



Parable of the Talents

Octavia E. Butler

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This Nebula Award-winning sequel to *Parable of the Sower* continues the story of Lauren Olamina in socially and economically depressed California in the 2030s. Convinced that her community should colonize the stars, Lauren and her followers make preparations. But the collapse of society and rise of fanatics result in Lauren's followers being enslaved, and her daughter stolen from her. Now, Lauren must fight back to save the new world order.

Parable of the Talents Details

Date : Published November 1st 2001 by Warner Books (NY) (first published 1998)

ISBN : 9780446610384

Author : Octavia E. Butler

Format : Paperback 448 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Dystopia, Fantasy

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From Reader Review *Parable of the Talents* for online ebook

Elizabeth says

Grim, bleak, and intellectual read about the near future. This is my first Octavia Butler book and I enjoyed her simple & elegant writing style. This particular novel is a dystopian story that, sadly, feels prescient. Christian America finally gets a candidate into the oval office and the consequences are terrifying. The US heads to war with Canada and Alaska who have both dared to secede. Citizens who are not good Christians, poor, or homeless are prey to Crusaders and their reeducation camps (much like WWII concentration camps). Again, grim. Much of the story deals with the day to day struggles of living in a society where there is never enough. Nothing is assumed and much of the population is often frightened, victimized, or wondering where they will sleep and eat. In response to such chaos, Olamina founds a new faith *Earthseed* that teaches *God Is Change*. She and her husband live in the community of Acorn where Olamina teaches *Earthseed*, promotes literacy, education, and a stable way of life. The Crusaders are not down & Acorn and its members are soon imprisoned as they are considered cultists. Their young children are quickly adopted into "good CA (Christian America) homes." The community members spend seventeen months being brutalized and worked like animals before being able to escape. The rest of the story deals with the after effects of their imprisonment and the search for their children.

Not a pleasant read but a compelling one.

Jamie says

I loved the first book, but could hardly bear to finish this one. The first half is really boring, and then there's a brief but extremely horrible and violent section, where evil, white Christian men rape, torture, and murder people who don't agree with their views. It's way over the top. Then it's boring again until the end.

Part of the boredom stems from the way this book is written. Unlike *Parable of the Sower*, which steeps the reader in the middle of the drama, this book consists entirely of diary entries that continue the first story (but told in fragments missing big chunks of time), and bold text narrative written by Olamina's daughter. The religious side gets tedious and a bit lecturing. I imagine L. Ron Hubbard at his desk trying to think of ways to start writing his Scientology when Olamina (who is pretty much nameless in this book -- the journals being in first-person and all) recites her verses over and over again. I also think it is a huge jump to go from poor, desperate woman to someone who can seduce anyone with her words, which is how she ends up within the last 50 pages or so, when her cult begins to grow.

I enjoyed the parts about her daughter's life the most. Though brief, there are some tantalizing descriptions of future technology and a society that, after a bad glitch, auto-corrects itself, are interesting.

In any case, I think the first book was far better by itself than with this as a sequel.

Jennifer says

This book is even harder to read than the first one was, but it's difficult to go into why without being a

festival of spoilers. So I'll just say a few things -- I noticed some people complaining in their reviews of *Parable of the Sower* that while Butler did go into some of the ways that minorities are hit harder during difficult times, she didn't go into much into how they fall harder on women. (But wait a second, really? Not with the two sisters who are prostituted by their own father? Not with the return of patriarchal polygamy? Not with all the reasons that Lauren spends much of her time disguised as a man?) Anyway, whether you feel that was a legitimate critique or not, this book makes up for it in spades.

Also, this book is pretty hard on Christianity. There are some truly, truly awful things done in this book by people who've wrapped themselves in the flag and the cross. Even those not participating in violent acts are portrayed as enabling those thugs, with what could at best be described as willful ignorance. There are a few individuals who call themselves Christian, yes, who are not evil. But those associated with the church in this book do not have much to redeem them. And then there is this one scene, where the thugs are quoting the bit about Eve's sins being the reason that women will bear pain in childbirth in order to justify themselves, and I had such a strong, gut-level reaction that I had to put the book away for a moment, and I thought, "I'm done. Me and Christianity are done. I can no longer use a label that in any way implies I lend my support to these men."

Because the truly horrifying thing about this book is that it cannot be put away from you on the basis that it is "fiction." These things have happened, are happening, will continue to happen all over the world. The Holocaust. Aboriginal and Native re-education camps all over the world. Japanese internment camps. The worst of the re-education camps for homosexuals. These things are true. So it is not so easy to just look away.

My only criticism of this book is that somewhere between the first main action of the book and it's conclusion, maybe about 2/3 or 3/4 of the way through -- things get a little wandering and hand-wavy. Which is disappointing, but forgivable. Overall this pair of books ranks very high on my favorite speculative fiction of all time.

Mary ~Ravager of Tomes~ says

I think both this and its predecessor *Parable of the Sower* are particularly relevant reads at this time. This one is superior to the first, in my opinion. It did a lot to make me feel absolutely terrible, but I do mean that in a positive way.

RTC.

Matthias says

The Bible's Parable of the Sower talks about seeds. Seeds need to fall on good earth in order to grow into majestic trees.

Butler's *Parable of the Sower* told a similar tale: The seeds of a new religion need to find fertile minds.

The Bible's Parable of the Talents talks about talents that get buried in earth. These hidden talents don't grow but become pointless and represent a significant waste.

Butler's *Parable of the Talents* told a seemingly totally unrelated tale.

"**Parable of the Talents**" continues the story of the birth of a religion and its evolution into a way of life, *Earthseed*. Where its predecessor, **Parable of the Sower**, was set in a society damaged by chaos, violence and poverty, this installment looks at how the seeds of a religion fare under a biblically inspired totalitarian regime set on reinstating law and order.

Style

This book is written in the form of a diary and employs the exact same style as the first in this duology, bringing the same problems with it. The protagonist has the propensity of distancing herself from what occurred to her through her diary writing as a way of self-therapy. Regardless of how therapeutic this kind of factual representation of events can be, it doesn't necessarily ensure an engaging read. The experiences lived through make for a truly interesting story, but the tone just isn't there in order to sympathise with the person you're meant to be sympathising with.

Narrators

There is a silver lining however. Where the first part of the series was a monologue of Lauren Olamina, new narrators are brought into this volume. For starters, Lauren's husband gets a couple of pages and so does one of her brothers, but these contributions are so small they're actually quite pointless in hindsight. The star narrator of this book is Olamina's daughter. She provides a completely new and fresh perspective, which is not surprising considering she grew up without and far away from her mother. This voice gives the reader a breather from Lauren's self-indulgent narrative and, for those like me who had difficulties relating to the self-declared Messiah, a voice of reason one could relate to.

A frightening future

Having read the interviews with Octavia Butler at the end of the books, the main aim was to give an idea of the challenges that come with starting up a new religion. This was done reasonably well, and basically boiled down to "not knowing where to begin" and "looking for peoples' support". Because a story needs more flesh than that, more complications were thrown at it, in the form of chaos in the first book, and in the form of oppression in the second. This added color came to dominate the central theme, however, and the main thing I praise in the *Earthseed* series is the dystopian setting it depicts. The oppressive regime, the way it came about and operates was described supremely well, not just in its viciousness but especially in how close to home it all sounded. Those who have been following my updates got a taste of how eerily close to reality these descriptions sometimes were.

A new religion

The reason *Earthseed* and her Messiah were so easily overshadowed is not only due to the strength of the dystopian element, I'm sorry to say. I can imagine it's not easy to come up with a new religion, but *Earthseed* and its cursed verses never said anything substantially new, insightful, or... substantial. That might be my fault, due to a personal difficulty with relating to abstract ideas (which also hindered a pleasant experience with Hesse's widely lauded **Siddharta**). As in Hesse's work, there's a lot of circular reasoning, wordplay hinting at symmetries and interconnections between lofty ideas, resulting in the equivalent of a rose-scented burp. There's a vague sense of something nice in there, but the actual flower is nowhere to be seen.

Every chapter starts with a verse like the one below:

We have lived before.

*We will live again.
We will be silk,
Stone,
Mind,
Star.
We will be scattered,
Gathered,
Molded,
Probed.
We will live
And we will serve life.
We will shape God
And God will shape us
Again,
Always again,
Forevermore.*

To me, that sounds like a heap of drivel. A big bag of airy nothing. Not only does each chapter start with it, but there are numerous references to these verses throughout the story itself. I think there's a little less than twenty verses in total over the two books, but they are repeated ad nauseam, ensuring that even the more acceptable and inspiring poems made me sick in the end.

Again, I don't blame Butler for not having come up with a great new religion, but it made the whole thing harder to relate to, especially if, aside from the religion's fanatic founder, you see people in the book vehemently cling to these words and make them their own. This led me to underestimate Butler herself for a while because she seemed to take herself and Earthseed too seriously. In Butler's universe, universities and other intellectual societies were enraptured by the verses, giving the impression that not only Butler's protagonist but also the author herself was seemingly proud of those pompous poems. Thankfully, as the story progresses, criticism on the religion grows and takes the same tone as the one in my mind: "*I don't believe in Earthseed. It's just a lot of simplistic nonsense.*" The person uttering these words later goes on to become a missionary for Earthseed without any explanation for the change of heart, but fine, at least that wall between me and the author was broken for a bit. The introduction of voices different to that of Olamina was what saved Butler's story in my view, and especially the daughter's voice further helped break down that wall and my image of an author who takes herself too seriously.

Characters

As this is a story about the birth and growth of a religion, it should also be about people touched by it, characters fighting against it. At least in my book. But not in this one. It tries, but it fails. And that's another element where Octavia Butler's Parables lose much of their appeal for me: there are very few characters you can relate to. There are a lot of names to plow through. Olamina meets a great many people (I guess that comes with the job) but almost none of them left a mark. Scores of people important to Olamina die and disappear, but it's all told in such an overwhelming context and in such a dispassionate way the emotional weight of these events falls short of what was intended. Another orphan got raped? A mother watched her husband die? A girl is slowly tortured to death? Oh well, nothing a little verse can't help us to deal with.

Purpose and power

At its strongest, it's a story that brings up a lot of questions with regards to religion. In essence it shows one

religion at the height of its power in the form of a totalitarian regime that controls a whole society, on the other hand it shows a fledgling religion that exists only of ideals, fragile and easily crushed. It's rather natural to sympathise with the latter, yet you can see how both are similar in potential and purpose. Some interesting take-aways:

People will follow people who seem to know where they're going.

Emphasis on the "seem", right?

Earthseed will force us to become more than we might ever become without it.

A great pick-up line, apparently also valid for religions.

People need purpose as much as I need to give it to them.

The protagonist's line of thinking and the cause of many problems, in my view.

Everyone looks for purpose. Sources of inspiration aside, I tend not to outsource that quest, but many do. That's where religion comes in. That's where power comes in. If you allow your purpose to be defined by others, you essentially become their slave. I find it striking how such a deeply personal thing as "purpose" tends to be socialised, politicised, religionised, time and again. These all seem like mechanisms that boil down to the same thing: purposes being force-fed to one another. This story shows perfectly how, with good intentions, this all can come about.

Conclusion

Pros of this book are definitely there: the setting, the idea of telling this kind of story and the questions it provokes. Weaker points are the main narrator's voice, the aggravating repetitions of lofty verses and the lack of a connection with any of the characters. These all come together in what became a mildly enriching, sometimes entertaining but ultimately mediocre reading experience.

The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars.

I hope 3 will be enough.

Apatt says

“We learn more and more about the physical universe, more about our own bodies, more technology, but somehow, down through history, we go on building empires of one kind or another, then destroying them in one way or another. We go on having stupid wars that we justify and get passionate about, but in the end, all they do is kill huge numbers of people, maim others, impoverish still more, spread disease and hunger”

The above passage is the essence of what Octavia Butler wanted to communicate with her Earthseed duology

— of which *Parable of the Talents* is the concluding volume — I think. The previous book *Parable of the Sower* sets the dystopian — almost post-apocalyptic — scene for the two books; it depicts the decline of civilization and the heroine Lauren Oya Olamina's struggle to survive and find a safe place to settle down and build a community that will help revive human civilization and also move it forward. At the end of *Parable of the Sower* Lauren has founded a community called Acorn, which she intends to form the foundation of her "Earthseed" project with an ultimate goal of space colonization for mankind. *Parable of the Talents* continues directly with this state of affairs. The year is now 2032 and the Acorn community continues to grow with new hungry and homeless travelers drifting in, and the community has begun trading with nearby communities. The Earthseed project is beginning to take root with Lauren's leadership and business acumen when it is suddenly invaded by government sponsored religious fanatics called "The Crusaders", a tacitly approved faction of "The Church of Christian America" ruling the US.

This happens around the middle of the book and begins the second phase of the storyline where the Acorn residents are captured, enslaved, and tortured by the Crusaders zealots. This section of the book is a harrowing read due to the vivid depiction of the Acorn people being violently abused by the Crusaders, they are forced to wear which can cause tremendous pain at the touch of a button on a remote control. All the women — including Lauren — are raped by their captors. How Lauren and her friends end their imprisonment will have readers cheering. Then we move on to the final section of the book which I won't elaborate on at all. Suffice it to say that the book ends very well and should leave most readers fully satisfied.

I really want to rate *Parable of the Talents* 5 stars because it is an excellent novel and a well deserved the Nebula Award winner, but I can't do that in good conscience as I do have one minor issue with it. Lauren's Earthseed religion is fine as an idea, it differs from most religions in that it has no supernatural elements in its teaching, a sort of atheistic religion if that is not an oxymoron. Still it does require a lot of faith from its followers with its long-term goal of interstellar emigration. The issue I have with this book is with the frequent litany of "God is Change" and several less than convincing passages from Lauren's "Earthseed: The Books Of The Living" which is basically their bible. My issue probably has more to do with my aversion to litanies than any misstep on Butler's part. Her prose is as powerful as ever.

Octavia Butler's ability to develop believable characters in just a few paragraph is as impressive as ever. For example:

"Len is a likable person to work with. She learns fast, complains endlessly, and does an excellent job, however long it takes. Most of the time, she enjoys herself. The complaining was just one of her quirks."

In just a few lines this Len is made to seem like a real living and breathing person. Lauren is, of course, badass, even without any martial arts skills, her indomitable will practically jump off the page. With her baby daughter stolen by The Crusaders and being beaten and raped:

"It was all I could do not to fold up among the rows of plants and just lie there and moan and cry. But I stayed upright".

Curiously I tend to picture Lauren Oya Olamina as looking rather like Octavia Butler herself — based on the author's photos — with her strong features, intelligent and kind face.

Parable of the Talents is a riveting, thought-provoking, and at times harrowing read, it should be read after *Parable of the Sower*, though if you insist on reading this second volume first you should have no problem following it but it's a bit like reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* before *The Adventures of Tom*

Sawyer you just won't get the full effect. If you have already read *Parable of the Sower* — and like it — I would recommend that you don't leave too long a gap before starting on *Parable of the Talents*, not more than, say, 3-4 months. This is so you don't lose your familiarity with the characters and the emotional investment you may have made in their story. Whatever you do, read them both. Come to think of it read all the Octavia Butler books you can get your mitts on because there are only a few of them and she is no longer with us. Her soul was too beautiful for this world :'(

4.5 stars rating then, half a star knocked off for the litany. I still rounded it up to 5 graphical stars though because Octavia Butler is my sci-fi queen!

Notes:

- Butler planned quite a few more volumes for this series which would have dealt with space colonization — and no doubt a lot of heartaches. Unfortunately she never got around to it :_(
 - In this interview with Amazon Ms. Butler talks about the two Earthseed books and her other works.
 - YA Dystopian fiction is — for some reasons — all the rage these days, but for me a great dystopian novel should be about more than good looking teens hacking and slashing. In all fairness *The Hunger Games* probably has more depth than what I have gleaned from the first book (I haven't read the others) but this is all that have taken from it. The nuances — if they are there — did not reverberate with me. As for the numerous *Hunger Games* knock-offs I have no time for them. The two Earthseed books are much more substantial, the adventures, slicing and dicing are there, but there is so much more to it, and it even rings true.
 - Seems like Octavia Butler may have predicted Trump's (potential) presidency with this book. For once, I hope she is wrong.
-

BlackOxford says

Much More Than Sci-Fi

Neither Amazon nor the Library of Congress has a classification in which *The Parable of the Talents* fits easily. So it typically gets dumped into science fiction by default. But while the book does take place in the future, and extrapolates some of the possible consequences of things like climate change and computer-controlled weaponry, there is nothing unrecognisable as probably existing on somebody's drawing board, somewhere. There is certainly no typical sci-fi bending of the rules of Newtonian physics, or speculation about time travel, or revolutionary technology.

The Parable of the Talents is in fact, as the title suggests, a work of theology, specifically political theology, the study of the link between community and individual belief. And although it overtly criticises evangelical Christianity, particularly the militant American brand, its target is really the monotheistic religions of the world - notably Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - not because they are monotheistic but because they are dogmatic, and consequently sectarian, and therefore useful for political manipulation, especially in modern democracies. The tale that Butler spins (in 1998) is eerily prescient of not just Donald Trump and his collusion with the American evangelical Right, but of Vladimir Putin's manipulation of Russian Orthodoxy and any number of Muslim politicians' tactics from Turkey to Indonesia. Monotheism, at least in its dogmatic forms, is clearly susceptible to political co-optation from Moses to Constantine to Khomeini.

It may not be obvious to those outside the theological community that the great monotheistic religions are heresies of each other. All other religions are merely pagan. The Christian Trinity is a polytheistic heresy to Judaism and Islam. Muslim views of Jesus are variants of the Arian heresy of the 3rd century. Jewish rejection of Jesus as more than a not untypical rabbinic preacher is also a heretical rejection of the Christian doctrine of supersessionism which claims that the Christian Church is the true Israel. The theological complexity of all dogmatic religion is such that each of these distinguishing heresies, as it were, promote further differences and ultimately conflicts and schisms within each major religion ad infinitum.

Butler is acutely aware of the role of monotheistic religion in the creation of her American dystopia, and in its reconstruction. Her main character is descended from a fundamentalist Baptist minister; her brother is a congenital religious fanatic. It is the diversity of dogmatic views that has caused, in the first instance, the disintegration of the American polity, and is, in the second, the rationale for the election of a dictator and the violent persecution of all who do not the doctrinal position of this Trump-like figure and his sympathisers.

The spine of the novel, introducing each chapter and referred to continuously throughout, is the 'new faith' of Earthseed, which is the invention or, if you prefer, the revelation of the protagonist as an antidote to dogmatic monotheism and its consequences. There are historical allusions to Ann Lee, the Shaker leader who brought that proto-feminist faith of Northern England to America, and to Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist, whose life-long concern was the primal religion that appears perennially throughout the world in various symbolic manifestations. But the main influence on Butler is clearly the so-called Process Theology that was developed originally by Alfred Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne in the 1920's and 1930's.

The central insight of Process Theology, one can hardly call it a dogma, is that it is an essential attribute of God to affect and be affected by temporal processes. Although not consistent with some developed theology, this insight is not at odds with the fundamental scriptures of any of the monotheistic religions, which all present an acting, feeling, mutable God who apparently learns about human beings as they learn about Him. Process Theology does not deny various monotheistic tenets such as divine eternity, omnipotence or even the immutability of the 'core' of God, as it were. It just doesn't care about these dogmatic issues.

Butler presents her theology in the form of a poem which develops as her story unfolds, a poem that Whitehead and Hartshorne would not, I am sure, be ashamed to have written. A single verse is enough to give the substance of the piece: "All that you touch You change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change." Change for Butler is not a fetish such as that proposed by current-day management consultants and psychological improvement merchants. Change is simply that which is inevitable and necessary for life, divine as well as human. We shape change which shapes us. This includes of course the shape we mould God into, which certainly in turn affects the shape we assume.

The fashion for Process Theology comes and goes with hemlines, but it has become an abiding force in academic religious thinking and affects many of the mainstream schools of theological thought. The fact that it is a somewhat esoteric discipline means that its relevance for practical affairs isn't immediately apparent. Quite apart from its literary value, which is considerable, Butler's work is important because it makes explicit both a fundamental issue in American, indeed modern European and Middle Eastern, society, namely the religious foundation of national unity, and a way in which that issue can be dealt with in an intellectual but practical way. For this achievement alone her brilliance must not be under-appreciated.

Sean says

I don't feel capable of adequately putting down my thoughts on this book quite yet. But I'll write some stuff. Parable of the Talents and Sower before it are both grand accomplishments in inspiring deep self reflective thought while also entertaining the reader with deep and relatable characters. For many years now I have been struggling with how I should determine my attitude toward religion and belief. Though my inquiry into understanding the true nature of faith and religion is far from over, Butler has been able to show me some insightful avenues of thought, but perhaps also stoked the fires of fear that lurk under my misunderstanding. If not for that fear, I would not feel any inclination to investigate at all. I am taken aback by it; what do I have to fear and thereby hate within the cathartic belief systems of others? Lack of understanding breeds fear, which leads to bitterness, hate and judgement. I like to understand people and processes, if anything that would be my purpose in life so far. Through understanding the belief system created by Butler throughout these novels, Earthseed, I have also gained insight into some of the characteristics of religion in general.

The protagonist of the Sower novels, Lauren Olamina, is a character for whom I have great respect. She is a realist, Earthseed is largely based on the fundamental concept that the world is what we make of it and yet we are subject to it even then. Change happens but we are not powerless to shape that change. Through her condition as a "sharer", a brain disorder which causes her sympathetic reaction to manifest physically and uncontrollably, Olamina is a master of understanding the feelings of others. Through this understanding she is capable of bringing people together, converting them to her religion. However I still feel that she is blind in subtle ways. Her steadfast faith that her beliefs are unequivocal truths makes her vulnerable, while she created Earthseed largely to help people understand this post-apocalyptic world, survive in it and become stronger, a contradiction. She doesn't seem to understand why some people, such as her husband, brother and eventually daughter, just don't believe the way she does. Much in her character reminds me of Orson Scott Card's Ender Wiggins (Speaker for the Dead). Ender had an uncanny way of understanding people and the situations that surround them. But his faith, if it could be said that he had one, was simply that of understanding. Ender could show people all of the illusions that had mislead them into hate and fear, but he wouldn't create illusions even to give hope and purpose. Earthseed may paint a harsh and mundane picture of existence, but at least it promised purpose and Destiny. These two characters seem to personify two sides of the narrowing range of ideas that I am searching through for understanding of the world I live in.

Zach says

There are times when I wish I believed in hell-other than the hells we make for one another, I mean.

These are tough books to review, and I'll just use this space to talk about both of them.

Butler unflinchingly looks at the effect the steady deterioration of society would have on women and the economically marginalized- I love this.

She also has a strong female character making her way through this world in a believable way- I love this too.

This female character slowly gathers a band of survivors who take care of one another, who rescue orphaned children, and who eventually put together a new home based on communitarian values of sharing and mutual support- I love this.

She does this, though, by espousing this bizarre humanist/materialist "religion" that basically boils down to the assertion that "God is Change." Get used to that phrase-if you read these books you'll encounter it

hundreds of times, often in the middle of some truly execrable "poetic" scripture that this character Lauren has written. After about 20 pages of the first book I quickly learned to skip anything in italics to avoid throwing the book down in disgust. Then when she was on the road I learned to do the same any time "Earthseed" (the religion) was mentioned in any kind of proximity to "truth" or "discover." In the second book I added "Destiny" to the list (the "Destiny" of Earthseed being to colonize the stars, further weakening and trivializing Lauren's commitment to building some sort of post-capitalist communitarian society here. ugh).

Butler almost (ALMOST) redeems this stuff in the second book, by expanding the number of POV characters (from one to four), and having all of the new ones react to this religion with varying degrees of scorn. The first book left me with the uncomfortable feeling that we were supposed to find this religion appealing, and to view Lauren's domineering personality as simply the result of someone who had, in fact, discovered the TRUTH. I think we were still supposed to sympathize with Lauren the most (and you do, at the end in particular, which is truly emotionally jarring for reasons I don't want to spoil), but it was still gratifying to have an acknowledgment of the fact that she consistently bullied or seduced people into embracing her religion.

To be fair, I am only being so critical of this stuff because Butler came so close to writing a post-apocalyptic story that was totally on-point with regard to the creation of a better, post-capitalist society in the ashes of the old, avoiding the libertarian/hyper-individualist bent that afflicts so many stories of this genre. She never stops hammering home the point that no one could survive this on their own, and even if she falls just short of expanding that into exactly the message I wanted her to, I think it was closer than anyone else has gotten.

(More negativity: I also think the "hyper-empathy" stuff is baloney, but it's much less irritating than the religion. While we're at it, I also hated that the 18-year-old Lauren ended up marrying a man who was almost 60.)

M. says

Recommended reading at the date of this review publishing.

President Jarret's slogan in this book is "Make America Great Again" and you read that within 30 pages of the opening. Ring the alarm.

Dannii Elle says

This is the second instalment in the Earthseed duology. This follows the same protagonist, Lauren, although the time period has shifted forward a few years, from the first book. This primarily follows the same diary-style format, although there are additional small inclusions from other characters. It also deals with primarily the same topics of focusing on the societal and political alterations in an anarchy-ruled dystopian, and the instalment and a creation of a new religion to alleviate the destruction and chaos that is so prevalent.

Although this was well-structured and formulated I had the same issues with this, that I had with *Parable of the Sower*. This book's plot can be summarised in just one paragraph and little happens beyond this. Whilst this is a distressing and harrowing insight to the world's horrors, there is also not much occurring beyond this. The overall concept was brilliant but it all felt a little lengthy for what it ultimately boiled down to.

Leslie Reese says

Octavia Butler's **Parable of the Talents** has a familiar sense of urgency that drove both *Kindred* and *Clay's Ark*. Like *Mind of My Mind*, **Parable of the Talents** features a strong-willed woman as visionary and shaper of a future world.

Most of the tale is told through *EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING*---a compilation of the journal writings of Lauren Oya Olamina, a hyperempath who is married to a physician known as Bankole, who happens to be 39 years her senior. But there are other tellers as well: there are entries in the voice of Bankole; as well as Lauren's brother, Marco; and an additional voiceover is supplied by Larkin, daughter to Lauren and Bankole.

The story takes place in the western United States during the years 2032-2090, and chronicles how Lauren leads the small community of Acorn toward her dreamed-of New World amongst the stars, Destiny. Acorn is the community slowly being transformed through a worldview known as Earthseed, or, "shapers of God." For Earthseed, "God is Change."

It seems that Butler's novel was allowed to develop from that same concept in that it begins with one set of ideas but rather than being bound by those parameters, the story morphs organically through the wills of its characters. Early in the book, Lauren says that she conceives her "talent"---Earthseed---as similar to the biblical parable in which the man with the single talent buries it for safe-keeping, only to anger God.

I think **Parable of the Talents** would make an excellent book club selection because Butler's treatment of issues such as religion, visionary ideas, government control, environmentalism, education, and gender roles in society lends itself to great discussions and debates. This book came out in 1998, and reading some of Octavia Butler's speculations about the United States in the year 2035 is a bit eerie.

Lyn says

God is change.

Thus is presented Octavia Butler's brilliant and brutally powerful 1998 Earthseed novel *Parable of the Talents*.

Taking its title from the Biblical parable from St. Matthew, Butler describes a near future dystopian American society that has been decimated by apocalypse, The Pox, and is unraveling along socio-economic and theological lines.

Religion as power

Some religious critics will see this novel as an attack on religious fundamentalism, most specifically Christian extremism, as horribly exemplified by Christian America (CA) Crusaders. Certainly, Butler's attack is focused on a Christian organization, but she is revealing a primary problem with lowest common denominators in fear and trembling before an angry God, and His hypocritical followers.

Andrew Steele Jarrett, reminiscent of Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip, from Sinclair Lewis's 1935 *It Can't Happen Here* and also Robert A. Heinlein's *Nehemiah Scudder*, is a populist, jingoistic preacher turned politician who is elected president and helps to transform the already fatally injured nation. Under Steele's rule, the novel's protagonist Lauren Olamina, suffers dreadfully, as does the country.

There is an old saying that religion has caused more wars than anything else in history. I've never really believed that, it seems like land, money or power is always the real underlying cause. In college, a professor taught us how the American Civil War was caused by cotton and the economics of cotton production rather than slavery and states rights. War is caused by many factors, and frequently with a dogmatic face such as religion, nationalism or racism to provide an idealistic front.

Steele's black clad crusaders made me think of the black clad and masked fundamentalist extremists we see on television these days as they behead orange clad victims. Butler is showing us how nationalistic and religious fronts can hide gross and deplorable moves for power by playing on inner fears and prejudices.

Religion as a spiritual movement

Butler describes a movement created by and championed by the protagonist Lauren Olamina: Earthseed. Comprising her writings in "The Books of the Living" and in her model community Acorn, "Earthseed" comes from the idea that the seeds of all life on Earth can be transplanted, and through adaptation will grow, in many different types of situations or places. "The Books of the Living" is chosen in direct contrast to many other religions' use of the phrase "The Books of the Dead". Earthseed, as defined by Olamina is a religion of the present and the future, of the living, not of the dead or the past. (partially from Wikipedia)

While Earthseed, as beginning in the American Pacific coast, is categorically opposed to the Christian America movement of President Steele, Butler's philosophy is a posthumanist statement intending and anticipating a radical change and a paradigm shift in the course of human evolution.

Butler describes organized religion as hypocritical, corrupt and focused on worldly and individual power rather than eternal salvation or harmony. Earthseed, by contrast is shown as a practical, if harsh, means to an end – eschewing the religious structures and conventions of the past.

Post-Apocalypse / Dystopian / posthumanism

Similar in theme and scope to Arthur C. Clarke's magnificent novel *Childhood's End*, Butler chooses to set her narrative close in time; much of the action takes place in the 2030s. Like much of Philip K. Dick's work (many now set in the recent past) this decision creates a theatrical tension with the reader who is able to identify closely with the events in the novel. This type of setting is in stark contrast to science fiction settings far, far in the future where speculative fantasy can have a freehand in developing the plot. Butler, like Dick and Clarke (I'm shameless) interprets her vision of the future through a glass darkly.

A powerful, sometimes painful, journey through endurance, determination and ultimately atonement.

Jessica says

God, I was so into this - even more than *Parable of the Sower*. I've never experienced a narrator like this - a young black woman founding a new religion in a post apocalyptic world. In this book, she's up against the Christian America movement, whose leader is elected president and whose Crusaders are given a free hand to destroy or enslave "heathens" and other undesirables. Some of the early rhetoric of the Christian America movement was eerily reminiscent of that which surrounded George W. Bush's presidency, which makes the fact that Butler wrote this before his term so amazing to me.

It's a tough read at times, emotionally - the chaotic world they're surviving breeds lots of slavery and rape and murder. But I couldn't put it down. I love this writer so much.

David says

This book is the sequel to *Parable of the Sower*, but it stands up pretty well by itself, though I would definitely recommend reading the first book, because Butler is that good and these books are very powerful. In *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren Olamina, the protagonist of the first book, continues trying to build a community and a following devoted to her new religion, "Earthseed." Unfortunately, she is trying to found this new religion just when America, in the grip of a near-apocalyptic economic and environmental collapse, elects a witch-burning fundie Talibaptist for President. Lauren and her people are literally enslaved, and Lauren's infant daughter is taken away from her.

This is a dark book, a truly horrific dystopia, but the rape and violence does not read like a gratuitous admixture the way it does in so many books. You know how some authors want to make their books **extra dark** to let you know that these are Very Bad Times and Very Bad People, so they toss in a little rape, a little dismemberment, like one of those buckets o' blood horror films that just wind up being too schlocky and over-the-top to really horrify you? Octavia Butler doesn't do that. Instead, Lauren tells us what happened to her and her people in very clear but non-graphic terms, and the impact is felt for the rest of the story because even though she is trying to start a hopeful new religion, she **hates** her abusers with the heat of a thousand burning suns and makes no bones about it. It's very refreshing. None of that "I have to get past this" or forgiveness bullshit. She does survive and eventually launch her movement, successfully, but it's not like "Oh, and along the way some bad stuff happened."

More horrific is the fact that Butler wrote this in 1998, and while the raving crush-the-poor blame-everything-on-brown-people sentiment was certainly alive then, Butler probably meant to exaggerate things a bit to make the country seem so horribly out of control. Today, while we're not exactly in the throes of Butler's "pox," the sentiments of President Steel could come right out of the mouths of some of the current crop of GOP candidates.

Parable of the Talents is also, indirectly, a mother-daughter story. It's told in the past tense through the journals of both Lauren Olamina and her daughter, whom she never knew until her daughter reached adulthood. Her daughter has a very difficult time coming to terms with who her mother was, and so there are two very different narrative threads woven through the events described in the novel: Lauren, describing much of it as it was happening, and her daughter, commenting (and often, passing judgment) decades later.

This is one of those science fiction books that really should be considered literature, and it's a shame Octavia Butler isn't more widely known. It's even more of a shame that she died before she could write the third book she planned. I give both of the *Earthseed* books a very high recommendation.
