

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

*Kindred*

by Octavia E. Butler

BOOK GROUP

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## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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A black woman writing in a genre traditionally dominated by white men, Octavia E. Butler received many awards -- including a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" in 1995 -- and brought many new readers to the science fiction audience before her unexpected death in 2006.

A rather famously reclusive figure, Butler often described herself as "comfortably asocial." In a 1998 interview, she explained, "I like spending most of my time alone. I enjoy people best if I can be alone much of the time. I used to worry about it because my family worried about it. And I finally realized: This is the way I am. That's that. We all have some weirdness, and this is mine" ([http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/octavia\\_butler.shtml](http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/octavia_butler.shtml)).

As a shy, bookish only child growing up in Pasadena, California, Butler knew she wanted to be a writer at the age of thirteen. Her mother and extended family -- her father died at an early age -- did not always support these ambitions. She once related that her aunt told her quite simply, "Negroes can't be writers" (1998 interview). In addition to obstacles presented by others, she found challenges in the writing process itself. In a 2004 interview, she compared writing with climbing: "I think climbing mountains or buildings or whatever has been a really good metaphor for finishing my work. Because no matter how tired you get, no matter how you feel like you can't possibly do this, somehow you do" (<http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/ac04/obutler.html>). In the same interview, she identified persistence as the most important quality for a writer to possess, not talent, not inspiration.

Butler knew she wanted to be not only a writer, but more specifically a writer of science fiction. In particular, she valued the freedom of the genre: "There isn't any subject you can't tackle by way of science fiction" (2004 interview). Further, she described science fiction as "the literature of ideas." She acknowledged that this is not everyone's notion -- good or bad -- of science fiction. "You can have video game science fiction on the screen, in movies, and you can also have science fiction that makes you think. I prefer the second kind" (1998 interview). In the end, however, she did not spend too much time worrying about how her work was labeled: "A good story is a good story. If what I'm writing reaches you, then it reaches you no matter what [label] is stuck on it" (2004 interview).

A theme that runs throughout Butler's work is the question of power: who has it, who does not, and the responsibilities of one party to the other. In a 2000 interview with National Public Radio, she explained that this was in part the result of being a black woman in a society dominated by white men: "one of the reasons I got into writing about power was because I grew up feeling that I didn't have any, and therefore, it was fascinating."

As opposed to regarding power as something we should do away with, Butler did not consider a world without power and its dynamics an ideal or even a possibility. She put it this way in the 2000 interview: "I find myself still interested in power relationships and still writing about them, not so much any longer because I worry about not having power myself, but just because they are part of what it means to be human."

She seems to be saying that power is a part of being human because the differences that often serve as the basis of power relationships are a part of being human. Her writing explores the problems of power inequalities and how to avoid them, rather than viewing power itself as evil.

In the earlier Patternist series novels, for instance, Butler shows us the relationship between a ruling

class with psychic powers and their servants who have none. The masters must first learn to master themselves in order to fulfill their responsibilities to their servants. In later works, she gives us groups involved in more clearly co-dependent relationships. In the Xenogenesis trilogy the aliens have what humans require and vice versa. Her last novel, *Fledgling* (2007), in which vampires and their human hosts live in peaceful harmony, also portrays symbiosis as the key to their equitable relationships.

*Kindred*, an earlier work, explores the theme of power relationships through the experiences of a 20th-century black woman who finds herself in antebellum Maryland, called upon to rescue a white boy. It has become a classic of both science fiction and of literature that presents issues of race and gender through compelling characters and powerful storytelling.

## **BOOK SUMMARY**

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*Kindred* is the story of Dana, a young black woman who is pulled from late-20th-century California back in time and place to early-19th-century Maryland in order to save the life of Rufus Weylin, the white boy who will become her “several times great-grandfather” (p. 28).

Dana is first called upon to save a very young Rufus, four or five years of age, from drowning. After rescuing him, she is confronted by the boy’s father. One moment, she is staring down the barrel of a rifle; the next, she is back in California.

A few hours later, Dana is pulled again into the past. This time, she finds a boy has set fire to his bedroom curtains. She quickly averts the danger and learns that this is the same boy, Rufus, only a few years older. As she speaks with him, she begins to puzzle out where she is and when, and most importantly Rufus’s relationship to her. Leaving him, Dana seeks the refuge of the free black woman whose daughter -- Alice Greenwood -- will eventually bear Rufus a child. At their cabin, she is assaulted by a member of a patrol hunting for slaves on the road without a pass. As she scrambles to defend herself, she suddenly finds herself back in the present, where she and her husband, Kevin, who is white, theorize that while a threat to Rufus’s life pulls her there, a threat to her own sends her back.

A day later, Dana is called for a third time into the past, and Kevin is carried back with her. In the past, they find an older Rufus -- around twelve now -- lying on the ground with a broken leg. After the boy is brought home, Dana and Kevin make a place for themselves on the Weylin plantation, Kevin as a temporary tutor and Dana as his slave. During their stay, Dana becomes acquainted with many of the other slaves -- Sarah the cook; her mute daughter Carrie; Luke the black overseer; and his son Nigel. This interlude ends when Rufus’s father, Tom Weylin, finds Dana teaching Nigel how to read. The brutal whipping she receives sends her back to the present. Without Kevin.

Eight days pass before Dana is called back once more, this time to rescue Rufus -- who appears to be about eighteen -- from a beating by Isaac, the slave whom Alice has wed. Dana’s timely intervention saves Rufus and allows Isaac and Alice to make an escape. Dana nurses Rufus back to health, just in time for him to stagger into town and purchase Alice, who has been captured and is being sold for helping a runaway slave. As Dana nurses Alice and helps her adjust to life as a slave, she anxiously waits for Kevin to respond to her letter, a letter that Rufus promised to post for her. She soon learns, however, that he did not, prompting her to attempt an escape, an attempt that fails and brings only another painful beating. In the end, the letters -- finally sent upon Rufus’s father’s insistence -- do

bring Kevin back to the plantation. A violent confrontation with Rufus ensues and sends Dana and Kevin back to the present.

Two weeks pass for Dana before Rufus needs her again. This time, she finds Rufus -- six years older -- drunk and face down in a ditch. She saves him, only to have him turn on her, blaming her for his father's death. At the same time, he comes to depend upon her more and more for help with managing the plantation. While Rufus sleeps with Alice -- who has now borne him four children, two of whom survive -- he is clearly dependent upon Dana for other things. While uneasy with the situation, Dana bides her time. It is only when his possessiveness causes harm to others that a despairing Dana sends herself back by cutting her wrists open.

Things finally come to an end on Dana's sixth visit. She returns to find only a few months have passed, but much has occurred. Alice is dead, hanging from a barn rafter, having killed herself. From Sarah, Dana learns that Alice tried once again to escape, and Rufus sought to punish her by telling her -- falsely -- that their children had been sold. After burying Alice and bringing back the children, Rufus attempts to persuade Dana to take over Alice's role. When she refuses, they struggle, and she kills him. As she struggles under Rufus's dead weight, she is sent back to the present.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

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While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

### **What is the significance of the title?**

The title foregrounds one of Butler's enduring themes, namely, the importance of families, both biological and chosen. As she explained in a 1996 interview published in *Science Fiction Studies*, family "seems . . . our most important set of relationships. It is so much of what we are."

More specifically, the title refers to a historical reality, the fact that many blacks have whites in their family tree. Such is Dana's case with Rufus as her "several times great-grandfather" (p. 28). And, vice versa, that many whites have blacks in their genealogy. Alice's son, Joe, for instance, has inherited Rufus's red hair and is light-skinned enough to "pass" as white.

It is a kinship that not all are happy about, neither in the past nor in the supposedly more tolerant present. During their time at the Weylin plantation, Dana's relationship with Kevin makes her the object of much suspicion and resentment from the other slaves. Alice, for one, condemns her for "crying after some poor white trash of a man, black as you are. You always try to act so white. White nigger, turning against your own people" (p. 165). Dana and Kevin find no more acceptance in the present day. Kevin's sister's reaction to the news of their relationship is outright rejection; Dana's aunt and uncle are no more understanding. Indulging in the color prejudice sometimes found among blacks, Dana's aunt cares only about the chance of light-skinned children (p. 111), while her uncle takes her decision to marry a white man as a personal rejection of him, a black man.

The novel reminds us, however, that this sort of kinship may well be necessary to survival. After all, the book's central relationship is that between a white man, Rufus, and a black woman, Dana, who are not in a romantic or sexual relationship, but whose very lives depend upon the other, nonetheless. As Dana observes, "he and I needed each other. We would be taking turns helping each other now. . . . We would have to learn to co-operate with each other" (p. 121).

### **How do race and gender intersect in the novel?**

Because Dana is a black woman instead of a black man, her return to the past disturbs conventional antebellum expectations regarding not only blacks, but also women. Dana is often chastised for not knowing her place as a black person. For instance, an exasperated Rufus exclaims, "You think you're white! . . . You don't know your place any better than a wild animal" (p. 164). She also draws attention to herself for not knowing her place as a woman. Men and women, slaves and non-slaves, for instance, constantly remark upon her clothes. Instead of wearing a dress, as all the other women do, she is wearing pants. Only men wear pants. She is not only dressed like a man; she asserts herself like a man.

These antebellum expectations regarding a woman's value and place affect both the slave women and the white women. Consider, for instance, the contempt with which Margaret Weylin is treated not only by her husband, but also by her son. Unfortunately, however, a common experience of oppression does not make Margaret Weylin any more understanding or any less vindictive to the slaves who also suffer under her husband. Moreover, these gender expectations persist into the present. Kevin's sister succumbs to stereotypical beliefs that a woman is nothing without a man, wedding a man two decades older and giving up her own rather liberal beliefs about race to adopt the prejudices of her new husband. Even in the 20th century, color blinds white women to the experiences they have in common with blacks in general and black women in particular.

### **And how do race and class intersect in the novel?**

Just as there are differences of power between men and women regardless of race, there are also differences of power within the black community, between field hands and house servants, on one hand, and within the white community, between the gentry and "white trash," on the other.

Dana soon discovers the power hierarchies within the plantation slave community: "Sarah ran the house -- and the house servants." Sarah is comfortable exercising this power. She does not hesitate, for instance, to call some house servants "lazy niggers!" Because, she explains, "I ain't goin' to take the blame for what they don't do" (p. 144). Those who must answer to Sarah, however, resent the little power that she has. For similar reasons, the plantation slaves look somewhat askance at Dana. Because of her preferential treatment at the hands of first Kevin and then later Rufus, and of the small amount of power she has as a result, she is not wholly embraced as a member of their community, their family.

At first glance, the slaves seem to disregard similar hierarchies among whites. For instance, when some slaves tell Dana that she talks "like white folks" (p. 74), they seem to lump all whites together, as if they were all alike. However, Dana's speech is not really a sign of her whiteness, but rather of her education, an education that she discovers the Weylins themselves do not possess. Kevin informs Dana, "I don't think [Tom Weylin's] had much education himself, and he resents you" (p. 80). These class distinctions are not entirely overlooked by the slaves. Sarah, for instance, calls her former mistress, Weylin's first wife, "a real lady. Quality," while dismissing Margaret as "white trash" (p. 95).

The class differences within the white community and the similarities between poor blacks and poor whites are, however, often ignored. As Dana explains to Rufus, the institution of slavery persists, in

part, because “it gives poor whites someone to look down on” (p. 140). In her 1996 interview, Butler expanded upon this theme: “It’s like the Civil War: most of the men who fought to preserve slavery were actually being hurt by it. As farmers they could not compete with the plantations, and they could not even hire themselves out as labor in competition with the slaves who could be hired out more cheaply by their owners. But they supported the slave system anyway. . . . I guess many people just need someone to feel superior to make themselves feel better. You see Americans doing it now, unfortunately, while voting against their own interests. It is that kind of shortsighted behavior that is destroying us.” She seems to hope that the same mistake will not continue to be made in the present. In the present, there are no slaves as in the antebellum South, but there is what Dana calls the “slave market” (p. 52) of low-wage, mind-numbing, repetitive labor performed by humans treated as “nonpeople” (p. 53). This market does not distinguish between blacks and whites.

### **Why do the characters so often associate death and freedom?**

Throughout the novel, slaves vow that if they cannot have freedom, then they would rather die. Alice tells Dana, for instance, “Mama said she’d rather be dead than be a slave” (p. 157). Death is seen as the only “freedom” that can be achieved, and life itself as a sort of imprisonment. Sarah draws this parallel quite explicitly when she and Dana talk about slaves who have escaped to freedom: “it’s like dying, though, and going to heaven. Nobody ever comes back to tell you about it” (p. 145).

On another level, the novel associates death and freedom through the peculiar way in which Dana is called to Rufus and how she escapes back to the present, namely, through an actual threat to their lives or at least their fear of possibly imminent death. “Rufus’s fear of death calls me to him, and my own fear of death sends me home” (p. 50). Her fear of her own death “frees” her, and Rufus’s actual final death also “frees” her.

In all these instances, freedom appears to be the greatest good, and death as a way -- or perhaps the only way -- to attain it. A life of slavery is not worth living; a fear of death, on the other hand, may trap one within an unworthy existence. As Dana says to Rufus, “There are worse things than being dead” (p. 253). In many ways, this view of death and freedom is familiar to most Americans, black and white.

### **If death is better than a life of slavery, what sense does it make to choose life over death?**

This is a pressing question because, of course, not all the slaves in the novel do choose death over a life of slavery. How then do they survive, and what are the costs to them of such survival?

Survival, Dana realizes, requires doing things that she -- at first -- believes herself incapable of doing. “To survive, my ancestors had to put up with more than I ever could” (p. 51), she confesses to Kevin at the beginning of the novel. Some part of survival involves doing harm to others. For instance, she cannot bring herself to take out the eyes of the white patroller who attacks her (p. 42), no matter the advantage it would bring her. Most of all, however, survival would seem to require coming to accept, to live with, an incredible amount of harm, physical and psychological, to oneself. Physically, there is the hard labor and the constant threat of violence from others. Psychologically, there is the fact that they have “so little control” (p. 194). The only way to endure, it seems, is simply to become unfeeling; Dana says, “slavery was a long slow process of dulling” (p. 182).

The ones who manage to survive in such circumstances are shown to suffer from a terrible self-loathing. In a way, they cannot seem to forgive themselves for choosing life over death. Dana and Alice are particularly harsh in their judgments of other women and, in the end, of themselves. Dana’s

pity for Sarah, for instance, is tinged with scorn: “she had done the safe thing -- had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid” (p. 145). Similarly, Alice expresses a loathing for those -- such as Dana, and including herself -- who have, in her opinion, compromised their integrity by choosing a life of slavery over death. Dana cannot disagree. She calls herself a coward for fearing the whip, for fearing the pain, and for allowing that fear to control her. Of Alice and herself, she says, “We were both failures, she and I” (p. 177).

### **Is such self-loathing justified, in the context of the novel?**

While some of the slaves express self-loathing, others do not. Instead, they see themselves using the small degree of power that they do possess to ensure the lives of others, and even sometimes to improve those lives. As Kevin points out to Dana in one exchange, “If your black ancestors had felt that way [i.e., preferred death to a life of slavery], you wouldn’t be here” (p. 246).

It may appear, at first, that slaves have no power. After all, Dana needs Rufus in order to survive in the past. But as it becomes clear, Rufus also needs her. After all, without Dana constantly saving him from his own self-destructive tendencies, he would have died at a very young age. Rufus also comes to depend upon her for help with managing the plantation, with the accounts and with the correspondence. Insofar as Rufus needs her, she has a certain power over him. Rufus grasps this: “I realized you could help me or not, just as you chose” (p. 255).

Yet this power must be exercised carefully. More specifically, simply killing off an individual slave owner is not portrayed as a possible solution, no matter how tempting. At the beginning, for instance, Dana marvels that Sarah, the cook, does not simply poison Tom Weylin, the man who sold off her three sons. She wonders, “How amazing that he was still alive” (p. 76). But she soon learns to think differently. Carrie must explain to her how Tom Weylin’s death would simply result in the the sale and dispersal of all the slaves and slave families of the plantation -- not just Sarah’s sons. Because of the cost to others, Dana is unable to bring herself to end Rufus’s life, until she is forced to do so in self-defense, even though she knows it would be one way to end her own personal enslavement.

Butler touched upon this aspect of the novel in her 2004 interview, in which she recalled an early exchange with her mother, a maid who endured much discrimination and humiliation. “I remember saying to her . . . at seven or eight, ‘I’ll never do what you do, what you do is terrible.’ And she just got this sad look on her face and didn’t say anything. I . . . wanted to convey that people who underwent all this were not cowards, were not people who were just too pathetic to protect themselves, but were heroes because they were using what they had to help their kids get a little further.”

### **What does the novel say about love?**

Quite simply, in the novel, love makes one vulnerable, either as the object of unwanted affections or because the people one loves can be used by others. If Alice were not the object of Rufus’s rather obsessive “love,” she would perhaps have had a far easier life. If Nigel did not love his wife, Carrie, and his sons, he would be more likely to attempt another escape. In a way, his love for them keeps him enslaved. Similarly, Alice bitterly observes how her own children are being used to keep her in line: “he uses those children just the way you use a bit on a horse” (p. 235).

Even in the present, between people in a much less dysfunctional relationship, love is shown to carry certain costs. Between Dana and Kevin, power is more equitably distributed, but it is a distribution that Dana works to maintain. She recognizes that love can restrict: “even people who loved me

could demand more of me than I could give” (p. 109). And so she refuses his offer to support her while she works on her novel. Instead, she insists on continuing as a day laborer, on maintaining “the independence the agency gave me” (p. 108). In the end, however, the fiercely independent Dana does marry Kevin. While love may mean dependence, it need not mean one person holding all the power over another. Instead, Dana and Kevin seem to need and to respect each other equally.

### **What might be the significance of Dana and Kevin both being writers?**

The ability to read and write is portrayed as a source of power. This is most literally the case in the segments of the novel that take place in the antebellum South. Reading and writing are skills denied to slaves because they are means to achieving freedom. A literate slave can write a pass for him- or herself. A less than comfortably literate Tom Weylin and his son Rufus may be easily victimized by white business partners who are far more educated. Besides that, it’s easier for an ill-educated white person to look down on slaves for their ignorance, even though the ignorance is enforced by the white power structure. On a more abstract level, reading and writing are the principal source of, or way of capturing, history. After all, Dana only knows of Rufus as her many times great-grandfather because his name was written in her many times great-grandmother Hagar’s family Bible. And the only clues she has about the fate of the plantation slaves after her last visit is a newspaper article listing the names of the slaves for sale after Rufus’s supposed death in a fire. Most importantly, writing is essential to the shaping of history, the way bits and pieces of the past are woven together to form coherent stories. Dana tells us, for instance, that in her desperation for information she even consulted Margaret Mitchell’s novel, *Gone with the Wind*, until she could no longer stomach its portrayal of “happy darkies” (p. 116). With her own words, Dana is giving us an alternate history, rewriting and reshaping the ways we think about the past.

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