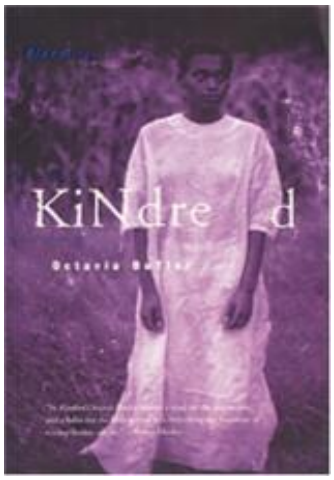
ReadingGroupGuides
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Kindred (Black Women Writers Series)

Octavia E. Butler; afterward by Robert Crossley



About the 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.

Discussion Guide

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." (page100); 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 handerkchief-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'?

Author Bio

Octavia E. Butler writes: I'm a 48-year-old writer who can remember being a 10-year-old writer and who expects someday to be an 80-year-old writer. I'm also comfortably asocial -- a hermit in the middle of Los Angeles -- a pessimist if I'm not careful, a feminist, a Black, a former Baptist, an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty, and drive.

I've had ten novels published so far: **Patternmaster**, **Mind of my Mind**,**Survivor**, **Kindred**, **Wild Seed**, **Clay's Ark**, **Dawn**, **Adulthood Rites**,**Imago**, and **Parable of the Sower**, as well as a collection of my shorter work, entitled **Bloodchild**. I've also had short stories published in anthologies and magazines. One, "Speech Sounds," won a Hugo Award as best short story of 1984. Another, "Bloodchild," won both the 1985 Hugo and the 1984 Nebula awards as best novelette.

-- Octavia Butler

Of Special Note: In 1995 Octavia E. Butler was awarded a MacArthur Grant. In what is popularly called the genius program, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation rewards creative people who push the boundaries of their fields.

Critical Praise

" Octavia Butler is a writer who will be with us for a long, long time and Kindred is that rare magical artifact . . . the novel one returns to, again and again, through the years, to learn to be humbled, and to be renewed. "**-Harlan Ellison , *author of Edgeworks***"An excellent, absorbing work. . . . Shattering. "***-The Los Angeles Herald Examiner***

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Publication Date: September 15, 1988

Paperback: 264 pages

Publisher: Beacon Press

ISBN-10: 0807083054

ISBN-13: 9780807083055