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# 'We Tend to Do the Right Thing When We Get Scared'

**I**N Octavia E. Butler's latest novels, "Parable of the Sower" and "Parable of the Talents," the near future is grim and dangerous. Americans have been devastated by an economic meltdown that makes water too expensive to bathe in. A religious right has captured the White House, unleashing a tide of intolerance, misogyny and ruthless persecution. Yet rising from the rubble of society is a movement of renewal called Earthseed. Its leader, an "empath," is a complex and conflicted black woman.

Never expect Ms. Butler to anchor her tales in sunny-day visions of tomorrow. And never be surprised to discover extraordinary yet flawed black women creating much of the gravity that governs Ms. Butler's earthy brand of science fiction.

The author of a dozen novels, Ms. Butler, 52, is part of a small cadre of black science-fiction writers.

She grew up in Pasadena, Calif., and recently moved to Seattle. In 1995, she received a fellowship from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, a so-called "genius award," for her unusual melding of science fiction with African-American spiritualism.

In an interview with Michel Marriotti, a reporter for The New York Times, Ms. Butler considered the prospects for real social change in the future. Following are excerpts.

**Q. Will racial and sexual attitudes improve in the 21st century?**

**A.** Absolutely not. I don't mean that it's going to get worse. I just mean that we human beings are such naturally contentious creatures. The only way the two issues could disappear is under a regime so totalitarian that we are not permitted to talk about it. . . .

In countries where there are no racial differences or no religious differences, peo-

ple find other reasons to set aside one certain group of people and generally spit in their direction. . . . It delights people to find a reason to be able to kick other people.

One of the books that I read when I was doing "Kindred" [about a woman who slips in and out of her ancestors' slave pasts] was a book called "Slavery Defended." It was a wonderful addition to my research because you don't read very much about the defenses of slavery these days. And there were a lot of them. One of them said blatantly that it was necessary that the poorest class of white people have someone that they could be better than. . . .

We are a naturally hierarchical species. When I say these things in my novels, sure I make up the aliens and all of that, but I don't make up the essential human character, the way we are. . . .

It's like war. I mean it's remarkable how many nice boys go off to war and do horrendous things that they don't really have to do.

I'm not talking about shooting at the enemy. I'm talking about making use of the local women, whether they wish to be made use of or not, or killing people just because they can. I mean power is . . . you can get drunk on it very easily, and it really does corrupt.

**Q. Why do you place black women at the heart of so much of your work?**

**A.** When I began writing science fiction, when I began reading, heck, I wasn't in any of this stuff I read.

I certainly wasn't in the science fiction. The only black people you found were occasional characters or characters who were so feeble-witted that they couldn't manage anything, anyway. I wrote myself in, since I'm me and I'm here and I'm writing. I can write my own stories and I can write myself in.

**Q. Could you imagine yourself living in any other era?**

**A.** I was sitting next to a white man who was



Octavia Butler, the writer, by a backdrop of Van Gogh's "Starry, Starry Night." Gary Settle for The New York Times

*Octavia E. Butler says social change will occur in the 21st century, but it won't happen 'until the disaster looms.'*

flying home, and we got talking. Once he understood what I did for a living, he said, which era did I think it would be most fun to live in, and he chose one. It wasn't the antebellum era, thank goodness. He chose something that he thought would be fascinating.

And what did I think?

As a black and as a woman, I didn't think that I would really want to live in any of the eras before this, because I would inevitably be worse off. I would have spent more time struggling just to prove I was human than doing my work.

**Q. Are you pessimistic about the future?**

**A.** I'm not pessimistic about much of anything. No, I'm hopeful. The only problem that we human beings really suffer from, and this is important to us as a species, is that we tend to do the right thing when we get scared.

Like, consider history as our emergency medical system. It works real well at that level, but unfortunately, we have to wait until the disaster looms. With a disaster like global warming, it's too late to worry about when it's looming except to figure out how to adapt to it. . . .

We human beings make a lot of the same mistakes over and over again. It doesn't seem to help. I'm alarmed at how easy it is, for instance, to railroad people into acting against their own best interest.

**War and Peace** Hitler's meeting with Chamberlain in Munich "declares to those who have ears that Germany henceforth wants peace."

Walter Durranty, Nov. 4, 1938.

**Germany** "Any realistic sense of the world today leaves it