

Kindred

Octavia E. Butler

«

KINDRED CONTINUES TO FIND A VARIETY OF AUDIENCES--FANTASY, LITERARY AND HISTORICAL BECAUSE IT IS AN EXCEEDINGLY WELL-WRITTEN AND COMPELLING STORY... THAT ASKS YOU TO LOOK BACK IN TIME AND AT THE PRESENT SIMULTANEOUSLY.

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ROLAND L. WILLIAMS
AFRICAN-AMERICAN
LITERATURE PROFESSOR

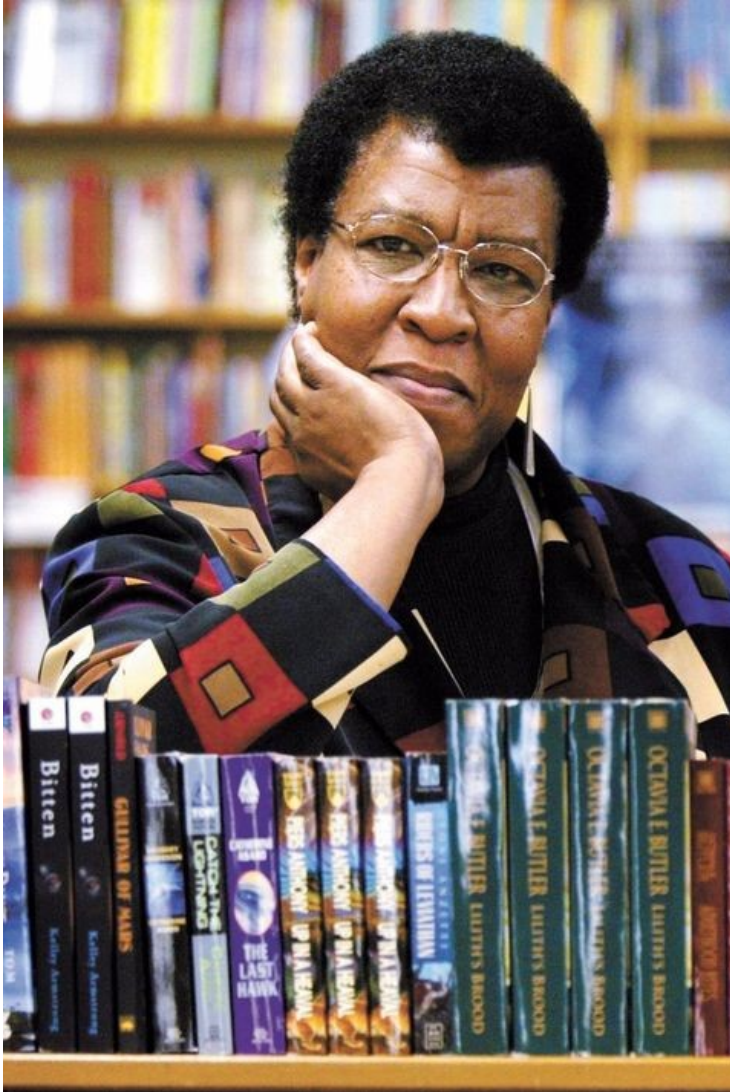
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Brief autor biography



Author Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006) is known for blending science fiction with African American spiritualism. Her novels include ***Patternmaster***, ***Kindred***, ***Dawn*** and ***Parable of the Sower***.

Who Was Octavia E. Butler?

Octavia E. Butler studied at several universities and began her writing career in the 1970s. Her books blended elements of science fiction and African

American spiritualism. Her first novel, ***Patternmaster*** (1976), would ultimately become one of the installments in the four-volume *Patternist* series. Butler went on to write several other novels, including ***Kindred*** (1979) as well as ***Parable of the Sower*** (1993) and ***Parable of the Talents*** (1998), of the *Parable* series. She continued to write and publish until her death on February 24, 2006, in Seattle, Washington.

Early Life

Writer Octavia Estelle Butler was born in Pasadena, California, on June 22, 1947, later breaking new ground as a woman and an African American in the realm of science fiction. Butler thrived in a genre typically dominated by white males. She lost her father at a young age and was raised by her mother. To support the family, her mother worked as a maid.

As a child, Butler was known for her shyness and her impressive height. She was dyslexic, but she didn't let this challenge deter her from developing a love of books. Butler started creating her own stories early on, and she decided to make writing her life's work around the age of 10. She later earned an associate degree from Pasadena City College. Butler also studied her craft with Harlan Ellison at the Clarion Fiction Writers Workshop.

Books: Patternist Series

To make ends meet, Butler took all sorts of jobs while maintaining a strict writing schedule. She was known to work for several hours very early in the morning each day. In 1976, Butler published her first novel, ***Patternmaster***. This book would ultimately become part of an ongoing storyline about a group of people with telepathic powers called Patternists. The other related titles are ***Mind of My Mind*** (1977), ***Wild Seed*** (1980) and ***Clay's Ark*** (1984). (Butler's publishing house would later

group the works as the *Patternist series*, presenting them in a different reading order from when they were chronologically published.)

In 1979, Butler had a career breakthrough with *Kindred*. The novel tells the story of an African American woman who travels back in time to save a white slave owner—her own ancestor. In part, Butler drew some inspiration from her mother's work. "I didn't like seeing her go through back doors," she once said, according to *The New York Times*. "If my mother hadn't put up with all those humiliations, I wouldn't have eaten very well or lived very comfortably. So I wanted to write a novel that would make others feel the history: the pain and fear that black people have had to live through in order to endure."

Literary Awards

For some writers, science fiction serves as means to delve into fantasy. But for Butler, it largely served as a vehicle to address issues facing humanity. It was this passionate interest in the human experience that imbued her work with a certain depth and complexity. In the mid-1980s, Butler began to receive critical recognition for her work. She won the 1984 Best Short Story Hugo Award for "Speech Sounds." That same year, the novelette *Bloodchild* won a Nebula Award and later a Hugo as well.

In the late 1980s, Butler published her *Xenogenesis trilogy* — *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989). This series of books explores issues of genetics and race. To insure their mutual survival, humans reproduce with aliens known as the Oankali. Butler received much praise for this trilogy. She went on to write the two-installment *Parable series* — *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998).

In 1995, Butler received a "genius" grant from the MacArthur Foundation — becoming the first science-fiction writer to do so — which allowed her to buy a house for her mother and herself.

Final Years and Death

In 1999, Butler abandoned her native California to move north to Seattle, Washington. She was a perfectionist with her work and spent several years grappling with writer's block. Her efforts were hampered by her ill health and the medications she took. After starting and discarding numerous projects, Butler wrote her last novel *Fledgling* (2005), which was an innovative take on the concept of vampires and family structures, the latter being one of her works' prevailing themes.

On February 24, 2006, Butler died at her Seattle home. She was 58 years old. With her death, the literary world lost

one of its great storytellers. She is remembered, as Gregory Hampton wrote in *Callaloo*, as writer of "stories that blurred the lines of distinction between reality and fantasy." And through her work, "she revealed universal truths."

[<https://www.biography.com/writer/octavia-e-butler>]

Main themes in *Kindred*

Realistic depiction of slavery and slave communities

Kindred was written to explore how a modern black woman would experience the time of a slavery society, where most black people were considered as property; a world where "all of society was arrayed against you." During an interview, Butler admitted that while reading slave narratives for background, she realized that if she wanted people to read her book, she would have to present a less violent version of slavery. Still, scholars of *Kindred* consider the novel an accurate, fictional account of slave experiences. Concluding that "there probably is no more vivid depiction of life on an Eastern Shore plantation than that found in *Kindred*," Sandra Y. Govan traces how Butler's book follows the classic patterns of the slave narrative genre: loss of innocence, harsh punishment, strategies of resistance, life in the slave quarters, struggle for education, experience of sexual abuse, realization of white religious hypocrisy, and attempts to escape, with ultimate success. Robert Crossley notes how Butler's intense first-person narration deliberately echoes the ex-slave memoirs, thereby giving the story "a degree of authenticity and seriousness." Lisa Yaszek sees Dana's visceral first-hand account as a deliberate criticism of earlier commercialized depictions of slavery, such as the book and film *Gone with the Wind*, produced

largely by whites, and even the television miniseries *Roots*, based on a book by African-American writer Alex Haley.

In *Kindred*, Butler portrays individual slaves as distinctive people, giving each his or her own story. Robert Crossley argues that Butler treats the blackness of her characters as "a matter of course", to resist the tendency of white writers to incorporate African Americans into their narratives just to illustrate a problem or to divorce themselves from charges of racism. Thus, in *Kindred* the slave community is depicted as a "rich human society": the proud yet victimized freewoman-turned-slave Alice; Sam the field slave, who hopes Dana will teach his brother; the traitorous sewing woman Liza, who frustrates Dana's escape; the bright and resourceful Nigel, Rufus's childhood friend who learns to read from a stolen primer; most importantly, Sarah the cook, who Butler transforms from an image of the submissive, happy "mammie" of white fiction to a deeply angry yet caring woman subdued only by the threat of losing her last child, the mute Carrie.

Master-slave power dynamics

Scholars have argued that *Kindred* complicates the usual representations of chattel slavery as an oppressive system where the master regards the slave as a mere tool/economic

resource to be bred or sold. Pamela Bedore notes that while Rufus seems to hold all the power in his relationship with Alice, she never wholly surrenders to him. Alice's suicide can be read as her way of ending her struggle with Rufus with a "final upsetting of their power balance", an escape through death. By placing *Kindred* in comparison to other Butler novels such as *Dawn*, Bedore explores the bond between Dana and Rufus as re-envisioning slavery as a "symbiotic" interaction between slave and master: since neither character can exist without the other's help and guidance, they are continually forced to collaborate in order to survive. The master does not simply control the slave but depends on her. From the side of the slave, Lisa Yaszek notices conflicting emotions: in addition to fear and contempt, there is affection from familiarity and the occasional kindnesses of the master. A slave who collaborates with the master to survive is not reduced to a "traitor to her race" or to a "victim of fate."

Kindred portrays the exploitation of black female sexuality as a main site of the historic struggle between master and slave. Diana Paulin describes Rufus's attempts to control Alice's sexuality as a means to recapture power he lost when she chose Isaac as her sexual partner. Compelled to submit her body to Rufus, Alice

divorces her desire from her sexuality to preserve a sense of self. Similarly, Dana's time traveling reconstructs her sexuality to fit the times. While in the present, Dana chooses her husband and enjoys sex with him; in the past, her status as a black female forced her to subordinate her body to the desires of the master for pleasure, breeding, and as sexual property. Thus, as Rufus grows into adulthood, he attempts to control Dana's sexuality, ending with his attempt at rape to turn her into a replacement of Alice. Since Dana sees sexual domination as the ultimate form of subordination, her killing of Rufus is the way she rejects the role of female slave, distinguishing herself from those who did not have the power to say "no."

Critique of American history

Scholarship on *Kindred* often touches on its critique of the official history of the formation of the United States as an erasure of the raw facts of slavery. Lisa Yaszek places *Kindred* as emanating from two decades of heated discussion over what constituted American history, with a series of scholars pursuing the study of African-American historical sources to create "more inclusive models of memory." Missy Dehn Kubitschek argues that Butler set the story during the bicentennial of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of the United States to suggest that the nation should review its history in order to resolve its current racial strife.

Robert Crossley believes that Butler dates Dana's final trip to her Los Angeles home on the Bicentennial to connect the personal with the social and the political. The power of this national holiday to erase the grim reality of slavery is negated by Dana's living understanding of American history, which makes all her previous knowledge of slavery through mass media and books inadequate. Yaszek further notes that Dana throws away all her history books about African-American history on one of the trips back to her California home, as she finds them to be inaccurate in portraying slavery. Instead, Dana reads books about the Holocaust and finds these books to be closer to her experiences as a slave.

In several interviews, Butler has mentioned that she wrote *Kindred* to counteract stereotypical conceptions of the submissiveness of slaves. While studying at Pasadena City College, Butler heard a young man from the Black Power Movement express his contempt for older generations of African-Americans for what he considered their shameful submission to white power. Butler realized the young man did not have enough context to understand the necessity to accept abuse just to keep oneself and one's family alive and well. Thus, Butler resolved to create a modern African-American character, who would go back in time to see how well

he (Butler's protagonist was originally male) could withstand the abuses his ancestors had suffered.

Therefore, Dana's memories of her enslavement, as Ashraf A. Rushdy explains, become a record of the "unwritten history" of African-Americans, a "recovery of a coherent story explaining Dana's various losses." By living these memories, Dana is enabled to make the connections between slavery and current social situations, including the exploitation of blue-collar workers, police violence, rape, domestic abuse, and segregation.

Trauma and its connection to historical memory (or historical amnesia)

Kindred reveals the repressed trauma slavery caused in America's collective memory of history. In an interview on 1985, Butler suggested that this trauma partly comes from attempts to forget America's dark past: "I think most people don't know or don't realize that at least 10 million blacks were killed just on the way to this country, just during the middle passage....They don't really want to hear it partly because it makes whites feel guilty." In a later interview with Randall Kenan, Butler explained how debilitating this trauma has been for Americans, especially for African Americans, as symbolized by the loss of her protagonist's left arm: "I couldn't really let [Dana] come all the way back. I couldn't let her return to what she was, I couldn't

let her come back whole and [losing her arm], I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole."

Many academics have extended Dana's loss as a metaphor for the "lasting damage of slavery on the African American psyche" to include other meanings: Pamela Bedore, for example, reads it as the loss of Dana's naïvete regarding the supposed progress of racial relations in the present. For Ashraf Rushdy, Dana's missing arm is the price she must pay for her attempt to change history. Robert Crossley quotes Ruth Salvaggio as inferring that the amputation of Dana's left arm is a distinct "birthmark" that represents a part of a "disfigured heritage." Scholars have also noted the importance of Kevin's forehead scar, with Diana R. Paulin arguing that it symbolizes Kevin's changing understanding of racial realities, which constitute "a painful and intellectual experience."

Race as social construct

The construction of the concept of "race" and its connections to slavery are central themes in Butler's novel. Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint place *Kindred* as a key science fiction literary text of the 1960s and 1970s black consciousness period, noting that Butler uses the time travel trope to underscore the perpetuation of past racial discrimination into the present and, perhaps, the future of America. The lesson of

Dana's trips to the past, then, is that "we cannot escape or repress our racist history but instead must confront it and thereby reduce its power to pull us back, unthinkingly, to earlier modes of consciousness and interaction."

The novel's focus on how the system of slavery shapes its central characters dramatizes society's power to construct raced identities. The reader witnesses the development of Rufus from a relatively decent boy allied to Dana to a "complete racist" who attempts to rape her as an adult. Similarly, Dana and Kevin's prolonged stay in the past reframes their modern attitudes. Butler's depiction of her principal character as an independent, self-possessed, educated African-American woman defies slavery's racist and sexist objectification of black people and women.

Kindred also challenges the fixity of "race" through the interracial relationships that form its emotional core. Dana's kinship to Rufus disproves America's erroneous concepts of racial purity. It also represents the "inseparability" of whites and blacks in America. The negative reactions of characters in the past and the present to Dana and Kevin's integrated relationship highlight the continuing hostility of both white and black communities to interracial mixing. At the same time, the relationship of Dana and Kevin extends to concept of

"community" from people related by ethnicity to people related by shared experience. In these new communities whites and black people may acknowledge their common racist past and learn to live together.

The depiction of Dana's white husband, Kevin, also serves to examine the concept of racial and gender privilege. In the present, Kevin seems unconscious of the benefits he derives from his skin pigmentation as well as of the way his actions serve to disenfranchise Dana. Once he goes to the past, however, he must not just resist accepting slavery as the normal state of affairs, but dissociate himself from the unrestricted power white males enjoy as their privilege. His prolonged stay in the past transforms him from a naive white man oblivious about racial issues into an anti-slave activist fighting racial oppression.

Strong female protagonist

In her article "Feminisms," Jane Donawerth describes *Kindred* as a product of more than two decades of recovery of women's history and literature that began in the 1970s. The republication of a significant number of slave narratives, as well as the work of Angela Davis, which highlighted the heroic resistance of the black female slave, introduced science fiction writers such as Octavia Butler and Suzy McKee Charnas to a literary form that

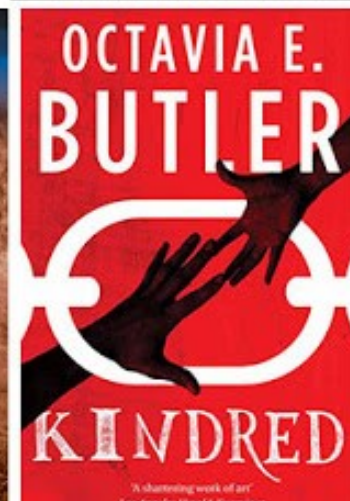
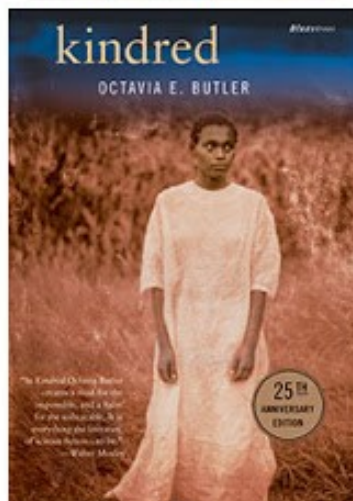
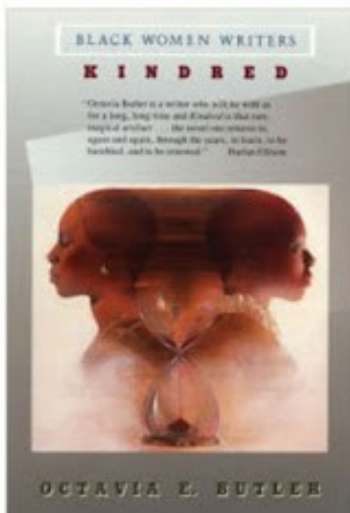
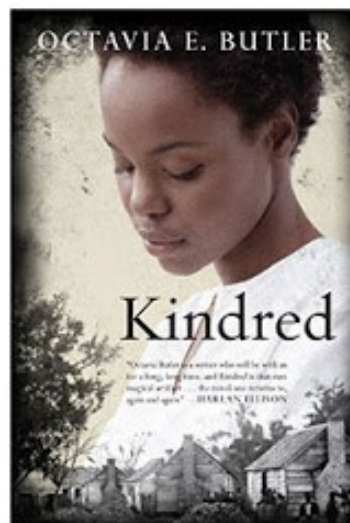
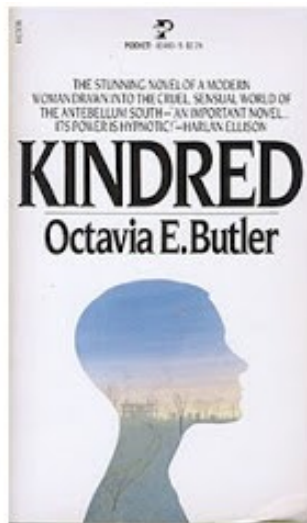
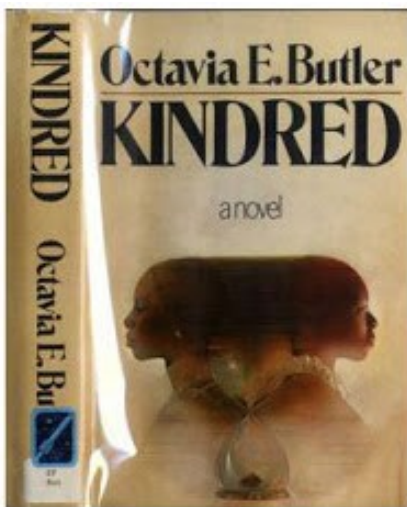
redefined the heroism of the protagonist as endurance, survival, and escape. As Lisa Yaszek points further, many of these African-American woman's neo-slave narratives, including *Kindred*, discard the lone male hero in favor of a female hero immersed in family and community. Robert Crossley sees Butler's novel as an extension of the slave woman's memoirs exemplified by texts such as Harriet Ann Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, especially in its portrayal of the compromises the heroine must make, the endurance she

must have, and her ultimate resistance to victimization.

Originally, Butler intended for the protagonist of *Kindred* to be a man, but as she explained in her interview, she could not do so because a man would immediately be "perceived as dangerous": "[s]o many things that he did would have been likely to get him killed. He wouldn't even have time to learn the rules...of submission." She then realized that sexism could work in favor of a female protagonist, "who might be

equally dangerous" but "would not be perceived so."

Most scholars see Dana as an example of a strong female protagonist. Angelyn Mitchell describes Dana as a black woman "strengthened by her racial pride, her personal responsibility, her free will, and her self-determination." Identifying Dana as one of many Butler's strong female black heroes, Grace McEntee explains how Dana attempts to transform Rufus into a caring individual despite her struggles with a white



patriarchy. These struggles, Missy Dehn Kubitschek explains, are clearly represented by Dana's resistance to white male control of a crucial aspect of her identity—her writing—both in the past and in the present. Sherryl Vint argues that, by refusing Dana to be reduced to a raped body, Butler would seem to be aligning her protagonist with "the sentimental heroines who would rather die than submit to rape" and thus "allows Dana to avoid a crucial aspect of the reality of female enslavement." However, by risking death by killing Rufus, Dana becomes a permanent surviving record of the mutilation of her black ancestors, both through her armless body and by becoming "the body who writes *Kindred*." In contrast to these views, Beverly Friend believes Dana represents the helplessness of modern woman and that *Kindred* demonstrates that women have been and continue to be victims in a world run by men.

Female quest for emancipation

Some scholars consider *Kindred* as part of Butler's larger project to empower black women. Robert Crossley sees Butler's science fictional narratives as generating a "black feminist aesthetic" that speaks not only to the sociopolitical "truths" of the African-American experience, but specifically to the female experience, as Butler focuses on

"women who lack power and suffer abuse but are committed to claiming power over their own lives and to exercising that power harshly when necessary." Given that Butler makes Dana go from liberty to bondage and back to liberty beginning on the day of her birthday, Angelyn Mitchell further views *Kindred* as a revision of the "female emancipatory narrative" exemplified by Harriet A. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, with Butler's story engaging in themes such as female sexuality, individualism, community, motherhood, and, most importantly, freedom in order to illustrate the types of female agency that are capable of resisting enslavement.

Similarly, Missy Dehn Kubitschek reads Butler's novel as "African-American woman's quest for understanding history and self" which ends with Dana extending the concept of "kindred" to include both her black and white her heritage as well as her white husband while "insisting on her right to self definition."

The meaning of the novel's title

Kindred's title has several meanings: at its most literal, it refers to the genealogical link between its modern-day protagonist, the slave-holding Weylins, and both the free and bonded Greenwoods; at its most universal, it points to the kinship of all Americans regardless of

ethnic background.

Since Butler's novel challenges readers to come to terms with slavery and its legacy, one significant meaning of the term "kindred" is the United States' history of miscegenation and its denial by official discourses. This kinship of black people and whites must be acknowledged if America is to move into a better future.

On the other hand, as Ashraf H. A. Rushdy contends, Dana's journey to the past serves to redefine her concept of kinship from blood ties to that of "spiritual kinship" with those she chooses as her family: the Weylin slaves and her white husband, Kevin. This sense of the term "kindred" as a community of choice is clear from Butler's first use of the word to indicate Dana and Kevin's similar interests and shared beliefs. Dana and Kevin's relationship, in particular, signals the way for black and white America to reconcile: they must face the country's racist past together so they can learn to co-exist as kindred.

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