

## Science Fiction Writer Octavia Butler Dead at 58

Kazembe Balagun 2006-02-27 11:09

According to Democracy Now, Butler "died on Friday night after a fall outside her home in Washington state. Her best-known work included "Parable of the Talents" and "Kindred." Butler was considered to be one of the first African-American women to break into the world of science fiction. Jane Jewell, of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, said 'She is a world-class science fiction writer in her own right. She was one of the first and one of the best to discuss gender and race in science fiction.'"

In January 2006, the Independent interviewed Butler while she was on tour promoting *Fledgling*, her first novel in nearly a decade.

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Octavia Butler's conversation style is like her prose: lean and to the point. Not that she does not have a lot to talk about. She has written eleven novels including *Kindred*, whose heroine keeps falling back in time to save her white slavemaster ancestor, and *Parable of the Sower*, a richly-imagined tale of a small band of survivors founding a new earth-centered religion in the midst of a post-apocalyptic America.

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Winner of the Hugo Award for science fiction and a MacArthur Genius Fellowship, Butler's fiction bends the boundaries of race and gender, while focusing on the problems of pollution, the legacy of slavery, and racism. The Independent spoke with Butler, while she was on tour promoting *Fledgling*, her first novel in nearly a decade.

Q. What were some of your major influences in terms of decision to start writing science fiction?

A. I began reading science fiction before I was 12 and started writing science fiction around the same time. I was attracted to science fiction because it was so wide open. I was able to do anything and there were no walls to hem you in and there was no human condition that you were stopped from examining. Well, writing was what I wanted to do, it was always what I wanted to do. I had novels to write so I wrote them.

Q. You mention wide openness and I noticed in *Lilith's Brood* and your most recent novel *Fledgling* there a great concern with bending the constraints of gender, race and sexuality, as well as open relationships. Do you think polygamy is the future of humanity?

A. No, I think the future of humanity will be like the past, we'll do what we've always done and there will still be human beings. Granted, there will always be people doing something different and there are a lot of possibilities. I think my characters [Lauryen in *Parable of the Sower* and Shori Matthews in *Fledgling*] have communities that are important in their lives or build communities around themselves.

Q. Your novels deal with the past, future and present as one. Some have compared it to the concept of Sankofa "We look to the past to understand the present and prepare for the future." How do you see the concept of Sankofa playing in your work?

A. Well there's only one novel that remotely deals with that concept and that's *Kindred*. I was trying to make real the emotional reality of slavery. I was trying make people feel more about the data they had learned. I wanted to make the past real and [show] how it scars the present.

Q.What's interesting to you on the literary scene at the moment?

A. I've been on the book tour for a few weeks, which means I haven't read anything more difficult than a newspaper (laughs)so I can't recommend anything in good conscience. One of my favorite books is Issac's *Storm* by Erik Larson. It

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gives us a picture of the great storm that hit Galveston, Texas and gives us a picture of 1900. Also a book called T-Rex and the Crater of Doom, by Walter Alvarez. It's a history of the finding of the asteroid that killed off the dinosaurs. I like it because it shows more about how science is done than most books that you read about the subject. It's talks about how the way we think about science can become religious if we are not careful. There were people who were firmly entrenched in the belief that things can only happen one way, they found it difficult that it could happen another way.

Q. Do you see a tension between writing save the world type of fiction and the artistic impulses of the writer?

A. No, not at all. I have written books about making the world a better place and how to make humanity more survivable. While Fledging is a different type of book, The Parable series serve as cautionary tales. I wrote the Parable books because of the direction of the country. You can call it save the world fiction, but it clearly doesn't save anything. It just calls people's attention to the fact that so much needs to be done and obviously they are people who are running this country who don't care. I mean look at what the Congress is doing in terms of taking money away from every cause that is helping people who aren't very rich. Especially making it harder for people to get an education. Who would want to live in a world where there were fewer educated people?

Q. We're speaking at time of crisis in the country between the Iraq war and Katrina. As a writer what makes you hopeful for the future?

A. At the present, I feel so unhopeful. I recognize we will pay more attention when we have different leadership. I'm not exactly sure where that leadership will come from. But that doesn't mean I think we're all going down the toilet, I just don't see where that hope will come from. I think we need people with stronger ideals than John Kerry or Bill Clinton. I think we need people with more courage and vision. It's a shame we have had people who are so damn weak.

FLEDGLING By Octavia Butler SEVEN STORIES PRESS, OCTOBER 2005

In her new novel Fledgling, Octavia Butler has turned tradition on its head by presenting a black female as a vampire. Genetically modified to be able to stay awake during the day, Shori Matthews is in a race to regain her memory before her community of vampires is destroyed. On the way, she creates her own community of humans called symbionts, a very model of group marriage. Think Interview with a Vampire meets The Ethical Slut.

Indeed, Shori's amnesia allows Butler to deal with the problem of memory and tradition, how we can create the new while maintaining the old. While Fledging is a departure from the political musings found in Parable of the Sower and Talents, Butler's trademark ability to place past, present and future in the same place is on display.

The author's creative powers are in full bloom, as she still has the abilities to pile darkness upon the reader, only to allow the final light of self-discovery.

The New Tradition of Speculative Fiction

Octavia Butler is in the long tradition of writers who blend science fiction and resistance politics. Surprising to some, the progressive tradition in science fiction dates back to the 19th century. Here are some of the highlights.

Blake, Martin Delaney: Delaney was an antislavery orator and editor when he published Blake, or Huts of America in 1862. The central character is Henirco Blacus a runaway slave who becomes Blake, a leader of a slave rebellion to overthrow the Cuban government and use the island as a base area for ending slavery throughout the Americas. Written some years before John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and, the novel was a stark contrast to the pacifist leanings of many in the antislavery movement.

Herland, Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Before the personal became political, Gilman wrote this short 1915 novel on what a feminist republic would look like. Filled with wonder and irony, this funny tale challenged many to rethink what civilization is and what free women could do. Looking Backward 1887-2000, Edward Bellamy: The 21st Century was the subject of speculation from the futurists in Russia to "The Jetsons" in the 1960s. For Bellamy, in Looking Backward, in 2000 America is a socialist republic where war, famine and cash are eliminated. Written in the vein of reform novelists like Sinclair Lewis and Upton Sinclair, Bellamy's work is seen as naïve in light of the advent of the Soviet police state.

The Dispossessed, Ursula K. LeGuin: Shevek is a middle-aged inhabitant of a desolate anarchist utopia. He is also the greatest theoretical physicist in the nine known worlds of LeGuin's Hainish Universe. In The Dispossessed, he becomes the first person from his society in over a century to return to the powerful mother planet and unexpectedly lights the fires of

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change in both worlds. LeGuin uses his journey to subtly compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of both anarchism and capitalism as well as to explore time, space, love, fidelity and the struggle to reconcile individual freedom and collective responsibility.

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