncertain whether or not Dana's life will end, long before it has even begun.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Taken from readinggroupguides.com

1. Both Kevin and Dana know that they can't change history: "We're in the middle of history. We surely can't change it." (page 100); and "It's over . . . There's nothing you can do to change any of it now." (page 264). What, then, are the purposes of Dana's travels back to the antebellum South? Why must you, the reader, experience this journey with Dana?
2. How would the story have been different with a third person narrator?
3. Many of the characters within *Kindred* resist classification. In what ways does Dana explode the slave stereotypes of the "house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, and the female Uncle Tom" (page 145). In what ways does she transcend them?
4. Despite Dana's conscious effort to refuse the 'mammy' role in the Weylin household, she finds herself caught within it: "I felt like Sarah, cautioning." (page 156), and others see her as the mammy: "You sound just like Sarah" (page 159). How, if at all, does Dana reconcile this behavior? How would you reconcile it?
5. "The ease. Us, the children . . . I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery." This is said by Dana to Kevin when they have returned to the present and are discussing their experience in the antebellum South. To what extent, if any, do you believe racial oppression exists today?

6. How do you think Butler confronts us with issues of difference in *Kindred*? How does she challenge us to consider boundaries of black/white, master/slave, husband/wife, past/present? What other differences does she convolute? Do you think such dichotomies are flexible? Artificial? Useful?
7. Compare Tom Weylin and Rufus Weylin. Is Rufus an improvement or simply an alteration of his father? Where, if any, is there evidence of Dana's influence on the young Rufus in his adult character?
8. Of the slaves' attitude toward Rufus, Dana observes "Strangely, they seemed to like him, hold him in contempt, and fear him at the same time." (page 229) How is it they can feel these contradictory emotions? How would you feel toward Rufus if you were in their situation?
9. Compare Dana's 'professional' life (i.e. her work as temporary help) in the present with her life as a slave.
10. When Dana and Kevin return from the past together, she thinks to herself: "I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time. Rufus's time was a sharper, stronger reality." (page 191) Why would the twentieth century seem less vivid to Dana than the past?
11. Dana loses her left arm as she emerges—for the last time in the novel—from the past. Why is this significant?
12. Kevin is stranded in the past five years, while Dana is there for almost one. Is there a reason why Butler felt Kevin needed to stay in the past so much longer? How have their experiences affected their relationship to each other and to the world around them?
13. A common trend in the time-travels of science fiction assumes that one should not tamper with the past, lest s/he disrupt the present. Butler's characters obviously ignore this theory and continue to invade each other's lives. How does this influence the movement of the narrative? How does this convolute the idea of 'cause and effect'?

Interview: Octavia E. Butler

by John C. Snider | 2004



Octavia Butler at a recent appearance in Atlanta, Georgia.

Octavia E. Butler has been an inspiration to a new generation of writers for the last quarter century. In the mid-1970s, at a time when few women - and even fewer blacks - were writing science fiction, Butler persisted, publishing the first three novels (*Patternmaster*, *Mind of My Mind* and *Survivor*) in her "Patternist" series. Then, in 1979, she published *Kindred*, a dark fantasy novel that drills down into the prickly core of American history: slavery. This novel, in which a young middle-class black woman finds herself shuttled between 1976 California and antebellum Maryland, has become a classic of SF&F and required reading in both women's and African-American studies. But don't be fooled - while Butler's fiction appeals to feminist and minority demographics, it's not propped up by that appeal. To read Octavia Butler is to read good literature - period.

Although she has written a dozen or so novels and numerous short stories (and won two Hugos and a Nebula), she is still most celebrated for *Kindred*. Now, Beacon Press has published a special 25th anniversary edition of *Kindred*, which includes a critical essay and discussion questions.

scifidimensions: Congratulations on the 25th anniversary of *Kindred*.

Octavia E. Butler: Thank you.

sfd: Did you have any idea when this book was first published, or when you were writing it, that it would have the impact that it's had?

OEB: Of course not. What I write gets called "science fiction" a lot, but I don't have any particular ability to see the future [laughs]. I knew it [*Kindred*] was something that I had not done before, and that it was going to be especially difficult. I didn't know how to write it. I got going with it after I'd done three other books, because at least by then I knew how to write a novel. I didn't really know how to write or research this novel. That's what I had to learn as I went along.

sfd: What kind of research that goes into creating a book like *Kindred*?

OEB: Well, of course I did a lot of library research, and I went off to Maryland and did some on-the-spot research. I talked to members of my family, and did some personal research that didn't really have anything to do with the time and place I was writing about, but that gave me a feeling of the experience of being black in a time and place where it was very difficult to be black.

sfd: Is the book's location in Maryland a real place, or based on a real place?

OEB: Well, the eastern shore of Maryland is a real place. I didn't really make up any locations - except that particular plantation.

sfd: I my memory is correct, Alex Haley's Roots (at least the mini-series) came out about the time you were writing Kindred...

OEB: Actually, I don't think the mini-series had come out yet, but the book had come out and was a bestseller. When I was traveling around in Maryland, I kept running across little "Alex Haley was here" signs; you know, advertising that he had done research at that particular place. I was writing a completely different kind of book, so it didn't bother me. It at least let me know that I was in the right place to do research.

sfd: So it didn't have any specific influence on you?

OEB: I hadn't read it, no, because I really was doing a completely different kind of book. I wasn't trying to work out my own ancestry. I was trying to get people to feel slavery. I was trying to get across the kind of emotional and psychological stones that slavery threw at people.

sfd: It's interesting to look at the different venues in which Kindred is studied. Science fiction fans read it. It's used in women's studies, as well as courses about African-American history.

OEB: I tried to convince my original publishers of this but I don't think they ever quite believed me. I knew that I had at least three audiences. My work before this had been all science fiction, and even then I felt that I had three audiences, but I couldn't get anyone to really pay attention.

sfd: Having multiple audiences is a good thing, isn't it?

OEB: It was especially good back then, because there were a lot more independent book stores: science fiction, women's studies and black studies. It was wonderful. I always hoped they would carry my work, but usually when I went in, the moment I said "science fiction" I should have just turned around and gone home [laughs].

sfd: Does the label "African-American woman writer" bother you at all?

OEB: It's silly because it puts me in a weird corner. It puts me in such a strange corner that a lot of people don't want to look at what I've done - either because they think they know what it is, or they're afraid of what it might be. I've gone to interviews where that's all anybody wanted to talk about. "What do you think of yourself as... How do you define this... How do you define that..." It's very tiresome.

sfd: What do you think, in general, of the phenomenon of hyphenated-Americanism?

OEB: People have the right to call themselves whatever they like. That doesn't bother me. It's other people doing the calling that bothers me.

sfd: I also wanted to talk a little bit about your Parable series, and specifically its religious aspects. For those that aren't familiar with it, can you give us a quick summary of the Earthseed religion and its basic tenets?

OEB: Well, the character [Lauren Olamina] who comes up with the religion is living during a near-future time that's gotten very nasty; the US has collapsed economically and ecologically, and things are going very badly. People, if they're surviving with any degree of comfort, are living in walled communities. Her father is a Baptist minister, and she feels that he's a good man in his religion. There's nothing wrong with it, except that it isn't really preparing people for what they have to deal with today. What she comes up with is a religion that gives people a

goal. It helps them deal with what's going on in their day, but it also gives them a future goal. Actually, the goal is to go to heaven, but she means it literally. She says the destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars. She helps people deal with the changes that have happened and the changes that will happen. She kind of points the way as she sees it, and describes things as she sees them. It's a fairly harsh religion, because there's no one to worship, and there's no one who's going to pull you out of hot water if you get into it.

sfd: Could Earthseed become a real religion?

OEB: Oh, it wouldn't work as a real religion. There's not enough of it. It's not comforting enough, really. When I was doing a tour for *The Parable of the Sower*, some asked something similar to that, adding that Earthseed was "a series of good rules to live by." I said "Well, yes - but it's not very comforting." And she said "But I don't really need comfort from my religion." And I said "Well, that's because you are comfortable." And most of us are. I don't mean we're rich, but we're not starving in the gutter. Most of us don't have to worry about being shot of we poke our noses outside. So we are comfortable, but the people I'm writing about are definitely not comfortable, and being shot while they're still inside is a good possibility. Considering that they are eventually burned out of their homes, this brings it home even more. She [Lauren] is living in a time when people need to be told, okay, you're in trouble and you're going to have to save yourself, because you're the only person you can depend on to do it - you and those with whom you bond.

sfd: So what would the ideal religion be? Maybe you've already found one for yourself?

OEB: Goodness, I wouldn't even want to say what the ideal religion would be! I was raised Baptist, and I like the fact that I got my conscience installed early. I have a huge and savage conscience that won't let me get away with things. I think if there were more of those around, we'd be better off.

sfd: Do you feel external pressure to write more in the universes you've created? To write a sequel to *Kindred*, or another *Patternist* book, or another *Parable* book?

OEB: No... a novel is a long business. I'm a slow writer, even when I'm doing very well I write slowly. For me, a novel has to be something I'm going to be interested in for the duration. If it's something I'm trying to write for any reason other than interest, it's probably not going to do very well.

sfd: Why did you get into writing science fiction, as opposed to some other genre of literature?

OEB: I guess it goes back to what I just said, really - it has to hold my interest. What held my interest early on was fantasy. But my problem with fantasy, and horror, and related genres, is that sometimes the problems are illogical. I have the kind of mind that demands that I work things out, to see how they would really work if they were real. I have to be able to do that. So fantasy was fine early on, and when I discovered science fiction, I was very happy with it, because my first interest in science fiction came with an interest in astronomy. That meant I got to read about the stars and the planets and everything - that was very exciting, even though they were duller than I expected. I thought there'd be Martians and Venusians and all that, and then I began to read and realized... well, no. But still, it was more interesting than anything I had to deal with in my day-to-day life. I think part of it was that I was an only child, and my day-to-day life was fairly dull. So I reached out for something that was more interesting. On the other hand, I was very much interested in the way people behaved, the human dance, how they seemed to move around each other. I wanted to play around with that. Science fiction let me do both. It let me look into science and stick my nose in everywhere. I would never have been a good scientist - my attention span was too short for that. Here I was into astronomy, and here into anthropology, and there I go into

geology. It was much more fun to be able to research and write about whatever I wanted to. So, I was writing and sending stuff out when I was thirteen. No one was going to stop me from writing and no one had to really guide me towards science fiction. It was natural, really, that I would take that interest.

sfd: What role did Harlan Ellison play in your early career?

OEB: Harlan was a big help in making my writing more publishable. He was one of my teachers. He was a teacher at a workshop in Los Angeles called the Writers Guild of America West Open Door Workshop, back around 1969. What he introduced me to was Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop. Clarion is a six-week writer's workshop. Each week is taught by a different publishing writer or editor, or occasionally someone else in the field. When I went, it was in Clarion, Pennsylvania, which is where the name comes from. It still exists, but now it's at Michigan State University in East Lansing, and there's a Clarion West in Seattle.

sfd: What kind of advice do you have for up-and-coming writers?

OEB: I know a lot of people are where I was several years ago, when I was getting started with writing, wondering how they might get started as writers. And I have this little litany of things they can do. And the first one, of course, is to write - every day, no excuses. It's so easy to make excuses. Even professional writers have days when they'd rather clean the toilet than do the writing. Second, read every day. Read voraciously and omnivorously, whatever's out there. You never know what's gonna grab you. Third, for people who aren't doing it already, take classes - they're worthwhile. Workshops or classes - a workshop is where you do actually get feedback on your work, not just something where you go and sit for a day. A workshop is a way of renting an audience, and making sure you're communicating what you think you're communicating. It's so easy as a young writer to think you're been very clear when in fact you haven't. Those are some of the suggestions I give to my young writers.

sfd: Is there anything lacking in today's science fiction? Any themes that aren't being explored?

OEB: The thing about science fiction is that it's totally wide open. But it's wide open in a conditional way. Fantasy is totally wide open; all you really have to do is follow the rules you've set. But if you're writing about science, you have to first learn what you're writing about. There are no walls apart from that. There's no subject you can't discuss. And by the way, I wanted to point out that Kindred is not science fiction. You'll note there's no science in it. It's a kind of grim fantasy.

sfd: I've heard you're working on a new installment in the Parable series?

OEB: No... I tried, but I had some health problems and some very damping medication that kind of stopped me from doing anything worth publishing for a long time. That was one of the things I tried to do that didn't work out. So I'm doing something completely different right now.

sfd: But there's still a possibility you might come back to it at some point?

OEB: Probably, yes. Not something about the two characters you meet in the previous books, because, of course, most of them are dead by the end of the second book. But it would be about people who tried to follow the Destinies.

sfd: Are there any other new projects you're working on that we ought to know about?

OEB: There are a couple of short stories, one called "The Book of Martha" and one called "Amnesty". These are stories people might not have seen because they're published online at SCIFICTION. They're from last year [2003], but they're my most recently published stuff. What I'm working on now - I'm back to fantasy, although considering that it's me, I'm turning it into a kind of science fantasy. It's a vampire story - but my vampires are biological vampires. They didn't become vampires because someone bit them; they were born that way. That's the novel I'm working on right now. I tend to write a lot stimulated by what's going on in the world - the news, history - plus I think I got a little depressed from my medication. And I realized the way out was to write something fairly lightweight, but still reasonably logical, so I'm writing this little science fantasy.

sfd: Any idea when that'll get published?

OEB: No, it's not something anyone has seen yet. I'm just over halfway done with it, and I'm hoping to finish somewhere around the middle of this year [2004].

sfd: Congratulations once again on the success of Kindred, and thanks for your time.

OEB: Thank you.