

DURHAM COUNTY LIBRARY

Discussion Guide

Kindred
by
Octavia Butler
(Beacon Press: New York, 2003, c1998)

Author Bio:

Octavia Estelle Butler, often referred to as the “grand dame of science fiction,” was born in Pasadena, California on June 22, 1947. She received an Associate of Arts degree in 1968 from Pasadena Community College, and also attended California State University in Los Angeles and the University of California, Los Angeles. During 1969 and 1970, she studied at the Screenwriter’s Guild Open Door Program and the Clarion Science Fiction Writers’ Workshop, where she took a class with science fiction master Harlan Ellison (who later became her mentor), and which led to Butler selling her first science fiction stories.

Butler’s first story, “Crossover,” was published in the 1971 Clarion anthology. *Patternmaster*, her first novel and the first title of her five volume *Patternist* series, was published in 1976, followed by *Mind of My Mind* in 1977. Others in the series include *Survivor* (1978), *Wild Seed* (1980), which won the James Tiptree Award, and *Clay’s Ark* (1984).

With the publication of *Kindred* in 1979, Butler was able to support herself writing full time. She won the Hugo Award in 1984 for her short story, “Speech Sounds,” and in 1985, Butler’s novelette “Bloodchild” won a Hugo Award, a Nebula Award, the Locus Award, and an award for best novelette from *Science Fiction Chronicle*.

Other books by Octavia E. Butler include the *Xenogenesis* trilogy: *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989), and a short story collection, *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1995). *Parable of the Sower* (1993), the first of her *Earthseed* series, was a finalist for the Nebula Award as well as a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. The book’s sequel, *Parable of the Talents* (1998), won a Nebula Award. In 1995 Butler was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Foundation fellowship.

[From author’s web site]

Summary:

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. (*From the publisher.*)

Questions:

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"?
14. Dana finds herself caught in the middle of the relationship between Rufus and Alice? Why does Rufus use Dana to get to Alice? Does Alice use Dana?
15. The needs and well-being of other residents of the plantation create a web of obligation that is difficult to navigate. Choose a specific incident; and determine who holds power over whom and assess how it affects that situation.
16. Dana states: "It was that destructive single-minded love of his. He loved me. Not the way he loved Alice, thank God. He didn't seem to want to sleep with me. But he wanted me around—someone to talk to, someone who would listen to him and care about what he said, care about it." (page 180) How does the relationship between Dana and Rufus develop? How does it change? What are the different levels of love portrayed in *Kindred*?
17. Discuss the ways in which the title encapsulates the relationships within the novel. Is it ironic? Literal? Metaphorical? What emphasis do we place on our own kinship? How does it compare with that of the novel?
18. Do you believe that Dana and Kevin's story actually happened to them, or that they simply got caught up in the nostalgia of moving old papers and books?
19. Butler opens the novel with the conclusion of Dana's time travels. The final pages of the book, however, make up an epilogue demonstrating a, once again, linearly progressive movement of time. How does the epilogue serve to disrupt the rhythm of the narrative?
20. After returning from his years in the nineteenth-century, Kevin had attained "a slight accent" (page 190). Is this "slight" alteration symbolic of greater changes to come? How do you imagine Kevin and Dana's relationship will progress following their re-emergence into life in 1976?
(*Questions issued by the publisher.*)

[From: Litlovers.com]