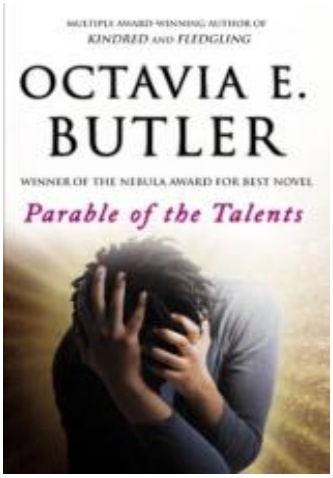
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Parable of the Talents

by Octavia E. Butler



About the Book

Lauren Olamina's love is divided among her young daughter, her community, and the revelation that led Lauren to found a new faith that teaches "God Is Change." But in the wake of environmental and economic chaos, the U.S. government turns a blind eye to violent bigots who consider the mere existence of a black female leader a threat. And soon Lauren must either sacrifice her child and her followers--or forsake the religion that can transform human destiny.

Selected as One of the Best Books of the Year by *Publishers Weekly Special Reading Group Guide Inside*

Discussion Guide

1. Considering the comfort and security that Acorn provides and considering that his long-lost sister has found him and saved him from a life of bondage, why do you think Marcus rejects Earthseed and risks his life to strike out on his own? Why does he have so much trouble accepting and understanding Lauren Olamina's goals? Why does he not believe the Christian America organization is capable of the cruelty inflicted on Lauren and Acorn?

2. After Marcus finds Larkin/Asha Vere and develops a close familial bond with her as her uncle, he specifically chooses not to let Olamina know about her daughter. Why does he keep Larkin all for himself?

3. Jenn Trust and Teri Mae Rutledge, reviewers for the "Feminist Bookstore Newsletter," said Parable of the Talents "is about slavery and survival, alienation and transcendance, violence and spirituality." The author has said that Talents is intended to be a novel of solutions: "When I say solutions, I don't mean the perfect solution, because there isn't one. But the kind of solutions that people reach for when they are desperate, when they are frightened, when they are looking around." What solutions do you see the author exploring through the characters in this book? What do you think this teaches us about people? Do you think there is a singular solution to the world's problems? What do you feel the world's problems are?

4. When the thugs representing Christian America came to Acorn and turned it into a reeducation camp, the violence and oppression that took place there is reminiscent of both the brutality of slavery in our country as well as the horrors of the concentration camps during World War II. But when we look through our history books, we can see that every part of the world has suffered from the traumas of oppression. What do you think the author is saying about human nature and our propensity for discrimination and cruelty?

5. Consider the following quote from Parable of the Sower: "The destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars. . . . 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." Do you believe that humans should try to achieve space travel? Do you think we should try to build homes on other planets? What do you think would change for the world if we do?

6. In the Bible Matthew 25:13-30 tells the parable of the talents:

> Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh. For the kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. Unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey. Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents. And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two. But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

What do you think the relationship is between this parable from the New Testament and the story this author is telling about the future of humankind?

7. Olamina's daughter, Larkin, is resentful because she believes that Earthseed is more important to her mother than family was. After all, her mother had an opportunity to move with her husband and child to an isolated coastal town and start a new life that could possibly have been safer. Do you agree or disagree with Olamina's choice to stay in Acorn and remain committed to her beliefs and ideals and to the community she founded? Which responsibility do you think is greater?

8. In a review that appeared in the magazine Time Out New York, Daphne Uviller wrote,

> Despite the bleakness of the novel's proposed future, the novel projects subtle equalities not yet enjoyed by pre-apocalyptic readers. Not once does anyone question Olamina's ability to lead Acorn and Earthseed on the grounds that she is a woman. People care for one another's children across racial lines. Even outside Acorn, in the oppressive Christian America party/religion modeled on fascist regimes, a black man's race does not impede his rise to the top of the church hierarchy. And both sexual preference and gender identity are portrayed as mutable and indeterminate.

Do you agree or disagree with this statement? If you agree, why do you think it is significant that the author has set up her novel this way?

9. The "reeducation camp" that Acorn becomes after it is taken over echoes the horrors of slavery and the holocaust along with many other of history's tragedies. Do you think the author is making a statement about how problems in a society can reflect or be attributed to the problems of the past? How does a nation escape a past tragedy? Can they ever succeed?

10. What statements about family is the author making in terms of Lauren Olamina's childhood when compared to Larkin/Asha Vere's childhood, as well as the family structure set up in Acorn before it was dismantled?

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

"The story of three generations of Olamina women....Most touching in the novel are the friction between generations, the

kinds of faith each generation indulges in, and the new families that form when traditional ones are splintered."

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