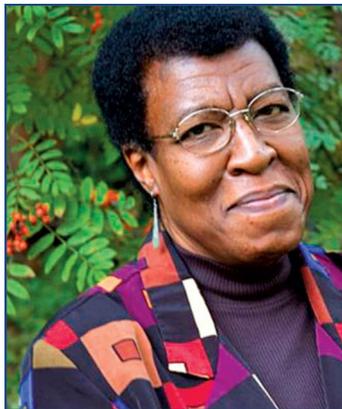


Author Spotlight

OCTAVIA E. BUTLER



Octavia Estelle Butler was born June 22, 1947 in Pasadena, California. Raised in a strict Baptist home, she was bullied by her peers due to her considerable height and shyness. Despite being dyslexic, Butler found refuge in science fiction and fantasy books. She wrote her first stories at the age of 10. As an adult, Butler established a reputation as a writer whose works explored complex topics concerning race, gender, power, civic dissolution, and social stratification. A multiple recipient of both the Hugo and Nebula Awards, she was the first science fiction writer to receive a MacArthur Fellowship. Butler died in 2006 at the age of 58.

Parable of the Sower was published in 1993, the first book in what was a planned trilogy. The novel is set in a dystopian California roughly three decades in the future. Much of the world has succumbed to lawless disorder due to the devastating effects of climate change. The protagonist is Lauren Oya Olamina, a teenage girl who lives with her family in a gated community in Los Angeles. Lauren—like the young Octavia Butler herself—grows up in a traditional Baptist home and finds a kind of sanctuary in the books she reads. Lauren also suffers from an affliction called hyperempathy syndrome, which allows her to feel the pain of others. After her community is overrun by violent invaders, Lauren leads a ragtag band of survivors on a quest northward, where they seek open land and the promise of a more peaceful future. Along the way, Lauren instructs her followers in the principles of a new religion she plans to establish called Earthseed, the tenets of which she hopes will one day inspire Earth’s survivors to abandon their ruined planet and colonize the distant galaxy.

Parable of the Sower is widely considered a science fiction classic. The writer Rick Riordan has observed that the novel is an early example of dystopian young adult fiction, anticipating the mass popularity of post-apocalyptic narratives for young readers by some two decades. Evidence of the far-reaching impact of the novel is found in the many references in books, songs, television shows, and films that have accumulated since its publication. Critics have praised its groundbreaking portrayal of a young, black female science fiction heroine, as well as the prescience of Butler’s vision of domestic anxiety and disorder brought about by ecological crises and the subsequent rise of populist politics. Butler said of the hellish future her novel imagines for the United States that she merely followed our current conflicts to their logical conclusions.

The book is generally lauded as a canonical text of Afrofuturism—a multi-media genre dating to the 1970s, which melds pan-African mythologies and mysticism with futuristic technologies and engages black characters in the standard tropes of science fiction and fantasy. Folk musician Toshi Reagon, who in 2017 adapted an opera version of *Parable of the Sower*, has called Octavia Butler the “mother of Afrofuturism,” and reflected that “she never promised us a future, she just wrote in future times.” Although she died prematurely, Butler’s titanic influence continues to galvanize the Afrofuturist imagination, with, for example, the critic Hilton Als crediting her as the inspiration behind Beyoncé’s 2016 album *Lemonade*.

Prepared by Jody Smith
July 2019

Sources: Goodreads.com, *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, Shondaland.com



Discussion Questions for *Parable of the Sower*

1. Lauren Olamina has hyperempathy syndrome, an illness that gives her the delusion that she feels both the pain and pleasure of those around her. Do you think it is significant that this is a congenital disease she contracted because her mother was a drug abuser? How has this illness made Lauren different from those around her? Why was she unable to tell anyone about it? Why do you suppose it is significant to the story that she has this illness?

2. Why does Jo react so negatively to Lauren's concerns about being better prepared as a community and as individuals to face crises? Do you think that Lauren's ideas, including community night watches, learning to fend for themselves in the wild, studying local wild plant life to see if it can be used for food, are excessively paranoid? Lauren's father has pointed out that the community as a whole has trouble thinking far ahead and into such sensitive areas. Do you see ways in which people in today's America are equally unable to think ahead?

3. Earthseed can be described as a "cold" religion since it has such an impersonal god. Is there anything about it that you think could be described as comforting? Or liberating? Do you believe God has a consciousness? Is a thinking being? Or is Earthseed a system of beliefs that appeal to you? What are your feelings about religion?

4. The near future of *Parable of the Sower* reflects an America steeped in chaos with relentless poverty and lawlessness. Education is no longer guaranteed for everyone and violence is rampant. The author has said that she came to this vision of the future by imagining our current woes progressing unchecked to their logical ends. Do you agree or disagree that this is a possible future for America? In terms of government and societal stability as well as future technological advancements, in what ways do you believe America will change by the year 2025? Do you think things will be better or worse than they are now?

5. In the Bible, Mark 4:3-41 tells us the parable of the sower:

Hearken, Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the wayside, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some a hundred. And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them. And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? And how then will ye know all parables? The sower soweth the word. And these are they by the wayside where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts. And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: Afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended. And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, and the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful. And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.

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Discussion Questions for *Parable of the Sower* continued

5. continued:

What relationship do you see between this parable and the novel? Considering that Lauren rejected her father's traditional Baptist teachings before going on to teach Earthseed, it's an interesting twist that the book is titled *Parable of the Sower*. Why do you think this is?

6. According to Lauren, "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars." She feels that we must go "beyond Mars. Other star systems. Living worlds." Are you curious about what's out in space? Do you think we should be trying to live on other planets?

7. Lauren Olamina says, "That's the ultimate Earthseed aim, and the ultimate human change short of death. It's a destiny we'd better pursue if we hope to be anything other than smooth skinned dinosaurs — here today, gone tomorrow, our bones mixed with the bones and ashes of our cities." What do you think about the possibility of humans becoming extinct? Do you think this is possible, and how do you think it would happen? Do you think this is something we have any control over?

8. An important issue in this novel is how well people know one another and when and how to trust people. Lauren struggles between her love for Curtis and her concern that he might not understand or accept both her hyperempathy or her Earthseed ideas. She also tells Harry Balter about her hyperempathy, and he worries the he can't trust her because he feels like he doesn't really know her. How do you learn to trust? How much do you have to know about a person in order to trust that person? What sort of lessons about trust do you think this novel holds for us? Do you think that it is easier or harder to trust people in our current social situation?

9. What lessons do you feel you took away from this novel?

Source: <https://www.grandcentralpublishing.com>

